From the '50's to the '70's

Study examines housewife's role

The glamorous, contented housewife of the 1950's has become a bored, isolated drudge in the 1970's.

At least that's how she's portrayed by many social critics denouncing the "exploitation of women through unpaid work in the home."

That may not accurately reflect the view of housewives themselves, points out Alfreda P. Iglehart, a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Michigan Survey Research Center (SRC).

"Despite the trend of married women entering the labor force, the majority of housewives in our study said they had no intention of ever seeking paid employment," Iglehart says.

"While they expressed mixed feelings about various household tasks, they took a strongly positive view of the broader housewife role. The rhetoric against housework tends to ignore the rewards of child care, community involvement and civic activities, all of which make homemaking a very viable way to enhance feelings of self-worth."

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Lowell Eklund, of Bloomfield Hills, dean of Oakland University's Division of Continuing Education, has been appointed by President Jimmy Carter to the National Advisory Council on Extension and Continuing Education. The council gathers suggestions from around the country for legislation and to formulate national policy on continuing education. Eklund was president of the National University Extension Association in 1974-75. He is a graduate of Michigan State University and has a doctorate in political science from Syracuse University.

IGLEHART is the author of "Married Women and Work: 1957 and 1976," to be published in July by Lexington Books. Her findings come from an analysis of two major national surveys taken by SRC in those two years on the sources of well-being and discontent Americans associate with work, marriage and parenthood. A cross-section of 2,460 adults were interviewed in 1957, and questions repeated with 2,264 persons in 1976 to see what kinds of social changes had taken place.

Iglehart compared the data for a subsample of those interviewed: women who are white, currently married and either full-time employed or full-time at home. For 1957 this included 628 housewives and 149 employed wives; in 1976, the subsample was 337 housewives and 231 employed.

"In 1957, social norms were rigid, particularly for mothers of young children. A wife's first loyalty was expected to be the home, and working, even for economic need, had a degree of stigma attached to it.

"Most sociological studies of the period dwelt on whether a woman's job interfered with her household responsibilities, not on whether it contributed to her life's satisfaction or happiness."

SEVERAL TRENDS over the next 20 years diminished sex role stereotypes, Iglehart says. Later marriages, birth control and labor-saving technology have brought women more feeedom, and a national political movement has emerged urging women to seek equality and fulfillment outside the home.

Iglehart hypothesized that the same factors that appeared to be reducing stress and guilt for working wives might be generating similar kinds of conflict in full-time housewives.

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>
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The UM data confirm that women have significantly shifted their attitudes toward paid work and housework. For example:

- The 1957 housewives uniformly held positive feelings about their work in the home. In 1976 they expressed mixed feelings, admitting they enjoy some tasks but dislike or merely tolerate others. The more educated wives are the more likely to acknowledge the negative side of housework and to anticipate seeking paying jobs in the future.
- In 1957, one-quarter of the employed wives said they would prefer to be home full-time. By 1976, this group had diminished to a negligible three percent. Today's wives appear to be working by choice, Iglehart says, rather than necessity.
- In 1957, wives who did not mention economic need often said they worked to keep busy or otherwise fill empty time. The 1976 wives were more apt to cite personal satisfaction or usefulness of a chosen career.
- The only working mothers who showed many negative feelings about themselves were the working mothers with pre-school children. By 1976, there appeared little difference between the self-images of working or non-working mothers, regardless of the ages of their children.

"IN BOTH 1957 and 1976, the wives surveyed expressed generally positive feelings about themselves and their lives," says Iglehart. "The presence or lack of full-time employment seems to have little bearing on their self-image or happiness.

"Many of the changes that have occurred in 20 years are less radical than they appear. For example, the percentage of women working for non-economic reasons rose from 58 percent in 1957 to 82 percent in 1976. While the increase is significant, the fact remains that even in the post-war era, the majority of wives worked for reasons other than money.

"Second, while more wives in 1976 say they plan to work in the future than did in 1957, the majority of housewives questioned both years say they don't plan to take jobs outside the home. Thus, while the housewives of the 1970's have mixed feelings about housework, they are not planning to relinquish the housewife role."

Since the survey involves only white wives, it raises some questions about the work attitudes of blacks, Iglehart says.

"Unlike the white homemaker of the 1950's, black women have always been encouraged to work outside the home.

"While researchers usually attribute this to economic need, little is really known about the black wife's true feelings about employment or housework. Is the work role forced on them, or would they choose it regardless of need or social norms? Further studies should be undertaken so that black women are not misrepresented by sweeping generalizations based on studies of white women.