Summary and Keywords

The Second World War changed the United States for women, and women in turn transformed their nation. Over three hundred fifty thousand women volunteered for military service, while twenty times as many stepped into civilian jobs, including positions previously closed to them. More than seven million women who had not been wage earners before the war joined eleven million women already in the American work force. Between 1941 and 1945, an untold number moved away from their hometowns to take advantage of wartime opportunities, but many more remained in place, organizing home front initiatives to conserve resources, to build morale, to raise funds, and to fill jobs left by men who entered military service.

The U.S. government, together with the nation’s private sector, instructed women on many fronts and carefully scrutinized their responses to the wartime emergency. The foremost message to women—that their activities and sacrifices would be needed only “for the duration” of the war—was both a promise and an order, suggesting that the war and the opportunities it created would end simultaneously. Social mores were tested by the demands of war, allowing women to benefit from the shifts and make alterations of their own. Yet dominant gender norms provided ways to maintain social order amidst fast-paced change, and when some women challenged these norms, they faced harsh criticism. Race, class, sexuality, age, religion, education, and region of birth, among other factors, combined to limit opportunities for some women while expanding them for others.

However temporary and unprecedented the wartime crisis, American women would find that their individual and collective experiences from 1941 to 1945 prevented them from stepping back into a prewar social and economic structure. By stretching and reshaping gender norms and roles, World War II and the women who lived it laid solid foundations for the various civil rights movements that would sweep the United States and grip the American imagination in the second half of the 20th century.
Women, Gender, and World War II

Keywords: femininity, gender, home front, marriage, military, masculinity, opportunities, propaganda, sacrifice, sex, women, work, World War II

The wartime arenas where American women witnessed—and often helped to generate—crucial changes and challenges were wage-based employment, volunteer work, military service, and sexual expression. In each of these arenas, women exercised initiative, autonomy, circumspection, caution, or discretion according to their individual needs and the dictates of patriotic duty.
Wage Work and Opportunity

Economic opportunities abounded for women willing and able to seize them. Wage work in war industries offered hourly pay rates much higher than those to which most women had been accustomed, with the best wages paid in munitions plants and the aircraft industry. Women were encouraged to apply for “war work” after President Franklin Roosevelt created the U.S. War Manpower Commission (WMC) to mobilize Americans in various venues for a total war effort. In August 1942, the WMC organized a Women’s Advisory Committee to consider how female employees could be used most effectively toward this end. Late in 1942, the WMC announced a new campaign to recruit women workers after estimating that “the great majority” of some five million new employees in 1943 would have to be women. The WMC also identified one hundred U.S. cities as “Critical War Areas,” with intent to marshal the “widely dispersed” womanpower reserves in these cities. The main targets were local married women who already lived in the designated metropolitan areas, including middle-aged and older individuals who had never worked outside their homes or whose experience was limited to domestic work. A major challenge would be “to remove social stigma attached to the idea of women working,” the WMC literature noted. Since the employment of married women had been a long-standing practice in working-class families and in the middle-class African American community, the WMC propaganda implicitly targeted white middle-class women who had not typically worked for wages.

Madison Avenue advertising agencies designed and produced a variety of propaganda campaigns for the U.S. government, including the WMC’s bold declaration and appeal late in 1942: “Women Workers Will Win the War.” Local U.S. Employment Service offices coordinated efforts to place women in jobs best suited to their skills and family needs. Mothers with children under fourteen were encouraged not to seek employment outside their homes unless other family members or trusted neighbors could offer reliable childcare. The propaganda campaigns generated posters, billboards, films, and radio announcements urging women to join the work force; some touted their domestic skills as advantageous for carrying out defense work, since women were thought to excel at repetitive tasks requiring small operations with fine details. While the images overwhelmingly featured young, white, married women, an occasional entreaty announced, “Grandma’s got her gun,” referring to an elderly worker’s riveting tool. Several corporations with U.S. government contracts proudly sponsored chapters of the War Working Grandmothers of America. In Washington war agencies, the demographic defined as “older” meant “women over 35.” Women of color rarely appeared in advertisements for industrial work, although their accomplishments and workplace awards were widely reviewed in African American newspapers and journals, including the NAACP’s principal publication, The Crisis, and the National Urban League’s Opportunity. Such coverage constituted a vital part of the “Double V” campaign, an effort launched by the black press to defeat racism at home while troops fought fascism abroad.
American women became artillery inspectors, aircraft welders, sheet metal assemblers, gear cutters, lathe operators, chemical analysts, and mechanics of all kinds. Length and depth of training varied according to industry, with many forced to learn quickly if not “on the job” itself. By 1944, skilled female workers earned an average weekly wage of $31.21. In spite of federal regulations requiring equitable pay for similar work, their male counterparts in similar positions earned $54.65 weekly. Years of experience in specific jobs accounted for some wage disparity between men and women but could not account for aggregate discrimination during the war years. However unequal their wages compared with men’s, women in defense industries out-earned most “pink collar” employees who held retail, service, or clerical jobs. Constance Bowman, a schoolteacher who spent the summer of 1943 working in a San Diego B-24 bomber factory, earned 68 cents an hour. A beginning sales clerk at the upscale Bullock’s Wilshire Department Store in Los Angeles earned about $20 week, two thirds of a factory worker’s salary. If women were able to cross boundaries into the “masculinized” workplaces of heavy industry, they would be remunerated more handsomely than women who remained in safely “feminized” spheres of employment; but they would not always see paychecks matching those of their male co-workers, even when they faced the same workplace challenges and hazards.

