

Extended Essay:

Why does the role of women change in  
western society in the 1960's?

Examples: USA and UK

**HISTORY**

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Abstract:

Why does the role of women change in western society in the 1960's?

Examples: USA and UK

This essay discusses the changing of role of women, and the factors behind that change. I chose this topic, because I wanted to see when exactly the changes took place. In this investigation I discovered that the time of upheaval and rioting was definitely the 1960's; however the time when there were the greatest changes was after the 1960's.

In the introduction, I discuss why women needed to change in society. The society of the 1950's, 60's and 70's is compared. I will argue that the 1950's becomes the period of time when women's awareness of the social injustice is fomenting, the 1960's is the time of the revolution, and the 1970's is the time of changes.

Having identified these three periods, I go through the main factors of change in the 1960's. With most factors, I see that they are all interlinked and connected, although some are more significant than others. The factors of change are the following: the ideologies of a post-war society, the black civil rights movement, the media and new technological advances, the new style of music Rock 'n' Roll, medical advances, and the Cold War events happening at the time.

Although there were several factors of change, they all had different degrees of importance. I reached to the conclusion that the three most important factors are: the media and new technology, the medical advances and the black civil rights movement. These factors triggered further upheaval, and worsened the situation of the other remaining factors. The remaining factors were just a base for some awareness of the social injustice, however not enough for a revolution that had an effect on life in every way.

## **Introduction:**

The changing of role of women during the 1960's is my topic of interest. I chose this topic because I wanted to know when exactly the role of women changed in the west. Although they weren't able to achieve equality, the start of the revolution was at this time.

I am aware that women had periods of upheaval before the 1960's. But the 1960's revolution affected most people, on several levels.

In the 1920's in the USA, women of a better class in the cities were affected, blacks and women in the countryside hardly profited of this change.

My original idea on this topic was to make a extended comparison of how the 1960's affected women in different cultures and in different countries. This comparison would enable me to find out whether the changes affected women world wide. Some political systems institutionalised gender injustice. Possibly some of the countries I would have compared might have not had any revolution at all. This could be due to their political and religious ideologies.

My starting title was "How did the role of women change in the 1960's?"

But this idea had to be more concise.

I decided to change the title to: "Why did the role of women change in western society in the 1960's? Examples: USA and UK. To make this study more focused on domestic and working lives of women, rather than the male dominated political structures of the world.

From this comparison, I predict that the 1960's was a change for women, blacks and pacifists. The 1960's became the starting point for further changes in society. These movements weren't able to change the differences between men and women, blacks and whites entirely in this period. But the 1960's was a start.

**Why did the role of women change in western society in the 1960's?**  
**Examples: USA and UK**

The 1960's was in the middle of the Cold War and coincided with the "hottest" time of the Cold War. The Vietnam war, the Cuban missile crisis, the Berlin wall and U2 spy plane incidents, were the main events of the 1960's, and had an effect on western society.

With the advances in the media, people were able to see daily on television the horrors of the Vietnamese war, and other events from the Cold War. This was a pivotal advance in society, without the information received over the media; people would have been more likely to accept the status quo.

The period of the 1960's was a time of change and upheaval. The nature of rebellion in the 1960's was different from previous revolutions, such as the Russian or the French. The improvement of intercommunications, medical advances and the media affected people on personal levels to an extent that rebellion was inevitable.

The revolution within the USA and UK was just an awakening of the consciousness to the events happening at the time. Flower power and women could be said to be rebels without a cause, (ie they weren't starving or homeless). They were imbued with the sense of injustice through inequality and excessive aggression affecting themselves and other ethnic groups.

During the Second World War, there was an increase of women working. At this time, many realized that women were just as capable workers as men. Once the war was over, women still worked but many returned to their former lifestyle as house wives.

"A good wife always knows her place."(Housekeeping Monthly 13 May 1955)

After the Second World War, women had to go back to their domestic lives. This was not questioned, but expected of them. The attitude of the society in the 1950's was that women should know her place.

After having worked on their own, and having to undertake important decisions, they could not accept to return to a society where they were always told what to do and deprived of independence.

"The good wife's guide."(Gave a thorough explanation of how the behaviour of a woman should be around her husband when he arrived from work.)

