

When Women Build a War: Women in the Workplace During World War I and World War II

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Abstract

Rosie the Riveter is an iconic image from World War II. However, most Americans are unaware of the roles of women in its predecessor, World War I. Using sources such as editorials, advertisements, government documents, memoirs, and scholarly books, this paper compares efforts to recruit women to work in the defense industries and other positions in support of both wars. It then examines the efforts of government and industry to encourage women to leave their jobs and return to their homes at each war's end. This paper argues that World War I was foundational for women workers and that World War II built on this groundwork, resulting in significant benefits for future women in the workplace. Preliminary research suggests that similar motivations led women to work in factories. Nonetheless, there were differences between the female workforce in World War I and World War II. The women in the First World War were generally young, single women who worked to support themselves. This contrasts sharply with the large number of mothers and homemakers that worked in World War II factories when many more women joined the workforce. These women benefited from protections put in place during World War I, though some of these same policies if it were not for the efforts of women workers from World War I, the women of World War II would not have been as protected nor would they have received as many benefits. Although this was the case, some of these benefits actually hindered women workers during the Second World War. However, without these challenges, it would have taken longer for women to receive better employment opportunities.

Keywords: Women workers, World War I, World War II

1. Body of Paper

She is iconic. Against the yellow backdrop with her patriotic red bandana and look of determination, almost-everyone can recognize Rosie the Riveter (Figure 1). During World War II, Rosie became a significant figure, especially for working women in America. With her elegant poise and masculine strength, women workers in industrial factories found her inspiring. And yet, would Rosie still be Rosie without the women who worked during the First World War? Both World Wars are fascinating, especially when looking at their impact on women, and, when examined together, prompt numerous questions. How similar was working in World War I to World War II for women? What were some of the effects of World War I on women workers in World War II? How did the two World Wars impact the future of working women overall? A closer look at Bridgeport, CT, during World War I will help answer such questions.² Likewise, the experience of women workers at Ford Manufacturing during World War II will be studied.³ The significant impact of these wars on women in the workplace is unmeasurable. Starting with World War I as the foundation in the advancements of women's work through the creation of women's organizations and working laws, World War II built on this framework and provided women with better work opportunities.



Figure 1 Rosie the Riveter was an iconic woman seen during World War II that encouraged women to join the work in industrial factories. J. Howard Miller, *We Can Do It*, n.d., National Archives and Records Administration.¹

Before World War I working women had drastically different duties than female factory workers during both World Wars. Women typically worked in clerking jobs found within department stores and other businesses that did not require many skills.⁴ If women lacked the luck to find such a job, they would work in factories, but not in the same sense as World War I or World War II. These women spent many hours a day sewing and making clothing in textile factories around the country, unaware of how the First World War would change their future job prospects.⁵

World War I brought a substantial rise in employment opportunities for women. Before 1914, the sphere of women's work and general landscape of employment varied greatly. Immigrants in America became important employees because they filled many of the factories and worked the dirty, grueling jobs. However, with the start of the war, the flow of immigrants to America dwindled and some of those already in the country returned to their homelands to fight in the war, creating a drastic need for workers.⁶ With American men off serving in the war and few immigrants to choose from, American factories receiving war orders from Europe had no other options but to turn to women in America to fill the labor shortage.⁷ An opportunity for women had arrived.

Between 1910 and 1920, the workforce only saw a 6.3% increase in women with most of them being young and unmarried.⁸ When looking at World War II, this time period saw a significantly larger movement of women into the workplace and in a shorter amount of time.⁹ Part of this could be explained by the stigma held against older, married women. Unfortunately, older women, especially those married with children, rarely had the opportunity to leave the home and find work. In fact, publishing houses admitted that employers did not want older women and even limited the number of young women that got hired in factories. They explained that they wanted to employ women who already had extensive experience, barring older and unskilled women from working in industrial settings.¹⁰ This hiring criteria could possibly explain the lower number of women hired into the workplace.

To hire the workers that they needed, the government utilized the newspapers and published many forms of propaganda through the United War Work Campaign. In this committee, multiple ads were designed to recruit both men and women into the war effort during World War I.¹¹ However, because women were often newcomers to the workforce they were specifically recruited. For example, "Back Our Second Line of Defense," portrays rows and rows of women dressed in industrial uniforms, marching in military formations stretching as far as the eye can see (Figure 2). The caption "For Every Fighter a Woman Worker" at the top of the image helps to solidify the idea that women have a necessary role in the war along with men. Another popular image, "Back Our Girls Over There" depicts a woman in a military camp in Europe receiving important messages while fighting occurs in the distance.¹³

Theses, and similar images, greatly encouraged other women to join the workforce. Not only did young women feel called to serve in Europe with the military, but they were urged to work on the home front in order to support both the American men and women in Europe.



