Women in WWII:

How Women’s Entry into the Public Sphere Helped Win the War and Influence

Gender Workplace Discourse

*Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War, 1943: “The War Department must fully utilize, immediately and effectively, the largest and potentially the finest single source of labor available today—the vast reserve of woman power.”*\(^i\)

*General Eisenhower: “The contribution of the women of America, whether on the farm or in the factory or in uniform, to D-Day was a *sine qua non* of the invasion effort.”*\(^ii\)

*Albert Speer, master of the German war production: “How wise you were to bring your women into your military and into your labor force. Had we done that initially, as you did, it could well have affected the whole course of the war. We would have found out as you did, that women are equally effective, and for some skills, superior to males.”*\(^iii\)

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This paper seeks to address how women’s economic efforts in the United States during World War II significantly influenced the Allied victory. During the 1940s, women served in the military, worked in government, entered or reentered the workforce, and contributed to the war effort as volunteers in their communities. American women were largely responsible for government and industry’s dramatic expansion during WWII that was necessary to meet wartime needs. Furthermore, women’s wartime efforts have influenced future decades of modern political economy by redefining gender roles and expectations in the public sphere.

Before World War II, women were largely restricted to the private domain: wifedom and motherhood. In 1940, many occupations were reserved for men. Some states even banned married women from working. However, during WWII, the need for workers was so great that normative gender roles were temporarily changed – and would start a discourse that continues today.

WOMEN IN THE MILITARY

During WWII, women served in the military in non-combat roles. Although combat was still restricted for men, women performed important, albeit temporary, support functions within the military.\(^{iv}\) Roughly 350,000 American women served in the military, both at home and abroad, during WWII, volunteering for the Women’s Army Corps (WACs), the Navy Women’s Reserve (WAVES), the Coast Guard Women’s Reserve (SPARS), the Marine Corps Women’s Reserve, the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), and the Army and Navy Nurses Corps.\(^{v}\) Nineteen forty two was the first time women were allowed to serve with the U.S. Army, Navy, Coast Guard and the Marines. Prior to Pearl Harbor, women were not allowed to serve in the military in non-nursing jobs.
As part of the military, women replaced men in jobs such as gunnery instructors, radio operators and repairmen, flight instructors, mechanics, and other technical and scientific fields—thus freeing up the men to fight. Women also participated as aviators—although they did so as civilian contract employees. Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) was formed in 1943. The WASPs delivered and repaired planes, instructed cadet pilots, trained troops for antiaircraft gunnery, simulated bombing runs, tested new planes, broke in new engines and transported government officials. These women were only given veteran status through Congress legislation in 1977. During the war, 1,830 women served as WASPs, performing crucial and often dangerous missions, and 38 died.\textsuperscript{vi}

Nursing was still an important “female” wartime activity. More than 200,000 women participated in the Red Cross, a civilian agency that served the Armed Forces, as Volunteer Nurses’ Aides. Of those, over 70,000 served in the Army and Navy nurse corps and were stationed both overseas and at home.

Females in the military were courageous, dedicated and sacrificed for their country. During the war, 432 female military servicewomen died and 88 became prisoners of war.\textsuperscript{vii}

**WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT**

Women also supported the war effort in a number of government functions. By 1944, women held more than a third of civil service jobs in fields formerly reserved for men. Nearly one million women worked in the federal government during the war. These women were called “Government Girls” and returned their jobs to the men they replaced after the war.

Some women served in crucial intelligence positions, handling classified wartime information. Some served in research and development functions for weaponry. A secret program to create the atomic bomb, called the Manhattan Project, employed military and civilian
Much of the work for the project was done in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, a town that did not exist before the war. By 1945, at the height of the war, Oak Ridge had 75,000 residents. Many of the residents were young women from small Southern towns who were recruited to this secret city. They were promised solid wages and told that their work would end the war. Civilian women worked in factories. Women’s Air Corp (WAC) members did important, classified intelligence research. Other women worked as scientists, directly aiding in the development of the bomb. Most of the women did not know that they were creating the first atomic bomb ever used in combat. These women were crucial and invaluable to the success of the Manhattan Project and to ending WWII.

