

A Woman's Place Is in the Workforce: American Gender Roles During the Second World War

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ABSTRACT

World War II (1939-1945) was the most devastating conflict in global history. The United States underwent profound economic, political, and social change as the nation mobilized for war. Millions of American men were drafted into the armed forces, creating an acute labor shortage that the government addressed through propaganda campaigns to recruit women into previously male-dominated occupations. These dedicated efforts resulted in a surge of female employment in the defense industry, noncombatant military roles, and medicine. Female workers overcame significant discriminatory barriers and challenged traditional social norms with their critical wartime labor contributions. Despite post-war efforts to remove them from the workforce, female workers brought about lasting change to the American conception of gender roles that contributed to the later rise of the second-wave feminist movement.

Introduction

World War II, the most devastating conflict in global history, was a war that touched every aspect of American life. Mobilization for the war sparked an economic revival that elevated industrial production to new heights, finally lifting the nation out of the financial hardship that characterized life during the Great Depression (Fogarty, 2022). The departure of millions of men from civilian life to serve in the military created an acute labor shortage that was ultimately relieved by women stepping up to fill nontraditional roles that were critical to the continued wartime functioning of the nation. These women, relatively few of whom had worked outside of the home prior to the war, defied social norms as they took on a wide diversity of jobs ranging from heavy industry to medicine to serving in the armed forces (“Working Women”, 2022). Although some argue that the aftermath of World War II ultimately repressed women more than it liberated them, the global conflict empowered American women to combat discrimination and pursue new opportunities on the military, medical, and home fronts that challenged the traditional conception of a woman's place in society.

Women on the Home Front

The critical male labor shortage sparked a nationwide effort to recruit women into the civilian workforce, called the “home front,” defying the deep-seated notion that women should confine themselves to the domestic sphere. Before World War II, women—especially white women—were expected to work only until they married and had a husband to support them. The few who were employed outside the home worked traditionally feminine jobs in the domestic service sector such as maids, dishwashers, waitresses, laundresses, secretaries, or telephone operators. Heavy industry jobs were occupied almost exclusively by men (“Working Women”, 2022). However, the drafting of millions of previously employed men into the armed forces meant that women needed to fill those vacant jobs to maintain the wartime economy, in the process upending the widely held belief that women belonged exclusively in the private sphere. The “Women in War Jobs” campaign was a nationwide propaganda effort to bring women into the workforce, particularly

into heavy industries. The program broke through social boundaries as it transitioned from appealing to women already in the workforce to girls who just graduated high school to, eventually, married mothers who had never before been expected to work outside of the home (Avila, 2022). The World War II recruitment effort on the home front thereby challenged the idea that a woman's place was solely in the domestic sphere.

Furthermore, this propaganda campaign recruited civilian women by presenting to them idealized images of working women who combined masculine strength with traditional feminine beauty. Figure 1 depicts the fictional wartime icon "Rosie the Riveter" flexing an arm in the center of a boldly colored poster. Rosie was the quintessential image of a female factory worker doing her part to serve her country during World War II. Her flexed muscles and utilitarian dress characterize her as a working woman, a far cry from a domestic housewife. Yet Rosie retains certain traditionally feminine elements, like her immaculately made-up face and manicured nails, that appealed to popular ideas of womanhood at the time.



Figure 1. "'We Can Do It!' Poster."

Choices like these established Rosie the Riveter as a figure with whom American women could identify. She challenged rigid gender roles through her work, yet she was still undeniably feminine. Propaganda strategies like this one were extremely successful, evidenced by the additional 6.5 million women who joined the workforce during World War II, with 2.5 million of them taking up industrial occupations. Between 1943 and 1944, half of all American women were employed (Santana, 2016). Although propaganda illustrates how wartime recruitment efforts empowered women, smiles and slogans do not reveal the whole truth. Such an unprecedented disruption of gender norms on the home front was met with much opposition.

Female workers had to overcome discrimination and negative attitudes as they pushed the envelope through their work on the home front. They were barred from higher-paying, more dangerous occupations like sandblasting; often paid significantly less than their male counterparts; unable to receive promotions in rank and pay; and sometimes denied access to gender-separate restrooms. Women of color experienced further discrimination: African American women in the defense industry were usually restricted to working as factory janitors (Avila, 2022), and Japanese American women were entirely prohibited from making any contributions to the war effort ("Women in World War II", 2022). But the tenacity of female defense workers can be seen in the millions who overcame such discrimination and institutional barriers, making massive contributions to the industries of the home front that powered America's

war machine. The perseverance that these civilian women exhibited was shared by the thousands of women in the armed forces.

