Women in World War I: Societal Impacts

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by Robert Wilde

World War I's impact on women's roles in society was immense. Women were conscripted to fill empty jobs left behind by the male servicemen, and as such, they were both idealized as symbols of the home front under attack and viewed with suspicion as their temporary freedom made them "open to moral decay."

Even if the jobs they held during the war were taken away from the women after demobilization, during the years between 1914 and 1918, women learned skills and independence, and, in most Allied countries, gained the vote within a few years of the war's end. The role of women in the First World War has become the focus of many devoted historians in the past few decades, especially as it relates to their social progress in the years that followed.

Women's Reactions to World War I

Women, like men, were divided in their reactions to war, with some championing the cause and others worried by it. Some, like the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), simply put political activity largely on hold for the duration of the war. In 1915, the WSPU held its only demonstration, demanding that women be given a "right to serve."

Suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel eventually turned to recruiting soldiers for the war effort, and their actions echoed across Europe. Many women and suffragette groups who spoke out against the war faced suspicion and imprisonment, even in countries supposedly guaranteeing free speech, but Christabel's sister Sylvia Pankhurst, who had been arrested for suffrage protests, remained opposed to the war and refused to help, as did other suffrage groups.

In Germany, socialist thinker and later revolutionary Rosa Luxembourg was imprisoned for much of the war because of her opposition to it, and In 1915, an international meeting of antiwar women met in Holland, campaigning for a negotiated peace; the European press reacted with scorn.

The U.S. women, too, took part in the Holland meeting, and by the time the United States entered the War in 1917, they had already begun organizing into clubs like the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) and the National

Association of Colored Women (NACW), hoping to give themselves stronger voices in the politics of the day.

American women already had the right to vote in several states by 1917, but the federal suffrage movement continued throughout the war, and just a few years later in 1920, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, giving women the right to vote across America.

Women and Employment

The execution of "total war" across Europe demanded the mobilization of entire nations. When millions of men were sent into the military, the drain on the labor pool created a need for new workers, a need that only women could fill. Suddenly, women were able to break into jobs in truly significant numbers, some of which were ones they had previously been frozen out of, like heavy industry, munitions, and police work.

This opportunity was recognized as temporary during the war and not sustained when the war came to a close. Women were frequently forced out of jobs that were given to returning soldiers, and the wages women had been paid were always lower than those of men.

Even before the War, women in the United States were becoming more vocal about their right to be an equal part of the workforce, and in 1903, the National Women's Trade Union League was founded to help protect women workers. During the War, though, women in the States were given positions generally reserved for men and entered into clerical positions, sales, and garment and textile factories for the first time.

Women and Propaganda

Images of women were used in propaganda beginning early in the war. Posters (and later cinema) were vital tools for the state to promote a vision of the war as one in which soldiers were shown defending women, children, and their homeland. British and French reports of the German "Rape of Belgium" included descriptions of mass executions and burning of cities, casting Belgian women in the role of defenseless victims, needing to be saved and avenged. One poster used in Ireland featured a woman standing with a rifle in front of a burning Belgium with the heading "Will you go or must I?"

Women were often presented on recruiting posters applying moral and sexual pressure on men to join up or else be diminished. Britain's "white feather campaigns" encouraged women to give feathers as symbols of cowardice to nonuniformed men. These actions and women's involvement as recruiters for the armed forces were tools designed to "persuade" men into the armed forces.

Furthermore, some posters presented young and sexually attractive women as rewards for soldiers doing their patriotic duty. For instance, the U.S. Navy's "I Want You" poster by Howard Chandler Christy, which implies that the girl in the image wants the soldier for herself (even though the poster says "...for the Navy."

Women were also the targets of propaganda. At the start of the war, posters encouraged them to remain calm, content, and proud while their menfolk went off to fight; later the posters demanded the same obedience that was expected of men to do what was necessary to support the nation. Women also became a representation of the nation: Britain and France had characters known as Britannia and Marianne, respectively, tall, beautiful, and strong goddesses as political shorthand for the countries now at war.

Women in the Armed Forces and the Front Line

Few women served on the front lines fighting, but there were exceptions. Flora Sandes was a British woman who fought with Serbian forces, attaining the rank of captain by the war's end, and Ecaterina Teodoroiu fought in the Romanian army. There are stories of women fighting in the Russian army throughout the war, and after the February Revolution of 1917, an all-female unit was formed with government support: the Russian Women's Battalion of Death. While there were several battalions, only one actively fought in the war and captured enemy soldiers.

