When Everything Changed

By Gail Collins

Hardcover, 480 pages
Little, Brown and Company
List Price: $27.99

Read An Excerpt.

In 1964, Rep. Howard W. Smith of Virginia, an 80-year-old ardent segregationist, tried to torpedo the Civil Rights Act then moving through Congress. To render the legislation absolutely absurd, the Democrat proposed an amendment adding women to the groups to be protected from discrimination.

The joke was on him. The amendment passed — and so did the bill. To make sure the ban on sex discrimination was enforced, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded and, in the blink of an eye, a women's liberation movement began attacking the traditional social roles assigned to the sexes.

In When Everything Changed, Gail Collins traces the transformation of the lives of women in the United States — in boardrooms and bedrooms — that ensued. It was, she argues, imperfect, incomplete and astonishing.

The first editorial page editor of The New York Times and the author of America's Women (2003), Collins is a masterful storyteller. Supplementing archival research with well over 100 interviews, she uses the memories "of regular women who lived through it all" to illuminate the public dramas of the last half century. Although she's clearly pleased with the progress women have made, Collins engages highly charged subjects, from "The Pill" to Palin, without grinding axioms.

She suggests, for instance, that the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was not ratified by the requisite number of state legislatures because supporters had "only vague explanations" for the actual good it would do. Nor did they effectively refute conservative Phyllis Schlafly's claims that it would result in unisex bathrooms, a merger of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and inclusion of females in the military draft.

Collins makes a compelling case, however, that although many women these days shy away from the label "feminist," the big story is not backlash. In 1960, women accounted for 6 percent of doctors, 3 percent of lawyers and less than 1 percent of engineers. A NASA official said that talk of a spacewoman made him sick. College women now think about the work they want to do, not the men they want to catch.

Although women have come a long way, baby, Collins acknowledges that — in 21st century America — they haven't figured out how to raise children and hold down a job at the same time, or to keep marriages from cascading into divorce. Nonetheless, her splendid book reminds us that their moms created a world their grandmas "did not even have the opportunity to imagine."

Excerpt: 'When Everything Changed'

Chapter One

1. Repudiating Rosie

"Some of you DO wear a cautious face."

In January 1960, Mademoiselle welcomed in a new decade for America's young women by urging them to be ... less boring. "Some of you do wear a cautious face," the editors admitted. "But are you really — cautious, unimaginative, determined to play it safe at any price?"

Mademoiselle certainly hoped not. But its readers had good reason to set their sights low. The world around them had been drumming one message into their heads since they were babies: women are meant to marry and let their husbands take care of all the matters relating to the outside world. They were not supposed to have adventures or compete with men for serious rewards. ("I think that when women are encouraged to be competitive too many of them become disagreeable," said Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose baby book had served as the bible for the postwar generation of mothers.) Newsweek, decrying a newly
noticed phenomenon of dissatisfied housewives in 1960, identified the core of the issue: menstruation. "From the beginning of time, the female cycle has defined and confined woman's role," the newsmagazine wrote. "As Freud was credited with saying: 'Anatomy is destiny.'

Though no group of women has ever pushed aside these natural restrictions as far as the American wife, it seems that she still cannot accept them in good grace. Most girls grew up without ever seeing a woman doctor, lawyer, police officer, or bus driver. Jo Freeman, who went to Berkeley in the early '60s, realized only later that while she had spent four years "in one of the largest institutions of higher education in the world — and one with a progressive reputation," she had never once had a female professor. "I never even saw one. Worse yet, I didn't notice." If a young woman expressed interest in a career outside the traditional teacher/nurse/secretary, her mentors carefully shepherded her back to the proper path. As a teenager in Pittsburgh, Angela Nolfi told her guidance counselor that she wanted to be an interior decorator, but even that very feminine pursuit apparently struck her adviser as too high-risk or out of the ordinary. "He said, 'Why don't you be a home-economics teacher?' " she recalled. And once Mademoiselle had finished urging its readers to shoot for the sky, it celebrated the end of the school year with an article on careers that seemed to suggest most new college graduates would be assuming secretarial duties, and ended with tips on "pre-job hand-beautifying" for a new generation of typists.

Whenever things got interesting, women seemed to vanish from the scene. There was no such thing as a professional female athlete — even in schools, it was a given that sports were for boys. An official for the men-only Boston Marathon opined that it was "unhealthy for women to run long distances." When Mademoiselle selected seven "headstrong people who have made names for themselves lately" to comment on what the 1960s would bring, that magazine for young women managed to find only one headstrong woman to include in the mix — playwright Lorraine Hansberry, who did double duty as the panel's only minority.