The Women’s Bureau (WB) at the U.S. Department of Labor sent field representatives to factories throughout the country to scrutinize working conditions. Among the WB administrators’ gravest concerns were endangered female bodies on factory floors, where safety seemed subordinate to management’s production quotas and workers’ personal style preferences. An alarming New York Times story announced in January 1944 that American “industry deaths” since the attack on Pearl Harbor had exceeded the “number killed in war” by 7,500. The Labor Department tried to convince American women to prioritize safety when choosing work apparel: to wear safety shoes or boots rather than ordinary footwear and to don protective caps or helmets rather than bandanas and scarves. A WB analyst reported that “the most distressing accident” in war industry resulted from long hair catching in machinery. In Rhode Island a woman was “completely scalped” after her hair coiled on an assembly line belt. The Office of War Information (OWI), the U.S. government’s chief propaganda agency, produced documents illustrating proper and improper ways to style and wear hair in industrial jobs. The WB urged factories to adopt rules about head coverings as well as safety shoes and slacks. The Labor Department even designed “fashionable” caps and hats in a variety of shapes and colors, since their research concluded that women did not wish to look exactly like one another in the workplace.

More shocking than minimal head protection was the use of substandard footwear, which led U.S. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins to sound a warning bell at a 1943 “Women in War Industries” conference. In her opening address, Perkins noted that most industrial accidents among women were in the “slip, fall, and stumble categories,” leading her to recommend that work uniforms include “shoes devised particularly to help women prevent” such accidents. Perkins and others concerned about occupational safety had to contend with American shoe retailers—and their representatives in Washington—who insisted that women would want to wear their sandals, moccasins, and espadrilles to
Retail store managers were told they could assist in recruitment and retention of female defense workers by displaying attractive work clothes that promoted safety, neatness, and good health. In spite of U.S. government war agencies’ directives to defense plants to enforce safety standards on all fronts, some Labor Department inspectors found that corporate managers would not comply until threatened with prosecution.

Munitions makers and retailers alike were encouraged to take women employees’ “health and beauty” needs seriously, providing them with cosmetics, soaps, and sanitary supplies to use in workplace restrooms and lounges. Such comfort packages would not merely attract employees but also keep them content and more likely to stay after they had been hired. The Labor Department recommended a sufficient number of showers and lockers on site for particular industries, such as shipbuilding, where women preferred to travel to and from work in their “street clothes.” Working women saw magazine advertisements instructing them to pay particularly close attention to skincare and personal hygiene, lest they lose their “femininity” in the much-altered economic and social landscape of wartime America.

Job opportunities and steady wages could not offset for many the hardships of fulltime employment: shift work, long commutes, limited childcare options, and inconvenient shopping hours for food and other necessities. Very few grocery and department store owners chose to accommodate women who needed to do their shopping in the late evening or night hours. That women workers got sick more often than men was attributed to the fact that they were doing, “in effect, two fulltime jobs.” U.S. government promises to organize day care centers in war boom areas went largely unfulfilled, meeting the needs of a mere fraction of the large population of working mothers; the public childcare project was not funded until 1943, and “even then, the centers provided care for only 10 percent of the children who needed it.”

While limited training, sore muscles, and exhaustion from the home/work double shift discouraged many women, added burdens for women of color included workplace discrimination and harassment. They endured racial slurs and physical attacks in factories, and disproportionately filled the lowest-paid and least appealing jobs, including janitorial work. The Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC)—created by Executive Order 8802 in 1941 to address racial discrimination in industry—lacked the funds to handle the wave of complaints engendered by rapid wartime mobilization. When FEPC cases faced delays, black women searching for work or seeking promotions in their current jobs suffered the most. But women of color, like all American women, found their greatest challenge to be reconciling home life and work life during the war years. Opportunity magazine noted that black women in defense jobs grew “much more irritated than men by periods of standing around and doing nothing,” since they knew they could use the down time running errands for their second shift duties at home. One commentator suggested release of workers in factory down periods in order to promote
“better morale” and to stem the tide of absenteeism, a significant problem among female employees eighteen months into the war.\textsuperscript{18}

American women were encouraged to consider every job a war job, however irrelevant a particular position might seem with regard to the military effort. Beyond riveting and welding, other tasks required even more hands and minds nationwide. The United States needed farm laborers, telephone operators, laundry workers, food servers, and bus drivers. Three million women cultivated crops in the federal agriculture program known as the Women’s Land Army. And while women had filled clerical positions for nearly half a century in the United States, the war accelerated the trend. Women took certain places as men vacated them, with the U.S. government offering hundreds of thousands of desk jobs to anyone who could file, type, and take dictation. The expanding bureaucratic structure of war was matched by private sector growth, where American businesses were forced to open their doors and offices to female employees. With the military draft taking its share of male, middle-class clerks and salesmen, openings for women abounded in the consumer economy. Radio stations, insurance firms, and advertising agencies hired more women than ever before. Banking, in particular, saw “feminization” in its employment ranks; at the beginning of the war, some sixty-five thousand women worked in banking but by the end of 1944, approximately one hundred thirty thousand women were bank employees, constituting nearly one half of the industry’s total personnel.\textsuperscript{19}
Volunteer Work

Beyond those who earned wages, millions of women donated their time, money, or both, especially in the realm of morale work. Those who cultivated a genuine spirit of volunteerism saw their work bear fruit, even though some groups were criticized for their “charity bazaar” approach. Images circulated of the rich snob who sat at a booth for a few hours a week but remained oblivious to real sacrifice. A government handbook for the American Women’s Voluntary Service (AWVS) clarified the organization’s purpose as well its diverse membership in many states, where women carried out “real hard work.” They took classes on home repair and first aid, helped children, and learned practical wartime skills such as map reading, convoy driving, clinical photography, and Morse code. The AWVS affected every aspect of wartime culture, sending its members to assist military personnel, distribute ration books, sell war bonds, and collect salvage, as well as to recruit blood donors, nurses, farm workers, and child care workers, and to knit, sew, and recondition clothes for military families and relief agencies.

