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Women and Work in World War 1

by **Robert Wilde**

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Perhaps the best-known effect on women of [World War 1](#) was the opening up of a vast range of new jobs for them. As men left their old work to fill the need for soldiers – and millions of men were moved away by the main [belligerents](#) – women were needed to take their place in the workforce. While women were already an important part of the workforce and no strangers to factories, they were limited in the jobs they were allowed to perform. However, the extent to which these new opportunities survived the war is [debated](#), and it's now generally believed that the war didn't have a huge lasting effect on [women's employment](#).

New Jobs, New Roles

In Britain during [World War 1](#), roughly two million women replaced men at their jobs. Some of these were positions women might have been expected to fill before the war, such as clerical jobs, but one effect of the war wasn't just the number of jobs, but the type: women were suddenly in demand for work on the land, on transport, in hospitals and most significantly, in industry and engineering. Women were involved in the vital munitions factories, building [ships](#) and doing work such as loading and unloading coal.

Few types of jobs were not filled by women by the war's end. In Russia, the number of women in the industry went up from 26 to 43%, while in Austria a million women joined the workforce. In France, where women were already a relatively large proportion of the workforce, female employment still grew by 20%. Women doctors, although initially refused places working with the military, were able to also break into a male-dominated world – women being considered more suitable as nurses – whether through setting up their own volunteer hospitals or, later, being included officially when medical services tried to broaden to meet the war's higher than expected demand.

The Case of Germany

In contrast, Germany saw fewer women join the workplace than other belligerents, largely due to pressure from trade unions, who were afraid women would undercut men's jobs. These unions were partly responsible for forcing the government to turn away from moving women into work more aggressively: the Auxiliary Service for the Fatherland law, designed to shift workers from civilian into the military industry and increase the quantity of the potential workforce employed, only focused on men aged 17 to 60.

Some members of the German High Command (and German suffrage groups) wanted women included but to no avail. This meant all-female labor had to come from volunteers who were not well encouraged, leading to a smaller proportion of women entering employment. It has been suggested that one small factor contributing to Germany's loss in the war was their failure to maximize their potential workforce by ignoring women, although they did force women in occupied areas into manual labor.

Regional Variation

As the differences between Britain and Germany highlight, the opportunities available to women varied state by state, region by region. Generally, women in urban areas had more opportunities, such as factories, while women in rural areas tended to be drawn to the, still vital, task of replacing farm laborers. Class was also a decider, with upper and middle-class women more prevalent in police work, volunteer work, including nursing, and jobs which formed a bridge between employers and the lower class workers, such as supervisors.

As opportunities increased in some work, the war caused a decline in the uptake of other jobs. One staple of pre-war women's employment was as domestic servants for the upper and middle classes. The opportunities offered by war sped up the fall in this industry as women found alternative sources of employment: better paid and more rewarding work in industry and other suddenly available jobs.

Wages and Unions

While the war offered many new choices for women and work, it did not usually lead to a rise in the salaries of women, which were already much lower than men's. In Britain, rather than paying a woman during the war what they would have paid a man, as per government equal pay regulations, employers split tasks down into smaller steps, employing a woman for each and giving them less for doing it. This employed more women but undermined their wages. In France, in 1917, women initiated strikes over low wages, seven day weeks and the continuing war.

On the other hand, the number and size of female trade unions increased as the newly employed labor force countered a pre-war tendency for unions to have few women – as they worked in part-time or small companies – or be outright hostile to them. In Britain, women's membership of trade unions went from 350,000 in 1914 to over a 1,000,000 in 1918. Overall, women were able to earn more than they would have done pre-war, but less than a man doing the same job would make.

Why Did Women take the Opportunities?

While the opportunity for women to expand their careers presented itself during World War 1, there was a range of reasons why women changed their lives to take up the new offers. There was firstly patriotic reasons, as pushed by the propaganda of the day, to do something to support their nation. Tied into this was a desire to do something more interesting and varied, and something which would help the war effort. Higher wages, relatively speaking, also played a part, as did the ensuing rise in social status, but some women entered the new forms of work out of sheer need, because the government support, which varied by nation and generally supported only the dependants of absent soldiers, didn't meet the gap.

Post-War Effects

After the war, there was pressure from returning men, who wanted their jobs back, and even from women, with single ones sometimes pressuring married women into staying at home. One setback in Britain occurred when, in the 1920s, women were again pushed out of hospital work, and in 1921 the percentage of British women in the labor force was 2% less than in 1911. Yet the war undoubtedly opened doors.

Historians are divided on the real impact, Susan Grayzel arguing that,

"the extent to which individual women had better employment opportunities in the postwar world thus depended on nation, class, education, age and other factors; there was no clear sense that the war had benefitted women overall." --Grayzel, *Women and the First World War*, Longman, 2002, p. 109