

Rosie the Riveter: Women Working During World War II

The Image and Reality of Women who Worked During World War II

Before the United States entered World War II, several companies already had contracts with the government to produce war equipment for the Allies. Almost overnight the United States entered the war and war production had to increase dramatically in a short amount of time. Auto factories were converted to build airplanes, shipyards were expanded, and new factories were built, and all these facilities needed workers. At first companies did not think that there would be a labor shortage so they did not take the idea of hiring women seriously. Eventually, women were needed because companies were signing large, lucrative contracts with the government just as all the men were leaving for the service.

Working was not new to women. Women have always workedⁱ, especially minority and lower-class women. However, the cultural division of labor by sexⁱⁱ ideally placed white middle-class women in the home and men in the workforce. Also, because of high unemployment during the Depression, most people were against women working because they saw it as women taking jobs from unemployed men.

The start of World War II tested these ideas. Everyone agreed that workers were greatly needed. They also agreed that having women work in the war industries would only be temporary.

The United States government had to overcome these challenges in order to recruit women to the workforce. Early in the war, the government was not satisfied with women's response to the call to work.

The government decided to launch a propaganda campaignⁱⁱⁱ to sell the importance of the war effort and to lure women into working.

They promoted the fictional character of "Rosie the Riveter" as the ideal woman worker: loyal, efficient, patriotic, and pretty. A song, "Rosie the Riveter", became very popular in 1942. Norman Rockwell's image on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* on May 29, 1943 was the first widely publicized pictorial representation of the new "Rosie the Riveter". This led to many other "Rosie" images and women to represent that image. For example, the media found Rose Hicker of Eastern Aircraft Company in Tarrytown, New York and pictured her with her partner as they drove in a record number of rivets into the wing of a Grumman "Avenger" Bomber on June 8, 1943. Rose was an instant media success. In many other locations and situations around the country, "Rosies" were found and used in the propaganda effort. A few months after Rockwell's image, the most famous image of Rosie appeared in the government-commissioned poster "We Can Do It".

Women responded to the call to work differently depending on age, race, class, marital status, and number of children. Half of the women who took war jobs were minority and lower-class women who were already in the workforce. They switched from lower-paying traditionally female jobs to higher-paying factory jobs. But even more women were needed, so companies recruited women just graduating from high school. Eventually it became evident that married women were needed even though no one wanted them to work, especially if they had young children. It was hard to recruit married women because even if they wanted to work, many of their husbands did not want them to. Initially, women with children under 14 were encouraged to stay home to care for their families. The government feared that a rise in working mothers would lead to a rise in juvenile delinquency. Eventually, the demands of the labor market were so severe that even women with children under 6 years old took jobs.

While patriotism did influence women, ultimately it was the economic incentives that convinced them to work. Once at work, they discovered the nonmaterial benefits of working like learning new skills, contributing to the public good, and proving themselves in jobs once thought of as only men's work.

When the United States entered the war, 12 million women (one quarter of the workforce) were already working and by the end of the war, the number was up to 18 million (one third of the workforce). While ultimately 3 million women worked in war plants, the majority of women who worked during World War II worked in traditionally female occupations, like the service sector. The number of women in skilled jobs was actually few. Most women worked in tedious and poorly paid jobs in order to free men to take better paying jobs or to join the service. The only area that there was a true mixing of the sexes was in semiskilled and unskilled blue-collar work in factories. Traditionally female clerical positions were able to maintain their numbers and recruit new women. These jobs were attractive because the hours were shorter, were white-collar, had better job security, had competitive wages, and were less physically strenuous and dirty. The demand for clerical workers was so great that it exceeded the supply.

Like men, women would quit their jobs if they were unhappy with their pay, location, or environment. Unlike men, women suffered from the "double shift"^{iv} of work and caring for the family and home. During the war, working mothers had childcare problems and the public sometimes blamed them for the rise in juvenile delinquency. In reality, though, 90% of mothers were home at any given time. The majority of women

thought that they could best serve the war effort by staying at home. During the war, the average family on the homefront had a housewife and a working husband.

