

# Women in the 1950s

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# World War II Employment

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- World War II brought unprecedented economic growth to the US. This booming economy created a large demand for labor, especially with many Americans serving in the military. This offered new job opportunities for women and minorities.
  - Women worked in new jobs in the war industry or in filling jobs vacated by those who went to war
  - About 300,000 American women served in the military during WWII

# WWII employment for women

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Women's Auxiliary Corps laboratory technician conducts an experiment, Fort Jackson State Hospital, 1944



Aircraft engine technician and senior supervisor, Naval Air Base, 1942

# Post World War II Employment

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- At the end of the war, women in jobs that had been traditionally filled by men were fired to make way for the returning male veterans
- Employment rates for women continued to increase in the 1950's, but women were again mostly limited to what were considered "women's jobs," such as teaching, clerical work, domestic labor, and being store clerks
- As the US deindustrialized and its service sector grew, many middle-class white women worked as typists and secretaries, who were unable to rise higher in employment ranks due to gender discrimination
- Opportunities for African-American women continued to be very limited so that many could work as domestic laborers, though some were schoolteachers and, in the North, clerical workers

# Post-WWII employment

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A secretary and her boss, an industrial designer, New York City, 1950

# Social pressures

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- *Early marriage*
- *Childbearing*
- *Stay-at-home motherhood*
- *Nuclear family*

Kennedy wedding, Jacqueline throwing the bouquet, 1953

# Social Pressures

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- Women faced huge social pressures to marry young (late teens or early 20s) and have a big family
- Women who could attend college were expected to go only to find a husband, not a career path
- Women were pressured to be stay-at-home mothers if their families could afford it. Most minority families could not afford this
- Single mothers were often shunned
- Cold War propaganda transmitted the idea that strong nuclear families would help the US beat the USSR

# Social Pressures

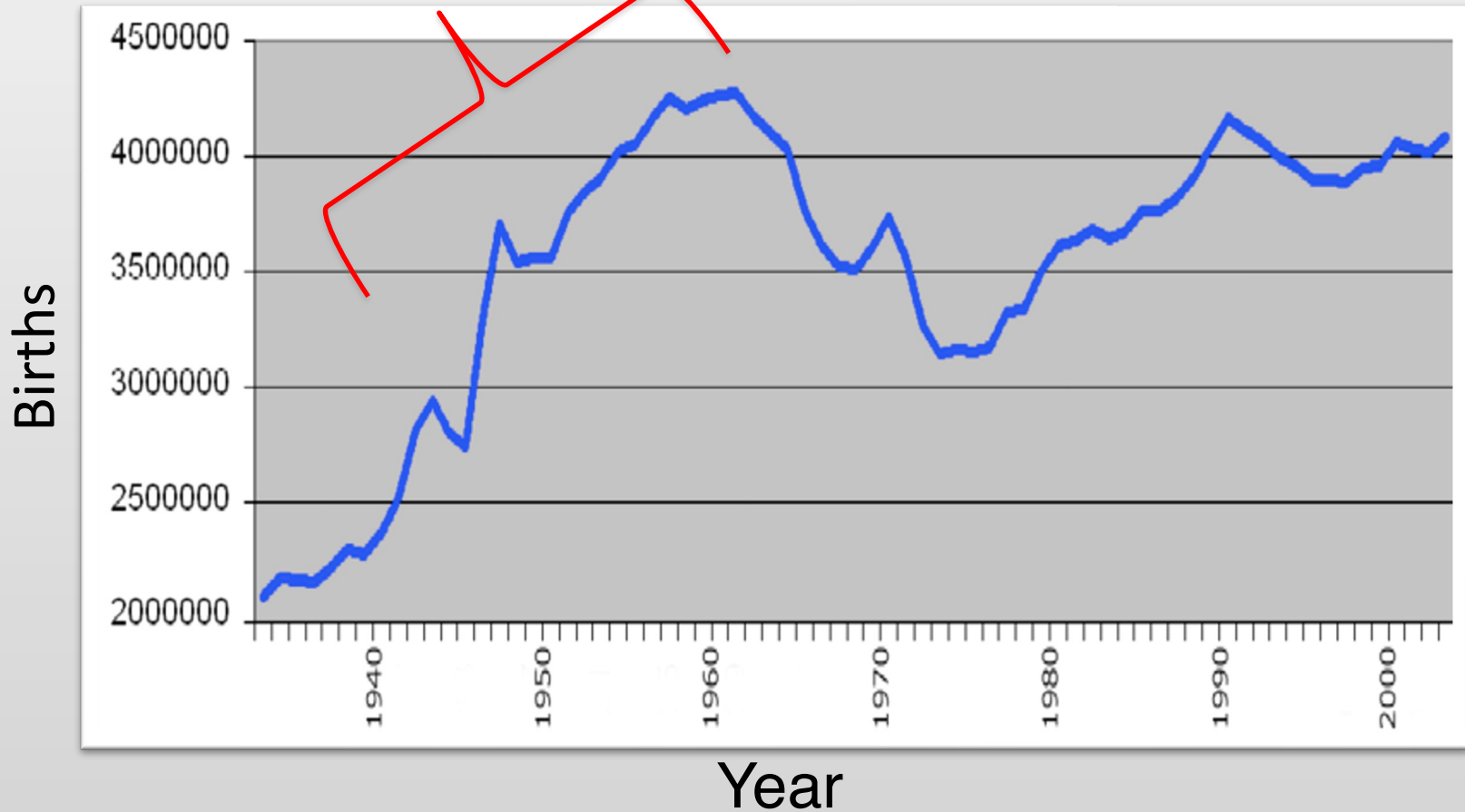
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- Not only were women marrying younger than before, they were having babies right away and continued to for decades. From 1940-1960, the number of families with three children doubled and the number of families having a fourth child quadrupled



# The Baby Boom

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# Media Portrayal

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- The media portrayed domesticity as the ideal for women
- Television shows and women's magazines claimed that women were most responsible for their children and husband's happiness and well-being
- Women were told to keep their houses and appearances flawless
- "Leave it to Beaver"—the white, nuclear family with specific gender roles
  
- Domesticity: home or family life
- Ideal: what is considered most suitable or perfect

# Media portrayals of gender

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A photo of the Cleaver family from *Leave it to Beaver*, a popular TV show in the 1950s-60s

# Suburbia, home of the “happy housewife”

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Levittown track homes of the 1950s

- *G.I. Bill*
- *Mass-produced, affordable homes*
- *Great Migration and “white flight”*

# Suburbia

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- The first mass-produced suburb, Levittown, New York, was built in 1951. These homes were affordable.
- Many returning veterans were able to buy a house because of the GI Bill—a law that said the federal government would back loans to WWII veterans.
- The homes were built quickly and cheaply; mass production resulted in uniformity of design and homogenous suburban neighborhoods.
- Millions of African Americans moved out of the South and into Northeastern, Midwestern, and Western cities during the Great Migration, causing “white flight” to the suburbs
- Life in suburbia encouraged conformity; there was pressure to “keep up with the Joneses” with material purchases (ie cars, appliances, etc.)

# Suburbia

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- New forms of media, in particular, the television, promoted consumer culture, with household products being strongly marketed to women