AWVS chapters took pride in their “non-sectarian, non-political, non-profit-making” status to encourage women from many backgrounds to join their ranks. Across the country the AWVS made strides in several socially sensitive areas including interracial cooperation. Indeed, African American women urged others to support the organization, because it “transcend[ed] any consideration of race, or color, or class, or caste.” The AWVS became a place where, through their work together, women could understand “each other’s problems and shortcomings and consciously or unconsciously, [develop] an appreciation of each other’s virtues,” one member reported. Interracial volunteer activities among women spurred optimism for a more inclusive postwar America while stimulating the growth of similar organizations where women could meet and serve a larger cause.

In the realm of “morale,” the presumed purview of women, one group enjoyed the spotlight above all others—the United Service Organizations (USO). In assisting and entertaining U.S. military troops, USO volunteers were asked to consider their work the female equivalent of military service. Through gender-defined actions and activities, USO volunteers were expected to assume particular mental and emotional postures when dealing with soldiers and sailors. The ideal USO junior hostess’s femininity quotient was determined in part by her ability to yield to a serviceman’s wishes within the boundaries of middle-class American womanhood. How she presented herself would determine the reactions of soldiers and sailors, she was instructed. Patience, general optimism, and good listening skills were a good hostess’s requisite qualities. Since many USO sites provided games, women played table tennis, checkers, and cards, and often allowed their male opponents to win. Such “gendered emotional work” meant women were not to appear too smart or too competitive; to challenge a serviceman’s masculinity undermined the organization’s purpose of supporting male service members’ morale. As historian Meghan Winchell argues, “If a hostess made a serviceman happy, then she had done her...
job, and this, not meeting her own interests, theoretically provided her with satisfaction.” Her selflessness would presumably reinforce cultural gender norms and uphold social order in the midst of wartime crisis.23

This requisite “cheerful selflessness” was matched by the initiative of women who chose to relocate near their spouses’ military installations. In packed trains and buses, often with young children in tow, they made their way cross-country to visit or live near their husbands. One observer called them “the saddest and most predictable feature of the crowded train stations and bus terminals.”24 War brides on the move could easily identify each other and found comfort in their shared condition.25 African American army wives who accompanied their husbands to Fort Huachuca, Arizona, lived in a squalid “unconverted barrack” outside the camp’s gates; during the day they served the base as secretaries, janitors, cooks, food servers, launderers, and maids in white officers’ homes. But their main priority, according to a reporter for The Crisis, was “the morale of their menfolk.”26
Military Service

Women who volunteered for military service posed a great challenge to the collective consciousness about gender and sexual norms and clear gender divisions, especially regarding who could be considered a soldier, sailor, or marine. The women in uniform closest to the front lines were nurses, government-sanctioned “angels of mercy” whose work Americans more readily accepted because it reflected expectations that women were natural caregivers. Precedent also helped to secure the public’s approval of women serving in this capacity; both the army nurse corps and navy nurse corps had existed since the early 20th century, with more than twenty thousand military nurses serving during the First World War, half of them in overseas duty. But female volunteers in military organizations founded during World War II faced tougher scrutiny than nurses; their womanhood and femininity were questioned by many detractors, even though the idea of national service for women was not new. As early as 1940, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had recommended a required service responsibility (although not specifically a military duty) for all young American women. Roosevelt did not get her peacetime wish, but after the U.S. declared war in December 1941, the mobilization of women as assistants in the army seemed not merely plausible but imperative. U.S. Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers’ bill to that effect had languished since May 1941, but in May 1942, Congress approved it and President Roosevelt signed it, creating the all-volunteer Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps.

Three additional military units followed the creation of a women’s army. The women’s naval organization, Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), was founded in July of 1942; the women’s coast guard, Semper Paratus Always Ready (SPAR), followed in November; and finally, the U.S. Marine Corps Women’s Reserve (USMCWR) was established in February 1943. All four of the women’s military groups were designed to release men who held military desk jobs and other stateside responsibilities for combat duty, something many men resented. In addition, because of the expansive mobilization of the military for the war, thousands of new clerical positions emerged in all branches of the armed services and this too inspired calls for female military personnel. As one colorful recruitment poster directed at women commanded, “Be A Marine. Free A Marine to Fight.” Recruiters had to proceed cautiously with a message whose logic told women that joining a military service organization would send more men to their deaths. Even so, the message reinforced gender differences—women might wear uniforms, march in formation, and be promoted, but only men could face enemy forces at battle sites. Thus, men continued to dominate the most masculine of human activities—warfare—which was further masculinized by U.S. government propaganda in the 1940s.

The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) did not receive military status during World War II, but members participated in the American war effort by ferrying planes from factory sites to defense camps and embarkation points. These female aviators also tested new aircraft, hauled cargo, and assisted male pilots in training exercises. In 1944, U.S.
Army Air Corps General Henry “Hap” Arnold publicly declared WASP pilots as capable as their male counterparts. Thirty-eight women died serving in the WASP during its two-year existence (1942–44), yet none of the pilots’ families received government support for their funerals because the organization was not officially militarized.²⁹

Propaganda aimed at enticing women to join one of the military forces touted substantial base pay in addition to food, lodging, clothing, and medical and dental care. But the Office of War Information (OWI) insisted that recruitment messages refrain from appealing “entirely to the self-interest approach.” Women were not supposed to entertain individual needs or wishes, but instead to join for higher, nobler reasons: “patriotism and the desire to help our fighting men,” the OWI instructed.³⁰ Even so, years later, many female soldiers, sailors, marines, and pilots admitted to volunteering because they wanted an adventure or independence or both.³¹

In 1943, the women’s army group discarded its “auxiliary” status to become an integral part of the U.S. Army and was renamed the Women’s Army Corps (WAC), a move that generated an outpouring of criticism, concern, and derision. Male GIs carried out a smear campaign against the organization. They spread rumors that WAC volunteers served as prostitutes for male soldiers, reinforcing a notion that army life encouraged promiscuity. Some wondered whether incorporating the WAC into the regular army meant that its members would—like their male counterparts—be issued condoms. Would army life encourage sexual activity among female volunteers?³² Viewed not simply in ethical terms, women’s sexual autonomy was considered transgressive behavior that aligned them too closely with men in uniform, whose masculinity was often measured by their sexual prowess and emphasized during the war years.³³ The blurring or crossing of gender and sexual lines in this realm implied a social disorder that many Americans could not abide.

