

United States Women in World War II

by Pamela K. Booth

Many changes took place in the United States during the "Roaring 20's" and the Great Depression, but women's traditional occupational roles remained relatively unaffected. When women were employed outside the home, their choices were limited. Generally they worked as domestics, nurses, teachers, or secretaries. Married women were expected to be homemakers, wives, and mothers, and leave the outside jobs to men. Especially during the Depression years, it was thought to be selfish of a woman to take a job that a man could use. However, after the attack by Japan on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941, hundreds of thousands of men went off to war and left behind jobs in factories, on farms, in offices, and in mines. Women were publicly recruited to fill jobs vacated by men. In 1942, President Roosevelt told the American people, "We can no longer afford to indulge such prejudice."¹⁵

A major concern of the U.S. government was keeping factories in operation. Many people regarded World War II as a "war of production" and the Germans and Japanese were believed to have a 10-year head start in amassing weapons. Production was essential to victory and women were essential to production.¹⁶

Government propaganda and advertising encouraged American women to get involved in the war effort. Posters, radio programs, magazine articles, and advertisements showed women in overalls with greasy hands. The Office of War Information (OWI) and other government agencies urged women to come out of their kitchens and move into the factories.

Propaganda efforts took two separate and distinct approaches that worked well together. The OWI appealed to women's patriotic sense as well as their emotions. Women were encouraged to enter the factories and build the implements of war that would bring their fathers, brothers, and sweethearts home sooner. The government utilized guilt by implying that soldiers might die unnecessarily if women did not "do their part". In addition women were urged to join the military as nurses and to be careful consumers.¹⁷

These campaigns were quickly successful. Women dug ditches, worked on road crews, tended fields and farms, and filled many office positions. Women volunteered for the Woman's Land Army, which brought women out of the cities and onto farms to work. The percentage of women working in the agricultural sector rose from one to fourteen percent by the end of the first summer of the war. In December 1941, about 12 million women were employed outside the home in the United States; by

early 1944, this number was over 16 million-- an increase of more than 33 percent. In manufacturing, a reported 6 million women labored to make weapons for the fighting men.¹⁸

Even while working in factories, women still had household obligations, including child care. These additional responsibilities often came at the end of a ten to twelve hour workday. Women had to handle those responsibilities without many of today's conveniences. Modern washing machines, automatic dishwashers, electric dryers, television for the kids, play groups and carpools were not available at the time. In fact, household chores in 1941 typically took fifty hours a week or more. Women also helped the war effort in more traditional ways. Women rationed meat, coffee, tin, rubber, nylon, and gasoline. Women saved and reused cooking fat, tin foil, soap, and nylon stockings. Victory gardens were common sights in backyards.¹⁹

In May, 1943, Congress passed a bill providing more funds for nursing schools. However, the wartime need for nurses was so great that a proposal to draft women into the nurses corps was considered. According to a public opinion poll, seventy-three percent of Americans approved of this idea. The House of Representatives passed the Nurses Selective Service Act in 1945 by a vote of 347-42 with 43 abstentions. The Senate Military Affairs Committee favored the measure, but one month later the war in Europe ended. When World War II was finally over, Americans were too busy rejoicing to notice this fundamental change in society's attitude toward women. If the war had continued, it is likely that women would have been conscripted.²⁰

The end of the war brought new challenges and considerations for American society and women in general. Women had served well in their new jobs. They proved they could build planes, tanks, and ships. Although thankful for the end of war and the return of men, many women were reluctant to give up the jobs they held during the war. The fact that most women defense workers stated that they wanted to keep their jobs signaled that women's aspirations for themselves and their sense of their own competence had been dramatically altered by their success in "men's" work categories.²¹

American working women and American society had different views on what their post-war roles would be. Society offered its appreciation for a job well done as it tried to usher women back into their pre-war kitchens. Advertisements for modern technology to assist in household chores and suburban lifestyles with large families became prominent. Women's magazines promoted the virtues of staying home and caring for post-war families. The government assisted women's early

retirement by cutting off federal funds for day care. According to one historian, the government wanted "to avoid massive unemployment after the war, and to government policy makers, unemployed was a male adjective."²²

After the war, both marriage and birthrates soared in new suburban communities. From a mid-depression low of 18.7 births per 1,000 population, the rate increased to 24.5 by 1949. Marriage was in vogue and home ownership was spurred on by the availability of GI loans and the savings that had been accumulated during the war.²³

Women's adaptation to the new roles created during World War II produced mixed feelings for women, men, and society in general, and forced many people to reevaluate their perceptions of women's capabilities. With the post-war surge in economic growth and the establishment of new families, communities, and suburbs, opportunities and dilemmas were created for American women. For many, traditional ideas won out, at least at the start. However, during the next two decades it became apparent that things would never return to the way they were before World War II.

Sources

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Women as a percentage of the United States Work Force

Year	Percentage
1940	27.9%
1941	28.5%
1942	30.9%
1943	35.7%
1944	36.3%
1945	35.8%
1946	30.8%

How do we explain these changes?