"Women used to be the big stars, but these days it's men."

Nothing sent the message about women's limited options more forcefully than television, which had just finished conquering the nation with a speed that made Alexander the Great look like an underachiever. In 1950 only about 9 percent of American homes boasted a set, but by 1960 nearly 90 percent of families had a TV, and those who didn't were feeling very deprived indeed. Beverly Burton, a Wyoming farm wife, had been estranged throughout the 1950s from a mother who had once told her she was sorry Beverly had ever been born. When her mother decided to mend fences, she sent Burton a note saying, "I hope this will cover the past" — attached to a television set. And it did indeed become a turning point in the relationship.

The postwar generation that was entering adolescence in the 1960s had grown up watching Howdy Doody, the must-see TV for the first wave of baby boomers. Howdy was a raucous puppet show in which the human performers interspersed broad physical comedy with endless pitches for the sponsors' products. "But all the slapstick stopped when they brought out Princess Summerfall Winterspring," remembered Stephen Davis, a childhood fan whose father worked on the show. The princess, played by a teenage singer named Judy Tyler, was the only long-running female character in Howdy Doody's crowded cast. The role had been created when a producer realized "we could sell a lot of dresses if only we had a girl on the show," and the princess spent most of her time expressing concern about plot developments taking place while she was offstage. Adults approved. "The harshness and crudeness which so many parents objected to in Howdy Doody now appears to have largely been a case of too much masculinity," said Variety. But the stuff that made kids love the show — the broad comedy and bizarre plots — was all on the male side of the equation. Princess Summerfall Winterspring sang an occasional song — and watched.

The more popular and influential television became, the more efficiently women were swept off the screen. In the 1950s, when the medium was still feeling its way, there were a number of shows built around women — mainly low-budget comedies such as Our Miss Brooks, Private Secretary, and My Little Margie. None of the main characters were exactly role models — Miss Brooks was a teacher who spent most of her time mooning over a hunky biology instructor, and Margie lived off her rich father. Still, the shows were unquestionably about them. And the most popular program of all was I Love Lucy, in which Lucille Ball was the focus of every plotline, ever striving to get out of her three-room apartment and into her husband Ricky's nightclub show.

But by 1960 television was big business, and if women were around at all, they were in the kitchen, where they decorously stirred a single pot on the stove while their husbands and children dominated the action. (In 1960 the nominees for the Emmy for best comedy series were The Bob Cummings Show, The Danny Thomas Show, The Jack Benny Show, The Red Skelton Show, The Phil Silvers Show, and Father Knows Best.) When a script did turn its attention to the wife, daughter, or mother, it was frequently to remind her of her place and the importance of letting boys win. On Father Knows Best, younger daughter Kathy was counseled by her dad on how to deliberately lose a ball game. Teenage daughter Betty found happiness when she agreed to stop competing with a male student for a junior executive job at the local department
store and settled for the more gender-appropriate task of modeling bridal dresses.

In dramatic series, women stood on the sidelines, looking worried. When Betty Friedan asked why there couldn't be a female lead in Mr. Novak — which was, after all, a series about a high school teacher — she said the producer explained, "For drama, there has to be action, conflict. ... For a woman to make decisions, to triumph over anything, would be unpleasant, dominant, masculine." Later in the decade, the original Star Trek series would feature a story about a woman so desperate to become a starship captain — a post apparently restricted to men — that she arranged to have her brain transferred into Captain Kirk's body. The crew quickly noticed that the captain was manicuring his nails at the helm and having hysterics over the least little thing.

Cowboy action series were the best-loved TV entertainment in 1960. Eleven of the top twenty-five shows were Westerns, and they underlined the rule that women did not have adventures, except the ones that involved getting kidnapped or caught in a natural disaster. "Women used to be the big stars, but these days it's men," said Michael Landon, one of the leads in Bonanza, the long-running story of an all-male family living on a huge Nevada ranch after the Civil War. Perhaps to emphasize their heterosexuality, the Cartwright men had plenty of romances. But the scriptwriters killed their girlfriends off at an extraordinarily speedy clip. The family patriarch, Ben, had been widowed three times, and his three sons all repeatedly got married or engaged, only to quickly lose their mates to the grim reaper. A rather typical episode began with Joe (Landon) happily dancing with a new fiancee. Before the first commercial, the poor girl was murdered on her way home from the hoedown.

"All the men become lawyers and all the women work on committees."