Worries about women’s sexual independence also inspired rumors of a “lesbian threat” in the WAC. In the 1940s, both American medical opinion and public opinion associated female sexual “deviance” as much with a woman’s appearance as her actions. Androgyny...
or, in wartime language, a “mannish” way, could mark a woman as suspect since she challenged the rules of femininity that grounded heterosexuality and secured a traditional social order. As women stepped into previously all-male venues during the war years, gender “disguise” could be interpreted as dangerous. Acutely aware of this, WAC director Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby ordered army women “to avoid rough or masculine appearance which would cause unfavorable public comment.” In the spring of 1944, female mechanics at Ellington Air Base, Texas, attended lectures about “proper dress for work” with a warning not to “roll up” the legs or sleeves of their coveralls. One Ellington mechanic wrote to her parents, “We are now buttoned and covered from tip to toe.” The OWI instructed advertisers and illustrators to show female soldiers in “complete G. I. uniform” and never “smoking or drinking alcoholic beverages,” concerns not voiced about men in uniform. These rules of propriety indicated the preeminent role that clothing played in assigning gender and sexual identities during the war. Even the appearance of impropriety could be grounds for dismissal and a dishonorable discharge.

Beyond the role of patriotic duty, the U.S. government’s preeminent recruitment message emphasized gender, declaring: “Women in uniform are no less feminine than before they enlisted.” In fact, officials hoped to appeal to women’s sartorial interests by using fashion plate graphic designs in recruitment literature. Illustrations of female soldiers posing as atelier models and department store mannequins displayed the numerous stylish items in a military wardrobe—from foundations to outerwear—together worth about $250. The idea was not only to recruit women but also to counter critics who railed against the idea of women’s military organizations in the United States. The tactics worked; many volunteers admitted joining one organization or another because they liked the uniforms.

Enlistment criteria, training, and job assignments varied widely by organization. The WAC accepted volunteers with a minimum of two years of high school, while the WAVES required a high school diploma, with college “strongly recommended.” Female marines in the women’s reserve (WRs) needed at least two years of college credit. Their respective training models also bespoke their differences. While WAC recruits trained, lived, and worked at army camps, WAVES and WRs took instruction on college campuses. As a result of the varying minimum standards for enlistment in the women’s services, the WAC became home to a more ethnically and racially diverse population, and it enlisted women from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds, including those who could not afford to attend college. More age-diverse as well, the WAC welcomed women between the ages of 20 and 50 who had no children under 14 years, whereas the WAVES, SPAR, and USMCWR limited their volunteer base to women between the ages of 20 and 36 who had no children under 18. Of the four women’s military services, only the WAC allowed its members to serve overseas.

To alert women to the army’s variety of needs and encourage them to volunteer, the WAC advertised “239 kinds of jobs.” Many recruits received specialized army training in radio, chemistry, mechanics, and other fields, while others brought previously honed skills, such as foreign language training, into the army. Bilingual Latinas, for example, were recruited...
specifically for cryptology and interpretation; a special unit comprised of two hundred Puerto Rican WAC volunteers served at the New York Port of Embarkation and other locations dedicated to the shipment of U.S. troops. Nevertheless, some female soldiers were given tasks considered “women’s work” rather than jobs they had been promised or trained to do. WAC officer Betty Bandel discovered low morale among troops whose expectations about their roles were not met. The army had given them domestic tasks, similar to those they had held in civilian life, or it had failed to utilize the professional expertise they brought with them into service. Disappointed at what she and her colleagues interpreted as gender discrimination, Bandel confided to her mother that some Army Air Force units had even requested that Wacs do the pilots’ laundry and provide “troop entertainment.”

Women of color who wished to join military units faced steep discrimination. Excluded from the WAVES and SPAR until November 1944, and excluded from the wartime marines or WASP, sixty-five hundred African Americans joined a segregated women’s army. As one of the first female African American army officers, Charity Adams experienced vicious discrimination at Ft. Des Moines on several occasions. Early in her training, a high-ranking white male officer—a fellow South Carolinian—excoriated Adams for appearing at the officers’ club one evening. In his lengthy peroration, Adams stood silently at attention while the colonel reminded her about segregation laws, the southern past, racialized slavery, and her “place” in this scheme. Adams persevered at the Iowa base, rising in the ranks to major and commanding an all-black battalion of eight hundred fifty women assigned to a postal unit in Great Britain and France in 1945. But she spent many hours at Ft. Des Moines tending to “extra” duties that fellow soldiers expected of her because she was black; one of those tasks was cultivating the small Victory Garden at their barracks. Other women of color in uniform were assaulted at southern railway stations, denied access to facilities and dining cars on trains, and treated with disdain in towns near their bases and well beyond.