Armed combat was typically restricted to men, but women were near and sometimes on the front lines, acting as nurses caring for the considerable number of wounded, or as drivers, particularly of ambulances. While Russian nurses were supposed to have been kept away from the battlefront, a significant number died from enemy fire, as did nurses of all nationalities.

In the United States, women were allowed to serve in military hospitals domestically and abroad and were even able to enlist to work in clerical positions in the United States to free up men to go to the front. Over 21,000 female Army nurses and 1,400 Navy nurses served during World War I for the United States, and over 13,000 were enlisted to work on active duty with the same rank, responsibility, and pay as men who were sent off to war.

Noncombatant Military Roles

The role of women in nursing didn't break as many boundaries as in other professions. There was still a general feeling that nurses were subservient to doctors, playing out the era's perceived gender roles. But nursing did see major growth in numbers, and many women from lower classes were able to

receive a medical education, albeit a quick one, and contribute to the war effort. These nurses saw the horrors of war firsthand and were able to return to their normal lives with that information and skill set.

Women also worked in noncombatant roles in several militaries, filling administrative positions and allowing more men to go to the front lines. In Britain, where women were largely refused training with weapons, 80,000 of them served in the three armed forces (Army, Navy, Air) in forms such as the Women's Royal Air Force Service.

In the U.S., over 30,000 women worked in the military, mostly in nursing corps, U.S. Army Signal Corps, and as naval and marine yeomen. Women also held a vast variety of positions supporting the French military, but the government refused to recognize their contribution as military service. Women also played leading roles in many volunteer groups.

The Tensions of War

One impact of war not typically discussed is the emotional cost of loss and worry felt by the tens of millions of women who saw family members, men and women both, travel abroad to fight and get close to the combat. By the war's close in 1918, France had 600,000 war widows, Germany half a million.

During the war, women also came under suspicion from more conservative elements of society and government. Women who took new jobs also had more freedom and were thought to be prey to moral decay since they lacked a male presence to sustain them. Women were accused of drinking and smoking more and in public, premarital or adulterous sex, and the use of "male" language and more provocative dress. Governments were paranoid about the spread of venereal disease, which they feared would undermine the troops. Targeted media campaigns accused women of being the cause of such spreads in blunt terms. While men were only subjected to media campaigns about avoiding "immorality," in Britain, Regulation 40D of the Defence of the Realm Act made it illegal for a woman with a venereal disease to have, or try to have, sex with a soldier; a small number of women were actually imprisoned as a result.

Many women were refugees who fled ahead of invading armies, or who remained in their homes and found themselves in occupied territories, where they almost always suffered reduced living conditions. Germany may not have used much formalized female labor, but they did force occupied men and women into laboring jobs as the war progressed. In France the fear of German soldiers raping French women—and rapes did occur—stimulated an argument over loosening abortion laws to deal with any resultant offspring; in the end, no action was taken.

Postwar Effects and the Vote

As a <u>result of the war</u>, in general, and depending on class, nation, color, and age, European women gained new social and economic options, and stronger political voices, even if they were still viewed by most governments as mothers first.

Perhaps the most famous consequence of wider women's employment and involvement in World War I in the popular imagination as well as in history books is the widening <u>enfranchisement of women</u> as a direct result of recognizing their wartime contribution. This is most apparent in Britain, where, in 1918 the vote was given to property-owning women over the age of 30, the year the war ended, and Women in Germany got the vote shortly after the war. All the newly created central and eastern European nations gave women the vote except Yugoslavia, and of the major Allied nations only France did not extend the right to vote to women before World War II.

Clearly, the wartime role of women advanced their cause to a great extent. That and the pressure exerted by suffrage groups had a major effect on politicians, as did a fear that millions of empowered women would all subscribe to the more militant branch of women's rights if ignored. As <u>Millicent Fawcett</u>, leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, said of World War I and women, "It found them serfs and left them free."

The Larger Picture

In her 1999 book "An Intimate History of Killing," historian Joanna Bourke has a more jaded view of British societal changes. In 1917 it became apparent to the British government that a change in the laws governing elections was needed: the law, as it stood, only allowed men who had been resident in England for the previous 12 months to vote, ruling out a large group of soldiers. This wasn't acceptable, so the law had to be changed; in this atmosphere of rewriting, Millicent Fawcett and other suffrage leaders were able to apply their pressure and have some women brought into the system.

Women under 30, whom Bourke identifies as having taken much of the wartime employment, still had to wait longer for the vote. By contrast, in Germany wartime conditions are often described as having helped radicalize women, as they took roles in food riots which turned into broader demonstrations, contributing to the <u>political upheavals</u> that occurred at the end and after the war, leading to a German republic.

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