Some women enjoyed working, but others could not accept the inconveniences it caused. Most women saved the money they earned. Between the wartime shortages and long working hours, there was not much to spend money on anyway. Women workers were frequently reminded to buy war bonds. After the war, the money was used to buy houses and luxuries that had been unavailable during and before the war.

When women started working at traditionally male jobs the biggest problem was changing men's attitudes^v. Male employees and male-controlled unions were suspicious of women. Companies saw women's needs and desires on the job as secondary to men's, so they were not taken seriously or given much attention. In addition, employers denied women positions of power excluding them from the decision-making process of the company. Women wanted to be treated like the male workers and not given special consideration just because they were women.

As time went on and more and more women entered the work force, the attitudes towards women workers changed. Employers praised them^{vi}.

While the image of the woman worker was important during the war, the prewar image of women as wives and mothers by no means disappeared. Mainstream society accepted temporary changes brought about by a war, but considered them undesirable on a permanent basis. The public reminded women that their greatest asset was their ability to take care of their homes and that career women would not find a husband.

After the war^{vii}, the cultural division of labor by sex reasserted itself. Many women remained in the workforce but employers forced them back into lower-paying female jobs. Most women were laid off and told to go back to their homes.

During World War II there was a change in the image of women, but it was only superficial and temporary. The reality was that most women returned to being homemakers during the prosperity of the 1950s. However, the road taken by women in the work force during World War II continued into the future. Society had changed. The daughters and granddaughters of Rosies continued on the road blazed by their mothers and grandmothers.

ⁱ Women have always worked inside and outside the home. Before industrialization, all women, except the most elite, worked on the family farm and anywhere else work needed to be done. With the start of the industrial revolution, minority and lower-class women started working outside the home. These women, though, still had to care for the home, which was not considered work. While there was a rise in female paid employment in the 1910s, the public did not notice until

the 1920s when young, white, middle-class women starting working.

The Depression changed female employment patterns. Both women and men denounced the women who worked outside the home. Men accused them of stealing their jobs and their ability to support their families. Despite this prevailing attitude, some married women had no choice but to work outside the home. Many people, however, thought that women worked in order to have extra spending money or because they wanted their own career.

In 1936, more than 80% of Americans believed that women should not work if their husbands had a job and laws were proposed that would prohibit married women from working. In addition, both women and men agreed that married women should give up their jobs if their husbands wanted them to. These attitudes reflect ideas about women's proper place and not of the job market. Women and men had different jobs: women worked in the service industries, which expanded during the Depression, and men worked in the heavy manufacturing industries, which contracted. Even as unemployment declined, people's attitudes about women's proper place remained strong.

ⁱⁱ The cultural division of labor by sex is based on the idea that there are two main areas of life: public and private. Women are responsible for the private sphere and care for the family and the home. Men are responsible for the public sphere and work to support the family.

Under the cultural division of labor by sex, women who worked outside the home were considered unfit wives and mothers, and men who could not support their families were less of a man. The family wage reinforced this by paying men as if they were supporting a family but women as if they were single.

The ideal of the cultural division of labor by sex was only possible white middle-class women. Minority and lower-class women needed to work in order to help support their families. They were in low-paying female-dominated fields like domestic service and school teaching. Women worked in occupations that could not attract men because of low wages, no means of advancement, or poor working conditions. It was common for young white women who did not go to college to work until they got married and then they would quit and start a family. Middle-class white women usually went to college and then get married, some never having worked.

In addition to caring for the home, women were in charge of taking care of the children. Taking care of the house and the children was more than a full-time job. Even women who worked still cared for the home and family.

ⁱⁱⁱ The government's war time efforts to recruit women had several themes, the main one being patriotism. The campaigns told women that the war would end sooner if more women worked. Women were also warned that if they did not work then a soldier would die, people would call them slackers, and they were equivalent to men who avoided the draft. Women who took war jobs were praised.