After the war, there was a rush by women to get married and have babies, "the babies boom." During the war so many men had died, there was a great need for marriage and pregnancies. But in the 1950's women became disillusioned and bored. Men thought that everything would go back to the pre-war norm. But women had had a taste of becoming independent, they wouldn't want more possibilities in the society they were living in.

"If divorce has increased by one thousand percent, don't blame the women's movement. Blame the obsolete sex roles on which our marriages were based."(Betty Naomi Friedan "The feminine mystique")

A change to the role of women had to occur. There was an increase of divorce, because women had realised that the roles in which marriage were based on, only took into account the well being of men. Women were actually just a side figure of society, someone that had to please and entertain men.

“Listen to him. You may have a dozen important things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first- remember, his topics of conversation are more important than yours.”(Housekeeping Monthly 13 May 1955)

Meanwhile in some states in the USA, the civil rights movement was gaining impetus. Rosa Parks was a catalyst for future movements concerning blacks and women. Her refusal to give up her bus seat for a white man, stirred up trouble in the 1950's that broke out in the 1960's. For a black woman to stand up against the rules of society of the time, made others realise that women were much more confident than what they seemed.

“...the black civil rights movement helped to give birth to other protest movements” (GCSE Modern World History second edition by Ben Walsh)

The 1960's was just a time of upheaval, where women and blacks were just starting to have an effect in a male dominated society. But many of these changes occurred after the period of the 60's and in 1970's, once the upheaval had passed, decisions had to be taken.

“Title IX of the Higher Education Act empowered women to break gender barriers in undergraduate and professional training. Until the Title IX took effect colleges and grad schools continued to discriminate against women. In addition, the Equal Opportunity Act was passed in 1972.”  
([http://web.bryant.edu/~history/h497/prof\\_wmn/1970s.htm](http://web.bryant.edu/~history/h497/prof_wmn/1970s.htm))

The aspects of life for women changed positively in the 1970's. These changes mainly affected women in their working and educational life. However, some of the domestic policies changed in the course of the 1970's and after. In some countries, rape was allowed in marriage. Women just gained some rights mainly in the educational and working life. But some of the domestic life, women had not evolved at all during the time of upheaval. In this way women were just as deprived and discriminated in the 1970's than before the 1960's revolution.

“Women consistently suffered sexual harassment and filled society's least desirable jobs.”([http://web.bryant.edu/~history/h497/prof\\_wmn/1970s.htm](http://web.bryant.edu/~history/h497/prof_wmn/1970s.htm))

Some believed that women were given the least desirable jobs. However, others believed that the period of the 1970's there was a gradual change, were women kept on improving their status.

During the 1970's, many changes took place for women. Although they didn't have the same rights as men, most of these changes were positive. From the 1970's to now the role of women in the UK and the USA has improved to an extent where women have almost reached the same status that men have.

“The women's movement of the 1970s made great strides towards helping women pave themselves new career paths for the future. Women now can receive higher education due to many of the legislative acts past in the 70s.”  
([http://web.bryant.edu/~history/h497/prof\\_wmn/1970s.htm](http://web.bryant.edu/~history/h497/prof_wmn/1970s.htm))

### Factors that changed the role of women in the 1960's

The revolution of the 1960's was the beginning for the change of role of women. This revolution affected women and men on different levels and in different aspects of their lives. The motives for the rebellion of women, blacks and other Protestants varied from world wide problems to personal problems.

The 1960's revolution was a mixture of factors; some were a build up from the post-war times, but others evolved during the change in the 1960's.

The post-war ideologies of women were very different to the role women had played during the war. During the war, the workforce of women was vital. While men were fighting in war, women had a chance to work. Although there was a gradual change from the 1940's to the 1950's, of a greater women's workforce 28.8 per cent wasn't that much.

"Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night-she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question-"Is this all?" (The feminine mystique, by Betty Friedan)

In the 1950's women saw no other chance than having to go to their original pre-war role as housewives. But the question "Is this all?" was on many housewives conscience.

Black women had greater difficulties than those of white women. In 17 states the "Jim Crow," laws were imposed on black people. The intentions of these laws was total segregation in areas such as; education, employment and public use of facilities.

The Supreme Court claimed that blacks should have the same opportunities as whites in education. However, Judge Julius Waring did not specify on the abolition of the segregation rules.

