

## The Crisis in Woman's Identity

*Friedan, an American **feminist**, writer, and activist, is widely credited with sparking the **second wave of feminism** in the United States. In this extract, she reflects on a conversation she had with Smith College seniors in 1959.*

I noticed that night that many of the engaged girls, sitting silently around the fire while I asked the others about jobs, had also seemed angry about something. "They don't want to think about not going on," my ponytail informant said. "They know they're not going to use their education. They'll be wives and mothers. You can say you're going to keep on reading and be interested in community. But that's not the same. You won't really go on. It's a disappointment to know you're going to stop now, and not go on and use it."

In counterpoint, I heard the words of a woman, fifteen years after she left college, a doctor's wife, mother of three, who said over coffee in her New England kitchen:

"The tragedy was, nobody ever **looked us in the eye** and said you have to decide what you want to do with your life, besides being your husband's wife and children's mother. I never thought it through until I was thirty-six, and my husband was so busy with his practice that he couldn't **entertain** me every night. The three boys were in school all day. I kept on trying to have babies despite an Rh discrepancy. After two miscarriages, they said I must stop. I thought that my own growth and evolution were over. I always knew as a child that I was going to grow up and go to college, and then get married, and that's as far as a girl has to think. After that, your husband determines and fills your life. It wasn't until I got so lonely as the doctor's wife and kept screaming at the kids because they didn't fill my life that I realized I had to make my own life. I still had to decide what I wanted to be. I hadn't finished evolving at all. But it took me ten years to think it through."

The Feminine Mystique permits, even encourages women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question "Who am I?" by saying "Tom's wife... Mary's mother." But I don't think the mystique would have such power over American women if they did not fear to face this terrifying blank which makes them unable to see themselves after twenty-one. The truth is - and how long it has been true, I'm not sure, but it was true in my generation and it is true of girls growing up today - an American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be. The public image, in the magazines and television commercials, is designed to sell washing machines, cake mixes, deodorants, detergents, rejuvenating face creams, hair tints. But the power of that image, on which companies spend millions of dollars for television and ad space, comes from this: American women no longer know who they are. They are **sorely** in need of a new image to help them find their identity. As the motivational researchers keep telling the advertisers, American women are so unsure of who they should be that they look to this glossy public image to decide every detail of their lives. [...]

Recently, interviewing high-school girls who had started out full of promise and talent, but suddenly had stopped their education, I began to see new dimensions to the problem of feminine conformity. [...] One of the girls, seventeen years old, told me: [...]

"I can't see myself as being married and having children. It's as if I wouldn't have any personality myself. My mother's like a rock that's been smoothed by the waves, like a void. She's put so much into her family that there's nothing left, and she resents us because she doesn't get enough in return. But sometimes it seems like there's nothing there. My mother doesn't serve any purpose except cleaning the house. She isn't happy, and she doesn't make my father happy."

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, chapter 3, 1963

**looked us in the eyes** : to look at someone openly and without shame or embarrassment

**entertain** : provide someone with amusement or enjoyment

**sorely** : very much in need