Japanese American women, initially barred from joining the Women’s Army Corps, were admitted beginning in November 1943, but organization officials preferred that news outlets not publicize the inductions of Nisei women. The WAVES, the second largest women’s military organization, did not accept Japanese American volunteers during the war. The pervasiveness of anti-Japanese sentiment adversely affected U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry, many of whom strove to prove their loyalty in the face of embedded racism and a nationwide hatred that took even deeper root among white supremacists as the 1940s wore on.
Sex, Marriage, and Motherhood

Loosening sexual mores, skyrocketing marriage rates, and a burgeoning baby boom characterized the war years. Casual sexual relations among the unmarried startled many Americans, who blamed young women—especially those who worked outside their homes—for shifting standards. Government propaganda associated the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, such as syphilis and gonorrhea, with women rather than men by casting disease carriers as female. Among the most vulnerable to infected women, official media suggested, were America’s men in uniform. Posters warned: “She May Look Clean—But” and, in 1941, before the United States entered the war, the May Act declared prostitution near U.S. defense camps a federal crime. Yet the vast wartime mobilization effort combined with the cultural politics of the early 1940s provided American women a wide berth to express and enjoy sexual intimacy in the name of patriotism. Many who migrated to war boom cities and military installments left behind constraints on sexual behavior that had guided them in their home communities. As circumstances “opened up new sexual possibilities,” women more freely explored their erotic desires. For example, lesbians socialized, fell in love, and “began to name and talk about who they were,” contributing to one of the war’s significant legacies, the establishment and reinforcement of lesbian and gay communities. At the same time, shifting social standards made more women open targets for sexual innuendo and unwelcome invitations from strangers; San Diego factory worker Constance Bowman wrote about cat calls and whistles and, on one occasion, a marine stalking her down a street with the persistent entreaty, “How about a little war work, Sister?” The intersections of rapid defense mobilization, loosened social constraints, and greater female sexual autonomy created a home front where women became a “suspect category, subject to surveillance for the duration of the war,” Marilyn Hegarty argues.

Paradoxically, in the midst of wartime fear and surveillance of women’s sexuality, female allure and glamour were used to sell everything from laundry detergent to soda pop to troop morale. The World War II years marked the heyday of the “pin up girl,” and an unprecedented display of American women’s bodies; movie stars such as Betty Grable, Rita Hayworth, and Lana Turner posed seductively for photographers and other artists, whose prints, posters, and calendars were reproduced in the millions and circulated widely. Ordinary American women copied these poses in photographs that they sent stateside to military camps and overseas to battlefronts. And many women took the next logical step by literally offering their bodies—out of patriotic duty, to cap a brief encounter, or to seal a romantic relationship.

High U.S. marriage rates during World War II created a “Wartime Marriage Boom.” Between 1940 and 1943, some 6,579,000 marriages took place, yielding over 1.1 million more marriages than rates in the 1920s and 1930s would have predicted. A “bridal terror” had emerged soon after the Selective Service Act of 1940 initiated the United States’ first peacetime draft, and a rumored “man shortage” took hold of the American
imagination midway through the war. Early on it was unclear how marriage and parenthood might affect military deferments, leading couples to tie the knot with expectations of securing extra time. In addition, with the wartime draft extending to males between the ages of 18 and 45, the pool of eligible men for marriage had presumably shrunk. By 1944, rising U.S. casualty figures also contributed to the alarm. In large cities and defense camp areas, where soldiers and sailors congregated before deployment, “the urge to send men away happy meant numerous intimate liaisons, quick marriages, or both.” Many couples barely knew each other before taking their vows. A 1944 U.S. Census Bureau survey revealed that more than 2.7 million young, married women had husbands away in the armed services. The following year, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that more marriages had occurred “in each of the past four years than in any prior year in the history of the United States.”

War mobilization encouraged many couples to marry sooner than they had planned and others to marry soon after meeting each other. Many of these long distance relationships unraveled over the war years, with the high wartime marriage rates resulting in the highest divorce rates in U.S. history. A baby boom accompanied the marriage boom, and many young mothers were left alone to care for their children and make ends meet. The more resourceful of them pooled their funds by “tripling up” in apartments, splitting the rent and food costs, and sharing childcare and housekeeping responsibilities. Others found childcare where they could in order to take advantage of defense industry jobs. These working mothers received limited assistance from federally sponsored childcare facilities that had been authorized under the 1940 Lanham Act, an extension of the Depression-era public works projects. Underfunded and concentrated primarily in war boom areas, federal childcare centers served some six hundred thousand children during the war years; yet at their greatest use, they served only 13 percent of children who needed them. Americans’ steadfast belief in a mother’s responsibility to remain at home with her children persisted during World War II; even the war emergency failed to temper this deeply entrenched, middle class standard. The notable exception to otherwise meager organized childcare assistance came on the west coast, where the Kaiser Shipbuilding Company provided its female employees in Washington, Oregon, and California with reliable, well-staffed facilities. The Richmond shipyards in the San Francisco Bay area oversaw approximately fourteen hundred children daily.
Working mothers were forced to make difficult choices during the war years. Some chose second shifts or night shifts, so they could be with their children during the day and work while they were sleeping. Others who worked day shifts were criticized for leaving their children. In several defense boom areas, social workers and school staff speculated that women entering the work force were spurred by “additional income and a too great readiness to evade full responsibility for their children” rather than “patriotic motives.” Pressure on mothers to assume full responsibility for their children intensified during the war years, as reports of increasing juvenile delinquency appeared in magazines and newspapers. In *A Generation of Vipers* (1942), Philip Wylie criticized “Mom” for many “social discomforts and ills,” particularly the problems of American youth. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover instructed mothers to stop “the drift of normal youth toward immorality and crime,” telling them not to take war jobs if their employment meant “the hiring of another woman to come in and take care of [their] children.” American society, in spite of the wartime emergency, barely budged on its expectations of working mothers.
Figure 3. “And then in my spare time...” Bob Barnes for the Office of War Information, ca. 1943. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-97636), digital ID: cph 3b43729.
**Mobility, Sacrifice, and Patriotic Duty**

Women’s growing independence during World War II was visibly characterized by their mobility. The cities, towns, and camps attracting them were located on both coasts and everywhere in between—Washington, DC, Seattle, Portland, Mobile, Detroit, St. Louis, and numerous other places where the prospects of war work, steady wages, or other opportunities beckoned. Some traveled occasionally to see their sweethearts, sons, and husbands, while others took to the road daily or weekly to punch time clocks in defense factories. Extending and expanding the Great Migration from the rural south to urban, industrial America, black women entered shipyards, ordnance plants, and bomber factories in unprecedented numbers.