Figure 2 Women were exposed to propaganda in World War I like Back Our Second Line of Defense, encouraging them to join the fight and do their part. Ernest Baker, For every fighter a woman worker Y.W.C.A.: Back our second line of defense // Ernest Hamlin Baker, 1918, Library of Congress.¹²

Economic influences also inspired women to enter the workforce. Higher wages tended to be the largest contributing factor for women to work in factories rather than department stores. Unfortunately, women rarely received the same pay as men.¹⁴ Still, jobs in manufacturing typically offered higher pay than department stores. This opportunity motivated women to move into these dangerous and physically demanding jobs.¹⁵ Working as a clerk did not provide single women with the sufficient support that they needed, nor did it help them contribute to their family income like the factory jobs could.¹⁶ With opportunities like these, it is not surprising that women jumped at the chance to earn more.

Increased respect also motivated women to choose factory jobs rather than working behind a counter or in a home as a maid. Many women preferred the opportunity to work more “dignified” jobs that did not require them to wait on people.¹⁷ By working in the factories and doing hard manual labor, these women found a new form of confidence and respect for themselves. Not only did women feel encouraged at work to do their best, but the government also commended them for their hard labor. Similarly, local newspapers would praise the success and work of women workers in the industrial factories. With women receiving public acknowledgment for everything that they did, they began to grow more confident in themselves their ability to physically handle the work.¹⁸ Because of the confidence and respect that women earned while in the factories, their perceptions of a woman’s capabilities began to grow.

While white women moved into factories with the rise of the war, the same could not be said for African American women. In fact, African American women rarely received work in industrial factories and usually filled the place of white immigrant women in laundromats with the aid of organizations like the Urban League.¹⁹ Like in the case of white women during World War I, African American women saw opportunities to move into a new realm of work. However, to fully explore this complex shift in African American working women during the Great War, the preliminary findings suggest a need for deeper research.

During the first war, Bridgeport, CT, became a booming industrial town as it created roughly two-thirds of the ammunition and small arms for the Allies.²⁰ In order to keep up with such war orders, a new Remington Arms

Company rifle factory had to be built next to the Union Metallic Cartridge. Immediately, they began to hire both men and women who ranged from skilled to unskilled laborers. Once employed, men and women received job assignments based on sex. Women worked “lighter,” more feminine jobs such as inspecting packages and trimmings while men made shot and lead bullets. However, even with this sudden increase in their workforce, the factories could not keep up with the demands of the war. Eventually, these two industrial factories had to reorganize and restructure their labor force to make it more efficient. This led to the first opportunities for women to get their hands dirty with rough jobs like polishing.²¹

Although the self-confidence of these women flourished, it did not prepare them for the poor treatment that they received from their employers and the other male workers. With these opportunities came challenges like wage inequalities and hostility from male coworkers. In 1917, at the Remington factory, the International Association of Machinists union spoke on the behalf of the women polishers and urged that the factory pay them the same wages as the other male polishers.²² The factory refused and claimed that these women should be grateful for their current wages because not all male polishers were as fortunate.²³ Women also faced hostility from the other skilled machinists and this was not just limited to Bridgeport factories.²⁴ Women working on the railroads saw similar hostility, especially when men began to return from the war and sought jobs.²⁵ Unfortunately, this would not be the last time that women industrial workers would experience such hardships.

On average, both men and women in the Remington and Cartridge Company factories worked ten-hour days. These long shifts took such a toll on the workers that they demanded shorter workdays. When the union got involved on the behalf of their members, the situation did not take long to resolve. However, ununionized women and the unskilled laborers were not as fortunate.²⁶ Eventually they did receive shorter hours, but not as quickly as unionized workers. In fact, it took strikes among women in both the munition and textile factories before employers eventually caved and agreed to shorten their work days to eight hours.²⁷ Although new to these types of jobs, Women did not stop demanding and fighting for better work conditions.