Before Martin Luther King, there were many other Protestors; Rosa Parks, Elizabeth Eckford and all the Protestors from the SNCC.

But the civil rights movement wasn't just ignoring the "Jim Crow" laws of segregation. During the 1950's there was a new music style that was rebellious, encouraged the sexual revolution, and it helped the breaking down of racial social barriers. While there was still repressed societies were many still followed the rule of "Children must be seen, not heard."

Rock 'n' Roll, stimulated the young teenagers in the 1950's, to experience a new form of expression. This new form of expressions allowed them to unite, and be freer in their way of thinking. This revelation undermined the traditional society of the west.

"Rock and Roll ran counter to everything that a "normal" white American society deemed tolerable."<http://www.musicjournal.org/03rocknroll.htm>)

The life of the 1950's was geared by money. After having suffered from a world war, the USA had a boom of prosperity for the higher middle classes.

"...middle-class America strived for prosperity, yet ironically only succeeding in widening the gap between the rich and poor."  
<http://www.musicjournal.org/03rocknroll.htm>)

This provided rich white teenagers to purchase the intolerable Rock 'n' Roll music of the 1950's. This music was the only form of rebellion for youngsters in a suppressed quiet and monotonous society.

“Teenagers emerged as a cultural and social category of their own, since "the prosperity of the 1950's gave young people spending money" which they had not previously had. With this money, youngsters invested in dangerous, exciting music, such as that sung by Little Richard. Whilst some critics argue that teenagers bought into Rock and Roll for the sake of rebellion against a repressive society,”(<http://www.musicjournal.org/03rocknroll.htm>)

Although this boom of prosperity was mainly between the higher classes, by the 1960's most families had television and radio at home. The media played a very big role in the revolution of the 1960's.

The television and the radio, was able to portray the events of the cold war. These events scandalized most of the western world, and made them become aware of the situation of others. This increased the amount of Protestors, and the media loved all the upheaval. The media could focus on the international problems; Vietnam, Berlin Wall, U2 Spy Plane and the Cuban Missile Crisis. But it could also focus on the civil rights protestors, the women's liberation movements, the “make love, not war,” protestors and the death of John F. Kennedy.

None the less the black civil rights movement was definitely the ones that gave birth to other movements.

“The decade of “I have a dream,” became a lever for many protestants.”(GCSE modern world history second edition by Ben Walsh)

There were many different women's movements; but NOW was very influenced by the black civil rights movements. They organised demonstrations and challenged courts. Some of these protests included bra-burning, became popular amongst the feminist and the media. Some of these campaigns started affecting more serious matters to an extent were reforming the law was the only choice left. In the early 1960's radical feminist campaigned to legalise abortion, and the use of contraceptives (which were illegal in some states).

“Abortion was illegal in the USA but feminist believed this law discriminated against women.” (GCSE modern worlds history second edition, by Ben Walsh)

Radical feminist of the 1960's believed that they should have the choice of what happened to their bodies, and of whether they should have a child.

Estelle Griswold took part in the protest pro-abortion, but she challenged the law in Connecticut indirectly. In Connecticut talking or purchasing contraceptives was illegal, as well as abortion.

However Estelle Griswold tackled these laws very cleverly. Abortion was a law that affected the right to privacy contained in the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution. This case was taken up to the Supreme Court, by 1965, the Supreme Court judges' favoured Griswold case.

The legality of the “Pill,” and abortion, would facilitate and improve the role of women in their work lives. If pregnancy wasn't inflicted upon women several times in their lives, they would be able to attain a more sophisticated job, and they would also



be able to be more successful in their work. Instead of concentrating on their domestic life, the amendment of these laws gave more liberty to women. The workforce that affected women was questioned several times by some feminist. Many feminist believed that in several jobs, women were seen as objects and not people.

In 1968 women criticised the Miss World Beauty contest in Atlantic City. To highlight this event radical feminist crowned a sheep, to represent Miss World.

The male dominated society wanted to believe that women had to follow men, and that women were there to look beautiful for men. This had to be questioned and improved.