Industrial growth and military mobilization allowed women to crisscross the nation in trains and buses, but their new mobility caused many Americans a sense of uneasiness and discontent. Women who traveled or lived alone were viewed with suspicion, while those who crowded into teeming defense areas, with or without their families, were often treated with scorn by local residents. In Portland, Oregon, community women criticized female shipyard workers who came into town “dirty and tired” at the end of their shifts. In Mobile, Alabama, a woman berated newcomers as “the lowest type of poor whites, these workers flocking in from the backwoods. They prefer to live in shacks and go barefoot . . . Give them a good home and they wouldn’t know what to do with it.” Many were met with the Depression-era epithet, “Okies.” In addition to the contempt they endured, migrants had to tolerate conditions that posed health risks: overcrowded boarding houses, makeshift accommodations, brimming sewers, limited water supplies and hard-pressed local schools.

In the nation’s capital, thousands of women who answered the persistent calls for office workers—a “Girls for Washington Jobs” campaign—created a “spectacle” that “staggered the imagination.” The women arrived in the city to find substandard lodging, if they found it at all. Construction on U.S. government residence halls that had been promised to unmarried female workers lagged months behind schedule, forcing women to find rooms in boardinghouses run by mercenary landlords or strict matrons.

Testing a woman’s conscience about her full participation in the war effort was commonplace in home front propaganda. She was supposed to want to undertake defense work, volunteer positions, or join a women’s military organization in order to support combat troops and out of a sense of patriotic duty. To use such positions to launch personal independence of any kind—especially financial—could be viewed as selfish or even reckless. African American sociologist Walter Chivers observed, in 1943, that black women who thought they had left domestic work behind by seizing defense jobs would once again “have to seek employment in the white woman’s home.” An appeal for more
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military nurses late in the war asked: “Is Your Comfort as Important as the Lives of 15 Wounded Soldiers?”

Women were advised to spend their extra coins and dollars on war bonds or other U.S. government initiatives. The 1942 handbook Calling All Women advised that a ten-cent war stamp would purchase “a set of insignia for the Army” or “five .45 cartridges for the Marine Corps.” The 6th War Bond Drive in 1944 included a “Pin Money War Bond” promotion for women who previously had been unable to afford to buy bonds; whether unemployed or underemployed, they could spend pennies and nickels to fill a “stamp” album that would eventually convert to a war bond. Eleanor Sewall, a Lockheed Aircraft employee whose husband was captured on Bataan, was heralded by the company for her decision to contribute 50 percent of her salary in payroll deductions toward war bonds. Beyond such an investment’s practical value in assisting the government, less disposable income for women would limit paths to financial independence that could be viewed as self-serving. Sacrifice in the cause of patriotic duty would temper desires for—and achievement of—personal autonomy.

Among many American women who sacrificed during the war were those who served near the front lines or had family members in military service. The sixty-six nurses who were captured by the Japanese on Corregidor spent three years in Santo Tomas prison camp in Manila. Besides sharing scarce food and limited supplies with three thousand other American and British prisoners, they shared three showers and five toilets with the five hundred other women there. American mothers, wives, sisters, and sweethearts together lost more than four hundred thousand loved ones—the U.S. death casualty count—during the war. The writer Zelda Popkin noted that some women became “widows before they were really wives.”

Lasting Changes

Amidst sacrifice and loss, many American women clung to the opportunities extended to them during World War II. Prewar gender expectations had been tested and found wanting. Susan B. Anthony II, great-niece and namesake of the women’s suffrage fighter, argued in 1944 that women had proven their abilities in every field and therefore deserved “equal pay for equal work, a right grudgingly acceded” them during the war. Having worked all three shifts as a grinder in the Washington Navy Yard machine shop, while her fifty-six-year-old mother worked at a Pennsylvania radar factory, Anthony was confident that war’s end would “mark a turning point in women’s road to full equality.”

If the Allies’ fight for “freedom” meant personal independence, then American women had embraced it in the early 1940s. Of the “Four Freedoms” articulated by President Roosevelt in 1940, “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear” went a long way in explaining why some American women enjoyed the financial, social, and emotional rewards of the war years. The large number of those who developed skills and carried out...
new work, who put on military uniforms, married quickly, engaged in sexual activity freely, or moved several hundred miles away from home—or all of these—did so inside the grander framework of national and global crisis. Out of crisis, the most meaningful transformations emanated from the confidence they developed and the independence they felt and exercised. Many feared these would fade or be retracted after the war, and their fears were justified. From popular culture to social commentary to political leadership, powerful voices urged women to “go back home to provide jobs for servicemen,” despite the fact that the jobs many held were not available to servicemen before the war and that many returning servicemen had not worked for wages regularly in the 1930s. Numerous surveys and polls of female workers found that most wanted to remain in the work force rather than return to their prewar employment conditions. Efforts to “contain” women during the late 1940s and convince them to embrace a middle-class dream where they would play starring roles as domestic goddesses in their own homes eventually backfired. Their wartime experiences combined with collective memory not only affected their daughters, sisters, and friends directly, but also reinforced the deep foundations of the equality crusades—from civil rights to women’s rights to workers’ rights to gay and lesbian rights—that would take center stage in the postwar generations.

Discussion of the Literature

Women featured in a few early histories of the Second World War, but they did not receive much scholarly notice as a group until the late 1970s, after the women’s movement and the field of women’s history had gained traction. The simultaneous influence of social sciences on history contributed to the heightened interest in women as subjects—they could be counted, plotted on graphs, and studied in the aggregate, especially as war workers. Thus the earliest scholarship highlighted women’s contributions to U.S. success in World War II, particularly through their work as builders and inspectors of military equipment. Leila J. Rupp’s book Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939–1945 (1978) focused on the U.S. government propaganda campaigns to get women into the factories and other places of employment and to keep them there for the duration.