TV created the impression that once married, a woman literally never left her house. Even if the viewers knew that this really wasn't true, many did accept the message that when matrimony began, working outside the home ended. In reality, however, by 1960 there were as many women working as there had been at the peak of World War II, and the vast majority of them were married. (Young single adult women were, as we'll see, as rare as female action heroes at this point in history.) More than 30 percent of American wives were holding down jobs, including almost 40 percent of wives with school-age children.

Yet to look at the way Americans portrayed themselves on television, in newspapers, and in magazines, you'd have thought that married women who worked were limited to a handful of elementary school teachers and the unlucky wives of sharecroppers and drunkards. Marlene Sanders, one of the very few women who managed to do on-the-air reporting for network television, left in 1960 to give birth to a son. "After about six weeks, I thought, 'I will go crazy,' " she recalled. She hired a housekeeper and offered a male college student free room and board in return for filling in when she, her husband, and the housekeeper were all unavailable. It seemed to work, but Sanders had no idea whether the arrangement was normal or bizarre. She knew no other working mothers, and there was, she said, "no public discussion of the child-care problems of working couples." One of the first articles she ever saw on the subject, she added, was one "about how I had this male babysitter."

If all the working women were invisible, it was in part because of the jobs most of them were doing. They weren't sitting next to Sanders in the network news bureaus. They were office workers — receptionists or bookkeepers, often part-time. They stood behind cash registers in stores, cleaned offices or homes. If they were professionals, they held — with relatively few exceptions — low-paying positions that had long been defined as particularly suited to women, such as teacher, nurse, or librarian. The nation's ability to direct most of its college-trained women into the single career of teaching was the foundation upon which the national public school system was built and a major reason American tax rates were kept low. The average salary of a female teacher was $4,689 at a time when the government was reporting the average starting salary for a male liberal-arts graduate fresh out of college as $5,400. (Women graduates' salaries were significantly lower, probably in part because so many of them were going into teaching.)

Another reason the nation ignored the fact that so many housewives had outside jobs was that working women tended not to be well-represented among upper-income families. The male politicians, business executives, editors, and scriptwriters who set the tone for public discussion usually felt that wives not working was simply better. After the war, Americans had a powerful and understandable desire to settle down and return to normal. Since they were doing so in an era of incredible economic growth, it was easy to decide that stay-at-home housewives were part of the package. Women could devote all their energies to taking care of their children and husbands (politicians, businessmen, and editors included). If some of them wanted a break from domestic routine, they could volunteer to work on the PTA or, if they were wealthy enough, the charity fashion show. ("It is a tradition in the Guggenheimer family that all the men become lawyers and all the women work on committees," said a story in the Times about some well-to-do New Yorkers.) Men were supposed to be the breadwinners. A woman who worked to help support her struggling — or striving — family might want to downplay the fact rather than make her husband look inadequate. As late as 1970, a survey of women under 45 who had been or were currently married found that 80 percent believed "it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home.
and the woman takes care of the home and family.*

The limited options for women who did work, and the postwar propaganda about the glories of homemaking, convinced the young women who were graduating from high school and college in the early 1960s that once you married, the good life was the stay-at-home life. Prestige lay in having a husband who was successful enough to keep his wife out of the workplace. Esther Peterson, the top-ranking woman in the Kennedy administration, asked an auditorium full of working-class high school girls in Los Angeles how many expected to have a "home and kids and a family," and the room was full of waving hands. But when Peterson wanted to know how many expected to work, only one or two girls signified interest. She then asked how many of their mothers worked, and, she recalled later, "all those hands went up again." The girls were disturbed by the implicit message. "In those days nine out of ten girls would work outside the home at some point in their lives," Peterson said. "But each of the girls thought that she would be that tenth girl."

*I'd know we were getting the wrong kind of girl. She's not getting married.*

Employers happily took advantage of the assumption that female college graduates would work for only a few years before retiring to domesticity. They offered up a raft of theoretically glamorous short-term jobs that were intended to end long before the young women would begin to care about things like health care or pensions or even salaries. The sociologist David Riesman noted that instead of contemplating careers in fields such as business or architecture, "even very gifted and creative young women are satisfied to assume that on graduation they will get underpaid ancillary positions, whether as a Time-Life researcher or United Nations guide or publisher's assistant or reader, where they are seldom likely to advance to real opportunity."

