

ideal wife and mother as a full-time homemaker. They portrayed the homemaker as a woman who devoted all of her energy to making her family happy and buying the latest household gadgets.

Contrary to these popular images, the number of working mothers actually increased during the 1950s. Many families needed two paychecks to achieve a middle-class income. Mothers usually worked part-time and spent the bulk of their income on “extras” for their children, such as music lessons or family vacations.

Some experts argued that working mothers achieved more personal satisfaction than full-time homemakers. *Life* magazine claimed that homemakers were often “bored stiff.” To examine this issue, popular magazine *Ladies’ Home Journal* held a forum in 1956 to ask full-time homemakers about their lives. Rather than reporting boredom, the majority of participants described their lives as a nonstop rush of family activities. One mother reported on her situation.



“At the present time I don’t think there is anything I would like to change in the household. We happen to be very close, and we are all happy. I will admit there are times when I am a little overtired . . . but actually it doesn’t last too long.”

—Mrs. Townsend, “Young Mother,” *Ladies Home Journal*, 1956

Some women did say that they felt pressured to make their families fit the ideal image portrayed in popular books and magazines. In other studies, some working mothers, particularly those with young children, said that they felt pressured by other people to live up to this ideal. Many women considered quitting their jobs and becoming full-time homemakers. “The only person who approved of me in those days was my father,” recalled working mother Gail Kaplan. “He had encouraged me to be an accountant and whatever I did was all right with him.”



INTERPRETING THE VISUAL RECORD

Consumerism. Advertisements directed at new suburban families maintained the image of women as happy homemakers who spent all of their time doing chores and buying household products.

How does this advertisement reinforce this image?

Consumerism and social life. The pressure that Kaplan and many forum participants felt to conform to a certain image reflected a broader emphasis on social conformity. This was particularly true in the suburbs. Suburban areas, reported writer Lewis Mumford, “[are] inhabited by people in the same class, the same income, the same age group.”

Advertising played a large role in promoting conformity in the 1950s. It encouraged Americans to enjoy the general prosperity by buying consumer goods. In response, Americans went shopping. Each year they bought many household gadgets and a total of almost 8 million new automobiles. Some suburban families worked hard to “keep up with the Joneses”—that is, to make sure that they had as many modern conveniences as their neighbors.

In addition to buying the same consumer items, suburban families participated in many of the same social activities as their neighbors. These included Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), scouting, Little League sports, and religious activities. For uprooted Americans in the suburbs, membership in religious institutions provided not only spiritual guidance but also a sense of belonging. Churches and synagogues often tried to appeal to new members by sponsoring a variety of social and recreational activities.

✓ **READING CHECK: Categorizing** How did the baby boom change American life?