In fact, the hardships that they face inspired action to be taken by women like Mary Anderson. During this time, many key leaders rose to fight. Leaders like Mary Anderson who had prior experience in the realm of unions. When she settled in Chicago, she joined a union for shoemakers called the International Boot and Shoe Workers Union. Eventually, she became more and more involved in the organization and politics of the union, causing her leadership role to expand. It did not take her long to discover the Women’s Trade Union League and make the decision to leave her original union to become a paid organizer for the league.²⁸

Mary Anderson’s success during the time of war quickly led to an invitation to join the government Committee on Women in Industry. This government organization acted as an advising committee to the government about factory conditions, particularly on women workers.²⁹ The committee also worked to oversee and enforce some of the policies and regulations that factories needed to follow.³⁰ Like the other women on this committee, Anderson observed the work place, took notes, and surveyed women workers in order to help make improvements to their conditions.³¹ The foundation for future working women had been laid.

The Committee on Women in Industry did not last long after the First World War nor did they have much legal power to do anything. Instead, this committee became the government group called the Women’s Bureau which aided the government during World War II.³² Holding onto its roots as an organization that worked to benefit women, this bureau helped pass legislation that both aided and hindered women workers during and after World War II.³³ However, prior to the Second World War, the Committee on Women in Industry attempted to help women workers and negotiate for better working conditions, but they lacked the power and ability to do so. Because of this, the push to make this organization into a bureau flourished.³⁴

As the First World War came to a close, so did women’s time in the industrial factories. It did not take long for returning soldiers to begin demanding that the women workers leave and make room for them, especially in the realm of railroads.³⁵ Many women, regardless of their seniority, lost their jobs to make way for men coming back from war. For the women who remained, employers and coworkers made their lives miserable. Employers would increase the women’s workloads so that they could not meet the physical demand of the job, and the other men would treat them with contempt until women eventually left the work on their own accord.³⁶ In essence, women were literally pushed from the industrial workforce. Not only were women unable to meet the physical requirements, but new regulations created by programs to protect women workers also inhibited them. Women were expected to be paid equally, work in safe conditions, and not do excessive amounts of strenuous work. Because of these rules, particularly the last one, women were told they could no longer do their job.³⁷ Not only did the war come to an end, but so did women’s opportunity in industrial jobs.

Prior to the war ending, women were praised for their hard work and originally had no intention of leaving their jobs.³⁸ With wages that allowed them to better support themselves, it is not shocking to discover the disappointment and anger that women experienced after being laid-off. While the removal of women from industrial jobs marked an

unfortunate moment in history, World War I served the crucial purpose of establishing agencies and organizations that would later benefit future working women, particularly in World War II.³⁹

With men called to serve during the Second World War, a need for workers arose once again and women stepped in to fill the gap. However, the differences between the pool of female workers in World War I and World War II is drastic. When looking at a typical working woman during World War I, she was unmarried and younger than the age of 30; however, that changed with the arrival of World War II. Not only were single young women working, but the “untapped work force” of married women in the home joined them in the factories as well.⁴⁰ This was no small movement into the workforce either. In the span of five years, the number of working women increased from 25% to 36% as 6.5 million women entered the workplace.⁴¹ These numbers drastically varied from World War I. Many motivating factors played a key as to why more women moved into the workplace. One of the biggest reasons being higher wages.⁴² Just like in World War I, women received higher wages when they worked men’s jobs. Likewise, with the main breadwinner away from home fighting in the war, women needed a way to supplement the income for their family and working in industrial factories seemed to be the best available way to do it.⁴³

Patriotism served as another major reason as to why women felt called to work in factories. During World War II, propaganda played a significant role in encouraging women to work. Along with Rosie, other advertisements depicting strong women inspired both single and married women to work in industrial factories. For example, in “Soldiers Without Guns,” three young women in various industrial apparel with the phrase “Soldiers without guns” beneath them (Figure 3). All three women look stoic and strong, as if they too were soldiers fighting in the war. With advertisements and propaganda like these highlighting feelings of patriotism for their country, it is unsurprising that women rushed to fill the factories. Although some of the motivations for joining the workforce varied a little between the World Wars, the biggest factor remained the same: better wages.