First and foremost among these mini-career paths was being a stewardess. Girls in the postwar era had grown up reading books such as Julie with Wings, in which beautiful and spunky young women beat out the massive competition to become flight attendants. Along with teenage fiction about Cherry Ames, the inexhaustible nurse, the stewardess novels were virtually the only girls' career books around — unless you counted the girl detectives, who didn't seem to get paid for their efforts. Winning your "wings," readers learned, might require leaving behind an unimaginative boyfriend. ("Tug, there's a whole world for me to discover before I marry and all its people for me to know. I must follow the silver path for a while. Alone.")

There would be difficult passengers and — according to the novels — an extraordinary number of airborne criminals. But the rewards were great. Within a few chapters, the heroine of Silver Wings for Vicki had attracted two new boyfriends, met a movie star, and helped the police arrest a smuggler. In the real world, the job was a lot more mundane, but it was still virtually the only one a young woman could choose that offered the chance to travel. As a result, the airlines got more than a hundred applicants for every opening. Schools sprang up, offering special courses that would improve the odds of getting into a flight attendant training program. (The Grace Downs Air Career School breathlessly asked potential clients to envision themselves being able to "greet oncoming passengers at lunchtime in New York and say farewell before dinner in Minneapolis!")

Despite the fact that the American experience was built around women who ventured off to create homes in an unexplored continent, there had always been a presumption that a proper woman didn't move around too much, and there was certainly a conviction that sending a woman on a business trip raised far too many risks of impropriety.

Georgia Panter, a stewardess for United Airlines in 1960, noticed that except for the occasional family, her flights were populated only by men. One regular run, the "Executive Flight" from New York to Chicago, actually barred female passengers. The men got extra large steaks, drinks, and cigars — which the stewardesses were supposed to bend over and light.

Women had been eager participants in the early years of flying, when things were disorganized and open to all comers. But any hopes they had for gaining a foothold in commercial aviation were dashed when the Commerce Department, under pressure from underemployed male pilots, exiled women from the field by prohibiting them from flying planes carrying passengers in bad weather. Instead, they got the role of hostess. The airlines originally hired nurses to serve as flight attendants, but by the postwar era, trained health-care workers were long gone and the airlines were looking for attractive, unmarried young women whose main duty would be to serve drinks and meals.

Georgia Panter and her sister — who also became a United stewardess — grew up in Smith Center, Kansas, a Plains town so remote "we used to run outside if a car went by to see who was in it." When the Panter sisters joined United, they became celebrities back home, and the local paper ran a picture of them in their uniforms. They quickly learned the downsides of the job, from the very low salary to the indignity of constantly being weighed and measured by "counselors" watching to make sure they kept their slender figures. "We had inspections often," Georgia said wryly. "Everybody seemed to think they should inspect us. Every department." (Besides limits on weight and height, stewardesses were required, according to
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Business Review

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the clerk to the chief justice of the state supreme court. These days, we think of a law clerkship as a
high-prestige post, but back then in Louisiana, people took the word “clerk” literally. “My judge felt all
women lawyers should take shorthand and should type,” Roberts recalled. She lasted a year and then
embarked on another job search, which landed her a starting position with a small law firm — as a
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The belief that marriage meant an end to women’s work life provided an all-purpose justification for giving
the good opportunities to young men. Joanne Rife, a college graduate in California who was interested in
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work such as real estate and insurance law.

Since it was perfectly legal to discriminate on the basis of sex, there was no real comeback when
employers simply said that no women need apply. A would-be journalist named Madeleine Kunin, looking
for her first reporting job, applied to the Providence Journal and was rebuffed by an editor, who said, “The
last woman we hired got raped in the parking lot.” She applied to the Washington Post and was told she
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copy-editor. “We don’t have anything in the newsroom for you, but I could see if we could get you a
waiting room job in the Times cafeteria,” said the personnel director.

Women were vigorously discouraged from seeking jobs that men might have wanted. “Hell yes, we have a
quota,” said a medical school dean in 1961. “Yes, it’s a small one. We do keep women out, when we can.
We don’t want them here — and they don’t want them elsewhere, either, whether or not they’ll admit it.”
Another spokesman for a medical school, putting a more benign spin on things, said, “Yes indeed, we do
take women, and we do not want the one woman we take to be lonesome, so we take two per class.” In
1960 women accounted for 6 percent of American doctors, 3 percent of lawyers, and less than 1 percent
of engineers. Although more than half a million women worked for the federal government, they made up
1.4 percent of the civil-service workers in the top four pay grades. Those who did break into the
male-dominated professions were channeled into low-pro?le specialties related to their sex. Journalists
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the good opportunities to young men. Joanne Rife, a college graduate in California who was interested in
industrial psychology, had a job interview in which she was pitted against a man with an inferior college
record. “They asked me very pointedly if I was going to get married ... and you know I probably waffled
around a little,” she recalled. In the end, the male student got the opening and Rife was offered a
secretarial job. When Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the future Supreme Court justice, went to Harvard Law
School, the dean held a dinner for the handful of women in the class. He jovially opened up the
conversation by asking them "to explain what we were doing in law school taking a place that could be held
by a man."