WOMEN IN THE LABOR FORCE

In addition to military and government roles, civilian women entered the labor force, often in traditional male roles in factory jobs, on farms, and other non-traditional industries. War production plants offered 40 percent higher wages than traditional female roles such as cleaning or waitressing, enticing many women to trade up from their lower-paying jobs. Early in the war, most who did this were blue-collar women who were already in the workforce in 1940—working class wives, divorcees, widows and students. However, as more men were drafted, the government needed to recruit single women (just out of high school or college) and eventually married women as well. Due to the stigma of women in male roles, government propaganda and public relations efforts were used to feminize wartime work in order to make it appealing to non-working women. They explained how to transfer household skills to war production manufacturing jobs. In 1943, the fictional Rosie the Riveter emerged, embodying the ideal single female war worker: loyal, efficient, compliant, patriotic, and pretty. During the war, many women joined the assembly lines, manufacturing clothes and boots for soldiers, or working
at munitions plants and aircraft factories—all of which became invaluable to Allied success. “With the help of women workers, total industrial production doubled between 1939 and 1945. The military production was astounding: 300,000 aircraft, 12,000 ships, 86,000 tanks, and 64,000 landing craft in addition to millions of artillery pieces and small weapons.”

In addition to factory work, over one million women joined the Women’s Land Army, an organization that deployed volunteers to work on farms for low wages. Women also took railroad and train maintenance jobs, allowing for the flow of war supplies and troops. Some worked as taxi drivers and transit workers. Other jobs, such as those in radio and journalism, also became available to women for the first time. Women were further encouraged to work in “essential civilian industries”, such as hotels, restaurants, stores, and laundromats, because these were seen as necessary to support the war effort.

**WOMEN IN THE COMMUNITY**

Women spearheaded local community efforts during WWII, including joining volunteer organizations, rationing and recycling, aiding in civil defense, and supporting the war bond effort, all of which influenced the US victory.

Many women joined volunteer organizations during the war. One of largest was the American Women’s Voluntary Services, in which female members became firefighters, drove ambulances, and provided emergency medical aid. Women also volunteered to provide recreation for military personnel as part of the United Service Organizations (USO). The USO Camp Shows provided entertainment to soldiers at home and sometimes abroad. USO volunteers also assembled care packages and distributed them to troops.

Women—even those who entered the public sphere—were still responsible for homemaking, and as such, played an important role in rationing and recycling. Consumer goods
(gasoline, clothes, shoes, and toys) and food were limited or rationed in order to aid the war effort. Metal, tires and rubber toys were donated to produce arms and waste paper was collected to make fuses for explosives. Recycling scarce materials was a patriotic duty. Women also helped to conserve water, gave up sugar, coffee, milk, eggs, and butter and created their own Victory Gardens to grow their own vegetables. Nearly 100,000 women distributed coupons to local rationing boards and most women voluntarily complied with the food rationing program.

Women also aided in civil defense. Female Civil Defense patrols were established to scan the coasts for enemy vessels and aircrafts, serve as air raid wardens in case of attack, and enforce blackouts. Women further contributed to defense by raising money for war bonds to fund defense production.

CONCLUSION

The economy greatly expanded during WWII to meet wartime needs. Women made this possible through serving in the military, working in government roles, entering the labor force, and spearheading community efforts—all of which significantly influenced US victory. New opportunities opened up for women that were never available before. During the 1940s, women were recruited out of necessity. It was not only acceptable, but encouraged for women to leave home and play a more important role in the economy. Between 1940 and 1945, the female labor force made up more than one third of the US civilian labor force (from 12 million women at the beginning of the war to over 18 million female workers by war’s end). After the war, many women lost their jobs to returning veterans. Some women remained, though they were generally displaced from the higher-paying jobs.
Women’s roles in WWII affected policy. During the war, Congresswoman Mary Norton helped pass the Lanham Act, which sought federal funds for day-care centers for working women. Norton’s causes created a dialogue about child care, maternity leave, "latch key" children, and equal pay for equal work that continues today. Another female organization, the Women's Bureau, also advocated for equal pay for women. The Women’s Advisory Committee of the War Manpower Commission also made recommendations for government policy. They advocated removing “all barriers to training or employing women in any occupation and basing wages only on the basis of the work performed.”xxiii Another change occurred when the American Federation of Labor (AFL) opened admission to women during the war and worked to address workplace issues concerning females. However, these women were denied full membership after the war.xxiv Some employers implemented new workplace policies in order to attract married and older women, offering health insurance, child care, and cafeterias—progressive policies for the time.xxv Women’s efforts not only helped boost the economy to win the war, their involvement in the public domain began the redefinition of traditional gender roles through public policy initiatives.

