

## Balancing War and Domesticity: American Women of World War II

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### Abstract

*American women throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century were confined to the domestic sphere based on societal traditions. As the United States entered World War II, the traditional breadwinner model was altered as men were taken to fight and women's roles were changed. Along with the push for women to work in factories throughout the war, many women were also inspired by what they could contribute in their homes, creating a sense of patriotism surrounding domesticity. However, as the war ended working women faced opposition as the majority of America returned to the pre-war state. This forced many women to return to their homes, as the war led to no true gains for women's equality in employment.*

Up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women in America were confined to the domestic sphere with little liberation. With the rise of manufacturing in the early 1900s, some women defied standards as they eagerly entered the workforce. Other women stayed in their expected societal roles as a working woman represented a sign of poverty for a family. Men at the time who were not the sole provider for their families were seen as a failure of a breadwinner. Complacency in the breadwinner model allowed the women to remain subservient in their home. It was only when the United States entered WWII that this model began to change as men were sent to Europe to fight, leaving their jobs open to be filled. Despite the war temporarily altering their societal expectations, women throughout World War II struggled to fight against the traditional values of true

womanhood as the pressure of being a 20<sup>th</sup> century woman stayed within their homestead and followed them into the working world.

With the promise of marriage, many women never had a reason to enter the public sphere while being “encouraged to be fluent with domestic tasks, be submissive, patient, and virtuous” (DuBois and Dumenil, 2016, p. 155). These traditional ideals kept many women complacent in their societal roles. The messages women received throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century argued that the image of true womanhood was equivalent to patriotism. Magazines like the *Ladies Home Journal* placed an emphasis on embodying the perfect wife as they showed images of women such as Mildred Riddle Douglas smiling and laughing while optimistically working on domestic tasks such as cooking with food

shortages. Emphasizing on the impact media had on women of the time, many joined in the patriotic movements as they felt the approval of their “temporary expansion of traditional middle-class domestic roles” (Kimble, 2011, p. 90). These roles inspired women to remain loyal to their husbands by keeping the image of a well-kept wife doing her part for the country.

Upon entering the workforce, women had to manage their other fulltime occupation: motherhood. Throughout the 1940s, society placed a higher importance on female’s abilities to be a mother as now women were also in a “man’s place”, taking care of the Homefront as if it was their household. A strong argument against women’s employment prior to the war was the fear of inadequate mothers. Women who had to work based on financial need met public scrutiny as they were seen as less. Despite the ideal image of a housewife being pushed through the media prior to the war, many non-elite white and colored women “carried heavy economic responsibilities at home” (DuBois and Dumenil, 2016, p. 530) creating a divide based on class on what was considered a typical family structure. Throughout the war, the American government had sought to help the working women by providing workers with daycare and nurseries. By 1942, emergency day nursery schools funded by both federal and local grants alleviated the burden on working mothers. The government had made a point to only take interest in advocating for women’s employment when it was absolutely necessary, proving that the government was less concerned about liberating women from the private sphere and more worried about the jobs left empty by the war. Upon the war’s end, many women still had to work in order to fulfill financial needs, leaving them to struggle upon the nation-wide closure of all of the nurseries as “the national government expected it had no more reason to maintain a

facility that assisted working mothers” (Sutrina, 2009, p. 423). Ultimately the demand for the full-time job of motherhood overcame women’s aspirations for employment. The working women after the war struggled against limited work and a lack of support from the rest of the country. By creating a separation from those who did not need to work, the end of the war created a greater isolation for women in different classes as they lost the employment that bonded them together.

The fight for women to enter the workforce was never about gaining a sense of equality, rather it was a ploy to make wartimes easier for the country to handle. The push for employment represented the nation’s willingness to use women as disposable labor. For many, employment throughout the war was a hopeful sign of growth within the vocational field as women believed the support from the government would allow opportunities for equality. The outcome of the war led to no actual gains for female employment as many were instantly terminated after the nation’s victory. Public figures and families sought to return women to their supposed true role of motherhood as they received little support from loved ones to stay employed. The struggle of non-elite women became more evident as “sex segregation in the workplace readjusted, ignoring the plight of single women and women whose husbands could not be the breadwinners” (Sutrina, 2009, p. 422). Even when women were economically stable, many proved to be skillful at their jobs, but arbitrary hierarchies prevented women from continuing moving up in the field. Forced back into less important vocations such as clerk work, women embodied the domestic nature that was expected of them, despite many showing skillfulness when working in the manufacturing field.

Due to drastic layoffs and a societal shift back to a family atmosphere, women after the

war returned to their homes as things once were before World War 2. Postwar Americans once again placed emphasis on the separation of men and women in the working world, leaving many to struggle without employment. This separation among sexes continues today as women struggle to break into traditionally male-dominated fields such as technology and manufacturing. After World War 2, America reverted back to the male-breadwinner model leaving women with no choice, but to resume their lives that revolved around submission. Once the War

ended, employers were able to dispose of their female workers easily. By removing women from the working sector, America was able to reinforce the true ideology of women by pushing them back into the domestic sphere. Regardless of the altering roles of the 1940's women could not escape the idealistic image that was painted of them, leaving them trapped in lives of domesticity; thus, impacting how society views working women today.

### References

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