Once hired, women had virtually no hope of moving up. A report on women in management by Harvard
Business Review in the 1960s said there were so few such women that “there is scarcely anything to
study." The idea that men were supposed to be in charge went beyond conventional wisdom; it was
regarded by many as scientific fact. A federally funded study of college students’ career objectives
concluded that the typical coed "most easily finds her satisfaction in fields where she supports and often
underwrites the male, such as secretarial work or nursing, or in volunteer work which is not paid and is clearly valued by the sentimental side of community attitudes."

"My name wasn't even on it."

Not long ago Linda McDaniel, a Kansas housewife, came across the deed to the house she and her husband had purchased when they were married in the 1960s. "It was made out to 'John McDaniel and spouse.' My name wasn't even on it," she said.

Men, in their capacity as breadwinners, were presumed to be the money managers on the home front as well as in business, and women were cut out of almost everything having to do with finances. Credit cards were issued in the husband's name. Loans were granted based on the husband's wage-earning ability, even if the wife had a job, under the theory that no matter what the woman said she planned to do, she would soon become pregnant and quit working. A rule of thumb that banks used when analyzing a couple's ability to handle a mortgage or car loan was that the salary of the wife was irrelevant if she was 28 or under. Half of her income was taken into consideration if she was in her 30s. Her entire salary entered the calculations only if she had reached 40 or could prove she had been sterilized. Marjorie Wintjen, a 25-year-old Delaware woman, was told her husband's vasectomy had no effect on the matter "because you can still get pregnant."

Even when a woman was living on her own and supporting herself, she had trouble convincing the financial establishment that she could be relied upon to pay her bills. The New York Times was still reporting horror stories in 1972, such as that of a suburban mother who was unable to rent an apartment until she got the lease cosigned by her husband — a patient in a mental hospital. A divorced woman, well-to-do and over forty, had to get her father to cosign her application for a new co-op. Divorced women had a particular problem getting credit, in part because of a widely held belief that a woman who could not keep her marriage together might not keep her money under control, either. (Insurance companies held to the same line of reasoning when it came to writing policies for car owners, theorizing that a woman who broke the marital bonds would also break the speed limit.) Joyce Westrich, a program analyst, wanted to buy a house in New Jersey for herself and her two children after she and her husband legally separated. All the banks she approached turned her down, to Westrich's befuddlement, until her real estate broker "whispered ... in the manner of a character in a deodorant commercial, 'Maybe it's your marital situation.' " Although her about-to-be ex-husband's income was much lower than hers, once he agreed to cosign, Westrich had no further troubles.

"Men needed faster service than women."

The presumption that women needed men's protection in every aspect of life led to a kind of near-infantilization. Looking back on her life as a housewife in the 1960s, the writer Jane O'Reilly recalled that she had "never earned my own living, never taken a trip alone, never taken total responsibility for a single decision. The only time I tried to give a speech, I fainted. I had been divorced once, and lasted only four months before I remarried in a fit of terror. I had never gone to a party by myself, never gone to the movies by myself. I wanted to run away from home but I felt I had to ask permission."

When women ventured into the outside world, they often felt tentative, unsure of their welcome. And it was no wonder. The Executive Flight to Chicago was not the only service that barred them at the gate. The world was full of men's clubs, men's gyms, and men's lounges, where the business of business was conducted. Even places that were theoretically open to the public reserved the right to discriminate. The public golf course in Westport, Connecticut, would not allow women to play during prime weekend hours, claiming that men deserved the best spots because they had to work during the week. Heinemann's Restaurant in Milwaukee banned women from the lunch counter because "men needed faster service than women because they have important business to do." Many upscale bars refused to serve women, particularly if they were alone, under the theory that they must be prostitutes.

Early in the 1960s, a freelance writer from New York, traveling to Boston to interview a psychologist for a book she was working on, stopped by the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and ordered a drink at the bar. "We do not serve women," the bartender said, and whisked her off to a little lounge off the women's restroom, where he brought her the whiskey sour. It was a moment Betty Friedan recalled with humiliation decades later, long after she helped spark a movement that made sure nobody ever got consigned to that lounge again.

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