Another propaganda theme was high pay. The government cautioned, though, that wages should not be overemphasized or women might spend too much and cause inflation.

As a way to lure young women into the factories, advertisers showed women workers as glamorous and even fashionable. They mentioned that women did not care much about their appearance while at work, but that they were still feminine underneath the dirt. The campaigns equated factory work with housework as a way to alleviate women's fears about working. Therefore, women already had the skills needed. But the government cautioned that war work should not look too easy or women might not take it seriously. This method reinforced women's role as homemaker and that her main duty was to her home.

The government's propaganda also called on husbands to encourage their wives to take jobs. It emphasized that it would not reflect poorly on the husbands and their ability to support their families if their wives worked. The campaigns told men that they should feel pride when their wives took a job much the same way that they felt pride when their sons enlisted. This campaign was based on the assumption that women did not work because of their husbands' objections.

The government focused its propaganda campaigns on white middle-class families whose women were not already working. It did not target the women who were already in the workforce and switched to higher paying jobs without any encouragement. Although there was a lot of diversity among women workers, women of color were absent in advertisements. The stars of the campaign were middle-class domestic housewives with no work experience who would leave when the war was over.

At first, the propaganda campaigns featured the few women who worked in skilled and high-paying jobs, even though they were a small percentage of women workers. Not until there was a labor shortage in 1943 were the unglamorous, underpaid, low-status jobs a part of the propaganda campaigns.

The propaganda campaigns used during the war never had any intention of bringing about permanent changes in women's place in society. Rather, the government used them to fill temporary labor shortages with women workers.

^{iv} Because of the "double shift", companies had a harder time retaining women in the workforce than recruiting them. Even though they took war jobs, women were still in charge of managing the household. After a full day of work, many women had to stand in long lines at stores, if they were even open, and usually by the time they reached the market the limited supplies were gone. Some grocers were aware of this problem and would save some items for women who worked. Transportation was especially difficult. Since gas was rationed along with food, many workers car-pooled. Public transportation was inconvenient because it was hard to get to and took a long time. Transportation alone could add one or two hours each way to a worker's commute. Another problem was the long hours that women had to work: 6 days a week, 8 hours a day. Many women left their jobs because of fatigue. Married women did not have time for entertainment, but single women did.

The biggest problem women faced was childcare. Communities and industries were slow to realize the importance of women workers, so they did not give much assistance to working mothers. If the husband was around, women tried to work when their husbands were home to care for the children. Single mothers relied on their mothers, older children, other relatives, and neighbors for help. The government and most employers thought that women should use federal childcare, but they ignored the fact that women were wary about putting their children in strange environments and were concerned about the qualifications of the childcare personnel. Yet the beginnings of the acceptance of child care as a normal part of our culture began at this time.

The second biggest problem for women was housing. Some landlords were reluctant to rent to women because they would want washing, ironing, and cooking privileges that men did not. In addition, women were more critical of their living environments and usually could not pay as much as men since they did not make as much. In some areas, groups like the YWCA helped women find housing.

When home responsibilities became too much for women, they would simply readjust their work schedules or take days off, otherwise they would give up sleep and recreation. The government was aware of women's difficulties and encouraged businesses to develop programs to help women workers, including staying open later and saving items for them. It did not, however, suggest that men help out with the female labor in the home.

^v When women started to work in traditionally male jobs, men resisted and often harassed the new women workers. At first, employers were hesitant to hire women, but they realized that with only minor modifications to the workplace they could utilize a large labor pool. The male employees had a deeper and more sustained resistance, though. They feared that women's cheap labor would replace them or lower their wages and most believed that a woman's place was in the home. Some men, though, accepted that the war effort needed women workers.

Women were brought into skilled labor quickly, upsetting the male employees. They also resented the special labor laws for women like longer rest periods, more desirable shifts, and newer restroom facilities. Men often played tricks on women by sending them for tools that did not exist. Men also sexually harassed women by whistling and cat-calling to them as they worked. Most of the resistance and hostility towards women workers disappeared as the novelty of women workers wore off, the labor shortage got worse, and women proved themselves.