Figure 3 In “Soldiers Without Guns” by Adolph Treidler, these women not only look beautiful and feminine, but their stoic look might motivate women to join the workforce and work in industrial factories. Adolph Treidler, Soldiers without Guns / Adolph Treidler, 1944, Library of Congress.⁴⁴

However, even though women had been recruited to work in factories before, the government had not prepared for the large movement during World War II. Following World War I, the government established the Women’s Bureau to help conduct studies on the treatment of women in the workplace so that they could advise the government on how it could improve working conditions for women.⁴⁵ The bureau also served as a means to protect “the mothers of tomorrow” and families, so they attempted to make policies and reforms based on this mindset in the workplace.⁴⁶ With America on the verge of getting involved in World War II, Mary Anderson began to tour the country and spoke

about the importance of women's roles in the war effort. In fact, not only did she and the bureau believe in the significance of women's role in the war based on previous events, but the Women's Bureau even advised the government to prepare for women to flood the factories. However, the government did not heed their advice.⁴⁷ Just like in World War I, the government did not put forth as much effort to prepare or protect the influx of women in the workplace.

The lack of preparation for the large number of female workers is not the only parallel that World War II draws with World War I. The biggest similarity would be the fight for equal wages. As in World War I, the pay between men and women in World War II remained unequal, even though they worked the exact same jobs.⁴⁸ For example, women worked in shipyards as welders and had to deal with high temperatures, small spaces, and heavy equipment and materials. However, these ladies did not shy away from the work and tackled it with everything they had.⁴⁹ Rather than being paid the wages that they deserved, these diligent and hard-working women received salaries similar to "women's wages" – or what they would be paid as clerks.⁵⁰ To justify these lower salaries, employers would change the title of the job position to make it appear that women worked lighter jobs without changing the workload.⁵¹ While women received different and unjust payments during both wars, this form of manipulation had not previously been seen in World War I, suggesting some differences between the struggles that working women faced in the World Wars.

Because the Women's Bureau served to protect and ensure the fair treatment of women workers, it pushed to pass regulations that required employers to treat their female workers differently than their male employees.⁵² However, by creating special conditions like weight-lifting restrictions and other working limitations such as not allowing women to stack objects overhead, the Women's Bureau, had a difficult time justifying equal pay for women workers.⁵³ Employers argued that they did not need to pay women the same as men because it cost so much to hire them. Likewise, unions made clauses that allowed employers to let workers go at the end of the war if they were not "suitable" or required special treatment.⁵⁴ Although the Women's Bureau had good intentions in trying to protect women workers, they made it difficult for them. In fact, in some cases, the restrictions that were put into place for the good of women workers made their treatment and ability to get paid worse. While the women of World War I suffered from a lack of protection, World War II over compensated and made impractical restrictions that led to greater employer resistance.

While the Women's Bureau implemented regulations that hindered the opportunities for working women, they did attempt to create other programs that could benefit them. Programs that did not exist during World War I. For example, the development of daycares for working mothers came about during World War II.⁵⁵ Because married mothers were new to the workforce, they did not always have arrangements to have their children watched. To help with these situations, the Women's Bureau pushed the federal government to create daycares and they did. This was a huge accomplishment because the government typically did not advocate for "publicly supported care".⁵⁶ However, in a survey of over 13,000 women from 1944 to 1945, fewer than 10% of the women workers with children actually used the daycares.⁵⁷ Due to poor planning and organization on the side of the government, the resources were not fully utilized. The areas that wanted to build a daycare had to provide a majority of their own resources like a site, staff, equipment, and half the money required to create the daycare.⁵⁸ It is unfortunate that the government did not try harder to help communities that had women workers with children. While some of the initiatives for women workers were not always successful, they served as a great place to start for future endeavors.

When World War II came to a close, a similar trend of departure in the female workforce from the industrial workplace ensued. Many men came back to America in search of work and assumed that women would be willing to give up their place in the factories and return home.⁵⁹ Yet, that was not the case. Seventy-five percent of the women employed at the time expected to remain working once the war finished.⁶⁰ In the words of Gladys Belcher, an African American woman who found herself working in the ship yard during World War II, "Welding on the deck was really fun. I enjoyed every bit of it".⁶¹ Not only did some of these women enjoy the work, but they loved the female comradery that came with it. Margaret White found fun working with other women saying that, "Instead of working alone all the time, like you do in domestic work...I was always with a bunch of other women".⁶² However, continuing work after World War II also included a practical aspect. Eighty percent of the wages earned by working women went towards their household or dependents.⁶³ These women expected to work because they wanted to be able to contribute to their family.