In the 1980s, four landmark works appeared, establishing the vital role of American women in the Second World War and positing an essential question: How did women’s work for wages affect their abilities as wives, mothers, and homemakers? In Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II (1981), Karen Anderson focused on three of the fastest-growing industrial areas for war production: Detroit, Baltimore, and Seattle. Anderson unveiled the underside of these burgeoning urban workplaces, with their racial tensions and violence, age discrimination, and unfulfilled government promises to working homemakers who needed assistance with shopping, meal preparation, and child care. Susan Hartmann’s The Home Front and
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Beyond: American Women in the 1940s (1982) launched Twayne’s American Women in the Twentieth Century series, a chronological history organized by decade. That Hartmann analyzed the 1940s, whole and entire, allowed readers to see the social and political forces operating to encourage the maintenance of traditional, clearly defined gender duties in postwar America (1945–1949), namely homemaking and motherhood for women.69

In 1984, D’Ann Campbell published the cleverly titled Women At War With America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era, a work that approached various groups of American women in terms of their roles and resources. Using the rich material produced by social scientists and their organizations during the war, Campbell combined the techniques of both a social scientist and humanist to show that military women, homemakers, stateside service wives, and female industrial laborers, among others, fared much worse on all fronts than one group singled out and heralded because their work fit within acceptable gender parameters: nurses. All of these groups had gone to war, many answering the numerous calls to assist however they could, but Campbell demonstrated that American women remained at war with a nation that extended opportunities to them while simultaneously reining them in.70

The fourth significant book published in the 1980s, Maureen Honey’s Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II (1984), revealed how high-circulation magazines aimed at particular audiences sought to appeal to women on the basis of class status and values. In addition to these four important works, Alice Kessler-Harris and Ruth Milkman also conducted studies in the 1980s on the challenges women faced during World War II as laborers. By the end of the decade these historians and other scholars generally agreed that the war had offered myriad and measurable opportunities to women of all races and at all socioeconomic levels, but the options proved temporary, resulting in little significant redefinition of cultural gender norms that had cast women primarily as wives and mothers.71

This early scholarship was enriched by oral history projects begun in earnest in the 1980s, notably Sherna Berger Gluck’s interviews of southern California war workers in Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War and Social Change (1987), a collection that encouraged scholars to follow Gluck’s lead in focusing on personal narratives of women who now seemed comfortable talking candidly about their wartime experiences. Oral history projects would flourish in the 1990s, as fiftieth anniversary commemorations of U.S. involvement in World War II not only marked specific events but also prompted an urgency to record aging participants’ stories. Scholars’ concentration on particular locales or geographic regions, as well as specific groups of women or the jobs they carried out became organizing principles for a succession of oral history collections, some available online and others in print, such as Cindy Weigand’s Texas Women in World War II (2003) and Jeffrey S. Suchanek’s Star Spangled Hearts: American Women Veterans of World War II (2011).72
While oral history projects flourished in the 1990s and beyond, Judy Barrett Litoff and David Smith began soliciting, collecting, and publishing as many wartime letters as possible. Their quest, begun in 1990, continues a generation later, with an amassed total of over 30,000 letters written by women. Litoff and Smith’s edited collections remain a starting point for any scholar pursuing the voices of ordinary American women who corresponded during the war.73

The emerging field of cultural studies influenced scholarship from the 1990s forward, bringing gender and sexuality to the fore. The questions raised by cultural studies required scholars to consider the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality as central elements in how women were viewed and what they experienced as a result. In *Abiding Courage*, Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo surveyed African American women who had migrated to northern California’s East Bay area, where employment in the shipyards and auxiliary industries offered economic opportunities unavailable in the Jim Crow south. Leisa D. Meyer’s *Creating GI Jane* revealed the myriad challenges, both real and imaginary, posed by a women’s army—notably Americans’ views on who could and should be a soldier and what that meant for a social order dependent on clear-cut gender norms; Meyer was one of the first to analyze lesbian Wacs during WWII. Maureen Honey’s edited collection of primary sources, *Bitter Fruit: African American Women in World War II* (1999), investigated how women of color were depicted in popular culture, including the African American press, and how they negotiated these characterizations in addition to the challenges of wartime mobility, displacement, and opportunity.74

In recent years, scholars examining American women during World War II have synthesized and built on the foundations laid by the previous generation, taking further the equations linking gender, sexuality, personal autonomy, and the media’s role in guiding individual and collective self-awareness, behavior, and cultural values. The historians’ titles reveal not only the characterizations of wartime women but also the pressures brought to bear on them during the crisis: Marilyn Hegarty’s *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II* (2008), Meghan K. Winchell’s *Good Girls, Good Food, Good Fun: The Story of USO Hostesses during World War II* (2008), and Melissa A. McEuen’s *Making War, Making Women: Femininity and Duty on the American Home Front, 1941–1945* (2011), all pose research questions that uncover uneasy truths about the measured oversight and careful management of American women during a U.S. war inspired by and fought to defend “freedom.” Similar questions remain today as historians still seek to understand how U.S. propaganda agencies, and American media in general, depicted women during the war, and what this meant to them, to those conducting the war effort, and to the nation at large.75
Primary sources depicting or targeting American women during World War II—including photographs, posters, cartoons, advertisements, letters, government documents, and oral history interviews—are available in several major collections, most notably at the Library of Congress, the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, and Duke University’s Rubenstein Library.

A good place to initiate any study of women on the home front is with “Rosie Pictures,” a selection of images of wartime workers from the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. The representative sampling in “Rosie Pictures” hints at what may be found among the library’s vast holdings of visual images, including the invaluable Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Collection, comprised of 175,000 photographs taken by U.S. government photographers who traveled throughout the nation between 1935 and 1944. The collection has been carefully curated, with each item fully described and contextualized, and nearly all of them digitized.