The role of women in modern American economy changes with each decade as each new generation redefines what it means to be a female in the workforce. WWII alerted Americans to new possibilities and created a discourse about gender roles, responsibilities and expectations in the public sphere. The 1950s is largely considered a period of confinement for women. By 1950, women made up only 29% of the US workforce, down from 33% in 1945.xxvi But the opportunities women had in the 1940s changed women’s behavior and beliefs about their place in the public domain. The changes made during the war "laid the precondition for an awakened womanhood in the 1960s" and 1970sxxvii, a period of pioneering and reassertion, with women
like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem setting the stage for second wave feminism. But they (perhaps wrongly) assumed that all women felt unsatisfied by being a housewife and mother and that work and home were opposing dichotomies. In the 1980s and 1990s, a new discourse emerged, encouraging women and men to embrace feminine characteristics in the workplace. The conversation during this time tended to center on production and work (new concepts such as the glass ceiling emerged), maternity leave policies, and sexual harassment. In 2012, Anne-Marie Slaughter wrote a jarring article in The Atlantic, arguing for serious policy and systemic changes, such as no summer breaks for students, flexibility to work from home, flexibility in schedules, 12-week family leave policies for all employees, and workplace childcare. Sheryl Sandberg’s memorable Barnard commencement speech in 2010 and the 2013 publication of her book, Lean In, further accelerated the momentum of this discourse. Sandberg agrees with the need for better US workplace policies, but her main point is accountability: women need to be more ambitious, strategic and determined to advance their career. In response, New York Magazine published an article called “The Retro Wife”, which stated that “for some women, the solution to resolving the long-running tensions between work and life is not more parent-friendly offices or savvier career moves but the full embrace of domesticity.” In the 2000s and today, it seems, therefore, that women may feel they have more choice than ever before with regard to profession. Regardless of which discourse is center stage at any given moment, each post-war generation of women has realized new opportunities, limitations, and, more recently, social pressure to “have it all”. World War II brought important and lasting changes. Women participated in traditional “male” roles for the first time. Married women reentered the workforce without stigmatization. Although it was perhaps patriotism that drew women to work in the first place, the economic
incentives and the benefits of learning, contributing, and gaining self-worth through work became values that would be passed down for generations. Women’s progress in leveling the workplace playing field is ongoing. Today, women are still a small fraction of corporate and government leaders and only earn 77 cents to each dollar earned by a male.

Without a doubt, US soldiers in the field made brave sacrifices in order to facilitate the peacetime that would follow, but we cannot discount the fact that women’s significant and crucial efforts in US industry and government helped the US win the war. Further, it is clear that women’s involvement in the economy during WWII not only helped the US win the war, but also set the stage for an ongoing discourse about gender in the public sector. Some historians claim that WWII was a temporary reorganization of general roles—women returned to their pre-war lifestyles when the war was won. But the stage was set for a permanent redefinition of gender in the public sphere, if not immediately, then inevitably.
Appendix:
Coast Guard SPARs recruiting pamphlet

Army Nurse Corps Recruiting Poster by Stu L. Savage, created for the US Army Recruiting Bureau, 1944

Women's Army Corps (WAC) Recruiting
Women Marines receive weather reports via radio, El Toro Marine Air Base, California, 1944. xli

SPARs of the 11th Naval District learn the intricacies of an automobile engine. xlii

USO entertainers Lynn Mayberry and Marlene Dietrich with members of the 101st Airborne Division in Europe. xliii
Advertisement encouraging women to enter the workforce\textsuperscript{xlv}

Female cubicle operators monitor the activity of the calutrons, the heart of the uranium electromagnetic separation process, in Oak Ridge, TN\textsuperscript{xlv}

The Y-12 Plant in Oak Ridge had about 22,000 workers in 1945, many of them young women. Below, a shift change.\textsuperscript{xlvii}
Endnotes


vi "Partners in Winning the War: American Women in World War II."

vii Ibid.

viii Ibid.


x "Partners in Winning the War: American Women in World War II."

xi Yellin 41-42.

xii "Partners in Winning the War: American Women in World War II."

xiii Yellin 43.

xiv "Partners in Winning the War: American Women in World War II."

xv Ibid.

xvi Ibid.

xvii Ibid.

xviii Yellin 21-22.

xix "Partners in Winning the War: American Women in World War II."

xx Ibid.

xxi Ibid.


xxiv "Partners in Winning the War: American Women in World War II."


xxvii Ibid.

xxviii "Partners in Winning the War: American Women in World War II."

xxix Ibid.


xxxii Ibid.

xxxiii Ibid.


xxxv Slaughter, Anne-Marie.

xxxvi Hartmann, 79.

xxxvii Miller.

xxxviii "Partners in Winning the War: American Women in World War II."

xxxix Ibid.

xl Ibid.