Women in the Armed Forces

While women in the U.S. Army were prohibited from becoming soldiers, they played critical support roles that challenged societal expectations and freed up male enlistees for battle. Much like on the home front, the national labor shortage broke traditional restrictions on female employment by necessity, and women took up previously male-dominated jobs in the armed forces. In 1942, Congress approved the creation of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps—abbreviated WAAC—a unit that worked alongside the Army and consisted entirely of women (“Women's Army Corps (WAC)”, 2018). Initially, WAACs held traditionally female occupations as stenographers, typists, and motor pool drivers. However, as the conflict intensified and it became clear WAACs were needed in a wider variety of fields, the range of positions that WAACs were allowed to fill expanded to include far more traditionally masculine and highly specialized roles. Such jobs included performing laboratory work and field testing in the Chemical Warfare Service, operating radios in the Signal Corps, and participating in the Manhattan Project in the Corps of Engineers. By January of 1945, only 50% of women in the Women's Army Corps who served in the Allied Air Forces occupied traditionally female roles (Bellafaire, 2005). The constant pressure the global conflict applied to the armed forces spurred the empowerment of women to perform these “male” duties, drastically diverging from pre-war expectations of domesticity. To a significant extent, the urgency of the conflict helped women transcend the social obstacles that had once barred them from service. But even with wartime pressures fueling forward progress for women, the road to empowerment was rife with challenges.

Women in the armed forces fought against discrimination and institutionalized inequality as a consequence of pushing the boundaries of what was socially acceptable for women in the 1940s. To illustrate, WAAC officers were not allowed to command men, received far less pay than did males of similar rank, and were denied the benefits that male Army soldiers received when working overseas. Furthermore, social backlash from male soldiers against the WAAC grew so severe in 1943 that the number of women joining the organization sharply declined. A sample tabulation by the Office of Censorship discovered that of all letters written by male soldiers that mentioned the WAAC, 84% of them did so in a negative way (Bellafaire, 2005). These negative attitudes arose because the women in the armed forces represented change itself. Soldiers valued that their communities and families would remain the same upon their return home from military service, so they met WAACs with great hostility and resentment. Even after the war, female veterans “encountered roadblocks when they tried to take advantage of benefit programs for veterans, like the G.I. Bill” (“History at a Glance”). Despite such pervasive discrimination, however, women continued to perform diverse and highly valuable duties in the military. Ultimately, nearly 350,000 American women served in the Army during World War II, challenging the notion that women belonged solely in the home as they thrived in specialized roles and overcame backlash from the American public (“The Women's Army Corps”, 2020). In 1943, the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps was finally recognized as an official branch of the U.S. Army, becoming the Women's Army Corps. The Women's Army Corps was a successful endeavor in large part due to its propaganda campaign, which promoted enlistment and allowed the corps to control its public image.

The recruitment propaganda disseminated by the WAC popularized idealized images of army women, figures who combined traditional femininity with wartime empowerment. Figure 2, a WAC recruitment poster entitled “Woman's Place in War” presents a twist on the common phrase “a woman's place is in the home,” illustrating the idea that World War II redefined the role of American women in society. Rather than confining themselves to the home, women were empowered to join the armed forces and take up specialized wartime occupations. The woman featured in the center of the poster sports styled, golden hair and heavy makeup, conforming to traditional notions of the ideal, white 1940s female while simultaneously challenging them through her nontraditional work as a topographic draftsman in the Army Ground Forces.



Figure 2. "Woman's Place in War-The Women's Army Corps."

Women in Medicine

In addition to opening new doors to women in the armed forces, World War II empowered women in medicine by increasing their access to education and professional opportunities. To contextualize, while it was traditional for American women to work in healthcare during times of war, female medical workers during World War II broke through boundaries with the 1943 establishment of the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps, or CNC, a federal program open to women of all religions and races. That same year, Dr. Margaret Craighill made history as “the first female doctor to become a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army's Medical Corps” (“Women in World War II”, 2022). The nation’s critical need for nurses and the well-publicized CNC program changed how society viewed nursing as a profession. When Army nurses returned to civilian life post-war, the G.I. Bill of Rights made them eligible for further education to pursue professional goals. Many Army nurses had received specialized training in fields like psychiatric care and anesthesiology and acquired first-hand practical experience over the course of World War II, and they took those highly useful skills back home with them (Bellafaire, 2003). The war therefore empowered nurses to grow professionally and pursue medical careers upon returning home to a society that was more receptive to the idea of nurses working as professionals in the U.S. healthcare system.