“You are asking that a stewardess be young, attractive and single. What are you running, an airline or a whorehouse?”(GCSE modern world history second edition, by Ben Walsh, Congresswoman Martha Griffiths)

Kennedy when elected as president wanted to change the voting laws. J.F.K and Robert Kennedy believed that if there was a majority of the black population registered in to vote, the voting laws would have to change. Voting rights encouraged the civil rights movement, which was now becoming a stately issue. By 1963 Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. It was probably Martin Luther King’s pacifist belief that enabled this law to come through, not the black radicals.

There were many black movements, many supported by Martin Luther King. But Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party weren’t pacifists. If force was necessary, they would use it.

“I am for violence if non-violence means we continue postponing a solution to the American black man’s problems. If we must use violence to get the black man his human rights in this country then I am for violence.” (GCSE modern world history second edition by Ben Walsh, Malcolm X)

The Black Panther Party did have some influence as they were a political party. At least by this time, women were beginning to have influence in politics. Eleanor Roosevelt pressurised President Kennedy to improve the status of women, especially in the working area. Eleanor Roosevelt had influence in politics, possibly because she was already a woman with status. The following investigation was carried out, and women were able to see the unfair treatment they had when compared to men.

“95 per cent of company managers were men.

88 per cent of technical workers were men.

Only 4 per cent of lawyers and 7 per cent of doctors were women.

Women earned around 50-60 per cent wages of men, even for the same work.

Work for women was overwhelmingly low paid, part time and low level with no responsibility.

Women could still be dismissed when they married.”(GCSE modern world history second edition by Ben Walsh)

Women like Eleanor Roosevelt did try to give women equal rights, or at least showed the male dominated society of the unfair treatment towards women.

However other right wing women like Phyllis Schlafly, thought that women should just have Equal Rights Amendments. For Phyllis Schlafly, feminist were women complaining for no particular reason. She did not support the new idea of legalising

abortion, as the rights of the unborn child were not considered. Phyllis Schlafly believed that if women's role was equal to men's, this would devalue their true role as housewives. All women should expect to receive were Equal Rights Amendments.

## Conclusion:

The main changes to the role of women during the 1960's were medical advances and the black civil rights protests. Although the pill and abortion came much later than the Civil Rights Protest, these were the two most important leavers that encouraged upheaval amongst women. Blacks had been discriminated against, and didn't have the same opportunities as whites. This raised awareness amongst women about their own opportunities to change the problems they had in society. Women and blacks found themselves handicapped in society. But once they started rebelling against the white male dominated world, they were able to start changing their roles.

Once these protests and demonstrations began, women needed to keep the momentum going. This happened when the pill and abortion were legalised. Because women had a chance to decide whether or not to be pregnant, this gave them more freedom. From this point onwards, women could plan ahead. Women were not obliged to stay at home; this encouraged them to apply for jobs without having to worry about being dismissed.

Once these medical advances were guaranteed for women, they had a chance to protest about their original roles. This converted the women from the role as housewife, to independent women who could decide their own future.

Obviously the fomenting of the post-war discontent felt by women was a very important issue. If women hadn't been discontent during this time, possibly the anger of the 1960's hadn't been such an upheaval.

This anger was not just carried by women but also by blacks in the USA. A very important issue that changed the view of African-American people was music. Rock 'n' Roll, became very important among the youngsters of the 1950's, and had its roots in black culture. Through music blacks found a perfect opportunity to express themselves.

The advances in the media were also of great importance for the changes in the 1960's. By the 1960's, most families were able to have a television or a radio. With this new technology, all the upheavals and events were known internationally. This had an effect on the Civil Rights movement at the same time in Northern Ireland. Although there were some changes and advances during the 1960's. The 1960's was not the period of time when there was a complete change of role for women. The change took place mostly from the 1970's onwards. The English speaking world believed that most of the changes were occurring in the USA and the non-communist part of Europe. However in Japan women had a greater involvement in the workforce than in the rest of the western world. The image the Japanese family portrays is that of

“A patriarchal, autocratic husband and a quiet, attentive wife.”  
([www.eu.emb-japan.go.jp](http://www.eu.emb-japan.go.jp))

This statement is true to a certain extent, at that time women preferred to be housewives than having to fight against the system. Although Japanese women preferred at that time not to fight against the system, this was not the case in the USA and the UK.

Finally the most significant factors were the Civil Rights Movement, the medical advances and the media and new technology. The other factors that worsened the situation for women, such as the post war ideologies, was just a conditional factor. However the main factors of change were all a trigger for further revolution.

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