Unions varied in their attitudes toward women workers. Some unions welcomed women, but only for the duration of the war. Other unions did not trust women because they feared that they might take men's jobs after the war. Women depended on male leadership to safeguard their interests since their representation in power was not reflective of their membership. After the war, many unions that had allowed women members got rid of them. In general, unions only helped women to the extent that it safeguarded the pay, seniority, and other labor standards of their male membership. Unions wanted to make sure that those safeguards remained when men returned to their jobs. For instance, when women

took over male jobs, unions advocated for equal pay for women because it prevented employers from undercutting future wages for men by hiring women at a lower wage. But unions did not fight for equal pay when women and men were in different positions or paid differently even though the work was the same.

^{vi} In many cases, the men who worked with and employed women became aware of their skills. When women were accepted as fellow workers and treated like a worker and not just a woman, they performed the work very well. If women received the same training as men did, their work was equivalent to men's and in some areas it was better. Some employers stated that women were better at jobs that required great patience and accuracy.

Some further stated that women were proficient in precise and delicate work on small objects where manual dexterity and repetitive operations were involved. It was also said that they were very eager to learn and took their jobs more seriously than men. Women took great pride in their work and even if it took longer, they would do it better. Women's great job performance helped dispel ideas that women had very little mechanical adeptness, aptitude, and skill.

Towards the end of the war, critics began assessing women's performance. Some belittled women's contributions to the war effort. Others said that women cared more about their looks than safety. Women sometimes ignored the rules about proper clothing, hair covering, and safety shoes so that about 10% of their accidents were the result of improper attire. While women had fewer accidents than men did, they took more time off to recover.

The majority of writers assumed that women would want to leave their jobs when the men returned. These observers also thought that after having worked in factories, women would be better homemakers because they would understand why their husbands were so tired when they got home and the value of money having earned it themselves. While employers praised their female employees, after the war these employers expected the women to return to the traditional female roles of pre-World War II.

^{vii} Women entered the workforce with different intentions on what to do after the war. Some entered out of patriotic reasons and always planned on leaving. Many women entered with the idea that they were going to stay. After the war, marriage and birth rates soared and after years of hardship and sacrifice during the Depression and World War II, many women wanted to return to a sense of normalcy and domesticity. Married women were tired of juggling work and domestic responsibilities and single women wanted their soldiers to come home so they could get married and start families. These women who left the workforce were now praised for opening up jobs for men.

Most of the married women workers needed to continue working since they were mostly minority and lower-class women, and they wanted to keep the jobs they had. In addition, women felt good about themselves since they proved that they could do the work that men could do and they did not want to give up their independence. The promise that women were only temporarily filling in for men was

being fulfilled as they were laid-off and forced back into female jobs fairly quickly. But there was little protest from women and what protest there was did not have any results. Not enough women challenged the discriminatory hiring practices of post-war employers. As a result, prewar employment patterns returned.

After the war, most companies only hired men, even if they had hired women during the war. Those that did hire women reclassified them to a lower rating with lower pay and used their lack of experience as an excuse. The majority of women who wanted to keep working were able to, but usually only after a period of unemployment and even then it was at a lower-paying job.

Most business leaders recognized women's contributions to the war effort, the skills they developed, and their desire to remain in the workforce. They also knew that it was unjust to treat women like a resource to use and then discard. At the same time, though, they thought that married women would want to go back to the home and so encouraged it. They reiterated the prewar idea of women as wives and mothers.

In numbers, there were more women in education and the workforce after the war, but their overall proportion relative to men declined. The biggest change in female employment patterns was that before the war the majority of women workers were young and single, and after the war the majority of women workers were older and married. The sexual division of labor was never fully eliminated during the war. This became evident when it reasserted itself after the war and the government and employers forced women back into the home and low-paying female jobs. Even though there was a temporary shift during the war, conventional attitudes regarding women's roles as wife and mother never lost their appeal.