However, large numbers of women left the workplace, and not always of their own accord. By 1946, roughly 3.25 million women were out of work. Of that number, 2.25 million "voluntarily" left the workplace while 1 million women were laid-off.⁶⁴ This large number of women voluntarily leaving is questionable based on the high percentage of women who preferred to remain working.⁶⁵ A closer look at the exiting process in the Ford Motor Company factories might shed some light on this. When an employee at a Ford factory chose to "quit" following the war, their exit was seen as voluntary while those who were fired or laid-off were assumed to have wanted to keep working.⁶⁶

By looking into the records at Ford, it appears that women were forced to quit rather than be laid-off. Some of the women workers at Ford had certain policies enforced against them, were required to deal with new workloads with few breaks, or were put on shifts that conflicted with their schedules.⁶⁷ With this evidence being revealed, the mass exodus after World War II might not have been as voluntary as it looked. Interestingly enough, the technique of forcing women from the workplace is nothing new. In fact, there is evidence of such tactics in World War I.⁶⁸ Not only do World War I and World War II share similarities in why women entered the workforce, they share similar reasons for why they exited

The media also played a significant role in the exit of women from World War II industries. After the war, many women returned to the home and resumed their role as the homemaker which some embraced wholeheartedly.⁶⁹ However, this did not make sense, especially when looking at history. Not only did women in the 1930s believe that women could have a career and a family, but women had been successful at working an industrial job and managing their homes during the 1940s. However, women in the 1950s appeared to be content with the domestic life and assumed a more subdued and childlike behavior.⁷⁰ Why the change? The most likely factor would be television and the shows broadcasted at the time. In these programs, the gender roles of men and women were created and reinforced through the portrayal of the “ideal family”.⁷¹ For example, in a show like *I Love Lucy*, Lucile Ball’s character Lucy typically acted like a “ditz” who viewers saw as weaker than men. The television show painted her as inferior to the opposite sex and incapable of working anywhere but in the home.⁷² With these ideas being highlighted and reinforced in American popular culture at the time, it is not surprising that women were willing to listen and believe them.

Even though a large number of women were out of the workforce following the war, their time was not done. In fact, it was only the beginning thanks to the foundations laid by both World War I and World War II. Following the 1950s, the employment of women exploded.⁷³ With the rise of industrialization and technology during the 1960s, the need to spend as much time in taking care of the home declined which provided women with the opportunity to look outside the home for work. Likewise, men grew tired of supporting a stay at home wife or they were unable to financially support such a lifestyle. Because of this, both men and women began to look for ways to reshape the roles of men and women following the Second World War.⁷⁴ As women sought jobs outside the home, they were met with frustrations, but thanks to World War II, there were women’s organizations already established to help improve women’s role in the workplace.⁷⁵ With these organizations in place, a younger, more radical group of women rose up in the late 1960s to truly challenge the traditional idea of gender division of labor.⁷⁶ By taking on these ideas, future women benefited greatly. In fact, by the 1980s, both single women and married women with children found themselves working full-time.⁷⁷ Without the hardships that women endured in World War I and World War II, the creation of the necessary groups that eventually advanced the opportunity for women to work would not have risen.

The idea that World War I served as a foundation for World War II and later movements for future women workers is also shared by other scholars. Carrie Brown in her book *Rosie’s Mom: Forgotten Women Workers of the First World War* looks at industrial factories around America and describes the experience of women workers.⁷⁸ Not only that, but she dedicates parts of the book to exploring organizations and key figures that worked to increase the protection and benefits of women workers in World War I.⁷⁹ At the end of the book, in an epilogue, Brown finishes with the beginning of World War II, emphasizing how the work and programs established in World War I bled into the Second World War.⁸⁰ Likewise, Judith Sealander and her book *As Minority Becomes Majority: Federal Reaction to the Phenomenon of Women in the Work Force, 1920-1963* also argues that World War I served a pivotal role in establishing the groundwork for World War II and the working improvements that followed. By acknowledging that the Women’s Bureau came about due to the creation of a committee in World War I, Sealander goes onto explain some of the successes and downfalls of the bureau during the Second World War.⁸¹ The idea of World War I as the foundation for future work improvements for women is an idea that is shared by other scholars in history.

While it can be difficult to compare how World War I and World War II impacted women workers, it can answer many questions and make connections between the wars that may have previously gone unnoticed. Not only were there significant similarities, such as wages being a motivation for joining the workforce, but important differences like how women exited the workforce were acknowledged as well. Likewise, not only did the wars have a significant impact on the white women who worked during those times, but they provide a glimpse into how African American women experienced a change as well. These wars served as the foundation for future women and their eventual successes in the workplace. Future research on how these moments in history have impacted women today still needs to be done, however, this paper can serve as the beginning of how the World Wars have affected both white and African American women workers and how major events in history can be the starting points for change.

2. Endnotes

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