The National Archives Library Information Center (ALIC) has organized information on women topically, so that the subject of war may be pursued from several angles and according to themes such as “women in the military” or “African American women.” Links to a variety of websites containing women’s history materials—though not necessarily items housed in the National Archives—may be found at the ALIC’s reference hub on Women. Millions of the U.S. government’s paper records not yet digitized are available at the College Park research facility, including documents produced by federal agencies created during the Second World War for specific objectives, such as the Office of War Information, the War Manpower Commission, and the War Production Board. At the U.S. Department of Labor, the Women’s Bureau generated countless pages of reports during the war, and all are available to researchers who visit the National Archives.

Duke University’s Rubenstein Library houses a variety of primary source materials in several major collections, including the War Effort Mobilization Campaigns Poster Collection, 1942-1945, and the extensive Guide to the J. Walter Thompson Company. World War II Advertising Collection, 1940-1948. Additional collections located in the John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, and Marketing History at the Rubenstein Library offer such resources as roadside billboard advertisements and department store window displays, designed to appeal to female consumers in the 1940s. Finally, among Duke University Libraries’ Digital Collections is Ad Access, a database of magazine and newspaper advertisements that features over 1,700 items from the war years, including official propaganda and many promotions directed specifically at women.

Three other significant primary sources collections deserve attention and offer scholars insight into women’s lives and experiences during World War II. Interview transcripts and video excerpts of interviews conducted for the “Rosie the Riveter WWII American Home Front Project” by the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California, Berkeley, are available at the Bancroft Library site. Northwestern University Library’s World War II Poster Collection contains 338 items, thoroughly identified and contextualized and at a high resolution to facilitate close analysis, many of them featuring
women. Images are available as high-resolution files for close analysis. For wartime correspondence, there is no better starting point than the U.S. Women and World War II Letter Writing Project, developed by Professor Judy Barrett Litoff at Bryant University, and housed there in 175 boxes. Several hundred letters are available as PDFs on the project site, along with a helpful Finding Aid to the entire collection, prepared by Litoff.


Further Reading


Notes:


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(7.) “Industry Deaths Since Pearl Harbor 37,600, Exceeding by 7,500 Number Killed in War,” New York Times, January 21, 1944, A34. This trend held throughout the war, as Renny Christopher notes: “The total of disabling work injuries for the war period totaled 8,730,400, whereas the total wounded, missing, and killed in the war was 1,070,524.” See Renny Christopher, “Work Is a War, or All Their Lives They Dug Their Graves,” in Critical Approaches to American Working-Class Literature, ed. Michelle M. Tokarczyk (New York: Routledge, 2011), 36.

(8.) McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 166-171; see also Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Online Catalog, Safe Clothes for Women War Workers.


(10.) Minutes, Shoe Retailers Advisory Committee, February 16, 1943; April 16, 1943; June 1943, Record Group 179, War Production Board, Policy Documentation File, 545.109 and 545.1005.

(11.) McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 152.

(12.) WB War Industries Conference Report, 47.

(13.) “Fawcett’s Winning War Girl,” Advertising & Selling 36 (February 1943), 138; see also McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 6, 58-59.


(15.) McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 14-21, 100-132.

(16.) Confidential report, “Quits Among Women War Workers,” July 1943, Record Group 179, War Production Board, Policy Documentation File, 241.11, Box 1016.

(17.) Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: Basic Books), 68.


(19.) McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 59-61.

(20.) Dorothy Parker, “Miss Brass Tacks of 1943,” typed manuscript, Record Group 208, U.S. Office of War Information, Records of the Office of the Director of War Programs, Records of the Chief, Bureau of Campaigns, Box 151, National Archives, College Park,
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Maryland. Parker’s essay was condensed and retitled for publication as “Are We Women or Are We Mice?” Readers Digest, July 1943, 71–72.

(21.) McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 200–201.


(28.) Christina Jarvis, The Male Body at War: American Masculinity during World War II (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), 56–83; see also National Archives, “Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art from World War II,” esp. “Man the Guns.” Wartime propaganda suggested that most men in the military were engaged in combat, but statistics show otherwise: “Of sixteen million military personnel, 25 percent never left the United States, and less than 50 percent of those overseas were ever in a battle zone,” states Michael C. C. Adams in The Best War Ever: America and World War II (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).


(30.) McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 190–191.

(31.) See, for example, numerous oral history collections including Jeffrey S. Suchanek, Star-Spangled Hearts: American Women Veterans of World War II (Frankfort, KY:


(34.) Meyer, Creating GI Jane, 148–178; Hobby quotation in Meyer, 155.

(35.) McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 147; for a fuller discussion of appearance, propriety, and perceived gender transgressions, including lesbianism, see Meyer, Creating GI Jane, 148–179.

(36.) McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 146.


(40.) Charity Adams Earley, One Woman’s Army: A Black Officer Remembers the WAC (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1989), 103–109.


(49.) McEuen, “Exposing Anger and Discontent,” 249–250.


(52.) Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 165. Hartmann attributes high divorce rates not only to quick marriages but also to “the new roles and independence each had experienced during the wartime separation.”


(55.) U.S. National Park Service, “World War II in the San Francisco Bay Area.”


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(65.) *Arkansas Democrat*, “Women in Employment,” August 14, 1945; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, “Rosie Turns Thumbs Down on Housework,” August 18, 1945; see also various documents, clippings, and reports in Record Group 86, Women’s Bureau, Division of Research, Re: Women Workers in World War II, Box 197, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.


(67.) Elaine Tyler May discusses domestic “containment” in *Homeward Bound*, 89.


(69.) Anderson, *Wartime Women*; and Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*.


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