Furthermore, the Cadet Nurse Corps empowered female nurses by redefining the image of American nurses as one of dignity, education, and professionalism. Figure 3, a World War II-era CNC recruitment poster, features the slogans “Cadet nurse / The girl with a future” and “A Lifetime Education FREE,” thus drawing a strong association between CNC nurses and empowerment through access to education and opportunities. Furthermore, the two nurses’ crisp uniforms and polished appearances characterize Army nurses as women of great capability and professionalism.



Figure 3. "Cadet Nurse Corps Poster."

Similarly, Figure 4 supports the idea that the CNC recruitment campaign portrayed nurses as dignified by labeling wartime nursing “a Proud Profession” and by depicting a uniformed woman nobly standing at attention with her chin raised. Additionally, both posters feature the colors of the American flag, implying that Army nursing is an honorable and patriotic profession. These choices worked together to empower female nurses by enhancing the American public’s perception of them.

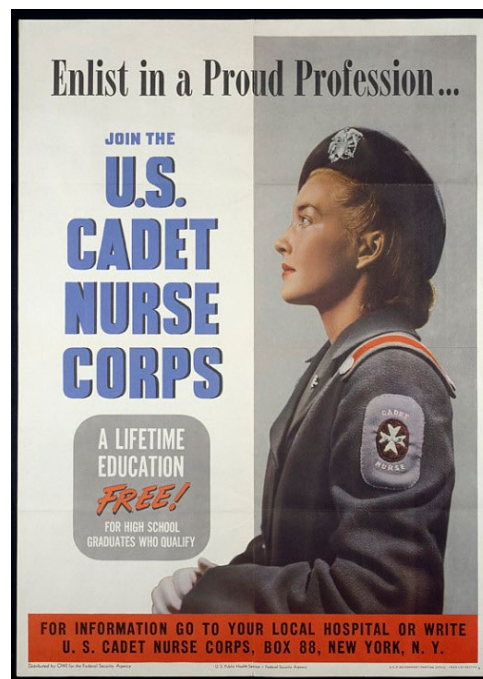


Figure 4. "'Enlist in a Proud Profession ... U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps' Poster."

But despite efforts to empower women through cultivating an inspiring image of Army nurses, female medical workers—much like the women serving on the home front and in the armed forces—encountered personal and institutionalized discrimination. While Army nurses nominally ranked above sergeants and corporals, their uniforms didn't include badges of authority, and soldiers sometimes refused to take orders from them ("The Army Nurse Corps", 2022). Furthermore, although flight nurses—women who cared for wounded soldiers as they were aerially transported away from the battlefield—performed critical and dangerous work that warranted recognition, "it was not until 1944 that a presidential executive order named [them] United States Army commissioned officers, and awarded them the rights and benefits given to male officers" ("Winged Angels"; Santana, 2016). Working women on the home, military, and medical fronts played a huge diversity of roles in World War II, but they were all united by their grit in the face of discrimination, both during and after the height of the war.

Significance

Although World War II caused American women to pursue many nontraditional roles outside of the home for the duration of the conflict, some argue that the post-war movement to remove women from the workforce meant that the conflict ultimately repressed women more than it empowered them. After the war ended, millions of women were laid off in favor of male veterans returning home from service. Women were expected to "once again make their families and homes the center of their lives" (Santana, 2016). Wartime trends in female dress, such as men's trousers and utilitarian jackets, proved fleeting as women "went back to the skirt and petticoat, keeping their hair long and their lipstick on" (Santana, 2016). The U.S. government sponsored propaganda encouraging families to "return to normalcy," the implication being that it was no longer acceptable for women to work in heavy industry or in the armed forces. But despite this immediate post-war pushback against working women, World War II had lingering positive effects on female employment that permanently altered American gender roles. Many women who were laid off in 1945 returned to the factories just a few years later as spending increased post-war. By 1947, "the percentage of women in the workforce had risen to the same level it was in 1940" (Avila, 2022). Wartime female employment foreshadowed permanent job opportunities for women in the 1970s and 1980s. Through paid work outside the home, women gained social respect and experience creating family budgets. Women challenged the idea that they belonged exclusively in the private sphere, becoming "a powerful force in the public space" and moving "a step closer to equality" (Santana, 2016).

In spurring economic and social change on a global scale, World War II permanently changed how American society viewed female workers. Women's critical contributions to the war effort on the home, medical, and military fronts decisively showed the public that women were capable and valuable members of the workforce whose efforts were not to be discounted, and that they could thrive beyond the domestic sphere. Women continued to challenge gender roles long after the war, building upon the work of those before them in what came to be known as second-wave feminism ("Women in World War II", 2022). The bold and tenacious female workers who defied deeply entrenched social norms during the height of the war set a lasting precedent, paving the way for the financial and professional independence women enjoy today.

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