

Women in World War One: A Change of Role and Rights

To what extent did World War One affect the role and rights of women in the United

States from 1919 to 1940?

Subject: History

Word Count: 3,847

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Introduction

In 1914, the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Bosnia, by Serbian Gavrilo Princip, sparked the first World War¹. The war lasted four years and helped change the role women played in society, specifically in the United States. In the years leading up to WWI, many women worked as mothers, cleaners, schoolteachers, factory workers, or domestic workers. Significantly, starting in 1917, 4.7 million men were enlisted into the war from the US². This not only left room for women in industries they never had access to before, but also created a need for extra work. Because there were almost 5 million men at war, women were needed to help internally. From April 6, 1917, when the US entered war, to the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on June 28th 1919³, women's roles in the US and all over the world changed significantly. Women across the country worked to support the same cause, many of them working alongside men. Women seized opportunities in WWI even though they were paid less and received no benefits or recognition. When the war ended, men returned to their pre-war positions and pushed women out of the way. Directly after what seemed to be a huge leap forward for womankind came what seemed like an equally significant setback. Despite this reversal in empowerment, women's rights and positions have improved dramatically since then.

¹ "Austria's Archduke Ferdinand Assassinated." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 9 Feb. 2010, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/archduke-ferdinand-assassinated.

² Byerly, Carol R. "The U.S. Military and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919." *Public Health Reports (Washington, D.C. : 1974)*, Association of Schools of Public Health, Apr. 2010, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2862337/.

³ "The United States Officially Enters World War I." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 9 Feb. 2010, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/america-enters-world-war-i.

The question remains, “to what extent did World War One affect the role and rights of women in the United States from 1919 to 1940?” This investigation shows that World War One acted as a platform for future women’s rights movements. While gender roles essentially returned to how they were pre-war and continued to remain the same through the 60s⁴, the war helped pave the way for future feminist movements. An examination of women's roles and rights in America before WWI, the changes that occurred during the war, and the impact of the post war world show that although the visible progress they made was short-lived, the seeds of liberalism planted largely by the Suffrage Movement eventually found a resurgence in the 1960s.

Women’s Role Before WWI

On the brink of war in 1917, women’s lives were about to change. Leading up to these years, however, life was hard. Most lower class women worked vigorously for every opportunity possible. But no matter how hard and efficiently they worked, a woman made less than half the dollar a man made⁵. While women were allowed to work, the options were limited and the pay was minute. Working women only making around one hundred and four dollars per year⁶. Along with miniscule payment, women faced unfavorable working conditions and no benefits (including health)⁷. Additionally, women could not serve in the military, the government, or legally own a business, nor

⁴ History.com Editors. “Women's History Milestones: A Timeline.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 26 Feb. 2019, www.history.com/topics/womens-history/womens-history-us-timeline.

⁵ “Striking Women.” *World War I: 1914-1918 | Striking Women*, www.striking-women.org/module/women-and-work/world-war-i-1914-1918.

⁶ “A Day In The Life Of A Munitions Worker.” *Imperial War Museums*, www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-munitions-worker.

⁷ A Day In The Life Of A Munitions Worker

could she vote in any election⁸. Furthermore, women could not own property; everything including the children legally belonged to the husband⁹. When a woman was married, she essentially transitioned from being property of her father to becoming property of her husband. Along with sexually discriminatory laws, there are also sexist implications to many laws and regulations. For example, in 1908 it was established that women could only work up to 10 hours a week while men could work more¹⁰. This was not only discriminatory in that it was impossible for a woman to earn as much as a man, the implication was that women are weaker and can not work for too long. This law was created and enforced by men.

Although the Suffrage Movement where women fought for their right to vote earned most of its publicity and recognition around 1918-1920, the fight had been building up quietly since 1848¹¹. As the war approached, many women believed they could use it as an opportunity to gain rights, specifically surrounding voting and working. They hoped to be able to work with male counterparts and fight for their country. Because so many men would be fighting the war, there was room for women to earn money in the workforce¹².

Women's Roles in Society During WWI

The most foreseeable changes for women at the start of the war were opportunities to work in formerly male-dominated positions. In 1916, the US joined the

⁸ Inscription on the Liberty Memorial Tower in Downtown Kansas City, Missouri. "Women in WWI." *National WWI Museum and Memorial*, 3 Jan. 2020, www.theworldwar.org/learn/women.

⁹ Inscription on the Liberty Memorial Tower

¹⁰ Striking Women

¹¹ Dodson, Angela P. *Remember the Ladies: Celebrating Those Who Fought for Freedom at the Ballot Box*. Center Street, 2019.

¹² Inscription on the Liberty Memorial Tower

war and turned 4.7 million men into soldiers, allowing room for women in their place. The addition of US women to the workforce kickstarted the women's movement, and allowed the country to continue to thrive. For the first time in American history, even African American women were not limited to factory and domestic jobs¹³. Women worked alongside men as postal workers, railway guards, ticket collectors, bus conductors, bank tellers, and clerks¹⁴. Many women saw themselves as essential and needed for the wellbeing of the US economy. However, women were still paid less than half as much as men. The United States system and economy depended on workers to do their part¹⁵. An unfortunate reason many of these women were hired so easily despite the need for them was because it was much cheaper to pay them. There were no laws until 1963 to declare equal pay¹⁶. Many men were worried that when the soldiers returned from war they would not get their jobs back because it was so much cheaper for companies to employ women. Nonetheless, women worked to earn a small wage and to help their country. Women got a taste of the real working world, and refused to permanently go back.

Women's Changing Role in the Workplace During WWI

The need for women to help during the war branched out to women who worked and volunteered directly for the war. Because the only women who were legally allowed to fight as soldiers were Russian, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Serbian¹⁷, American women found alternative ways to serve. Perhaps most importantly, soldiers needed

¹³ Inscription on the Liberty Memorial Tower

¹⁴ Inscription on the Liberty Memorial Tower

¹⁵ Inscription on the Liberty Memorial Tower

¹⁶ "Women's History Milestones: A Timeline."

¹⁷ Inscription on the Liberty Memorial Tower

nurses and surgeons. An organization emerged called the American Red Cross¹⁸ emerged. Within this organization, women from all across the United States traveled to France and other places to save dying soldiers. Many women quit their jobs to travel across the world to save lives. At British hospitals in France, over 3,000 female American nurses served the war¹⁹. Thousands more helped on the frontlines. At first, even these women faced opposition. Many men insisted they did not need female help and worried men would not get their jobs back after the war. Funds for members of the American Red Cross were not provided²⁰. Red Cross members raised money themselves to travel to France. Once they arrived, they went straight to work. For many women, career nursing wouldn't have been a career they thought possible for themselves if it weren't for the war. Other than being hands-on doctors and nurses, some found driving ambulances was a much needed alternative²¹. These women helped transport wounded soldiers to and from hospitals. Workers were needed everywhere, so it was not difficult for women to find jobs, however low or non paying they were. The introduction of females in the medical field during WWI foreshadowed a future of countless female medical professionals.

Some women who were bilingual in French and English were recruited by the US Army to be telephone switchboard operators. They were called "Hello Girls"²². As

¹⁸ Inscription on the Liberty Memorial Tower

¹⁹ Inscription on the Liberty Memorial Tower

²⁰ Striking Women

²¹ readers, Guardian, et al. "Women during WW1 - Readers' Stories: 'I Can't Do the Work If the Men Won't Listen to Me'." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 10 Nov. 2014, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/guardianwitness-blog/2014/nov/10/-sp-women-first-world-war-readers-stories-photos-memories.

²² "The Hello Girls' Tells Story about Army's First Women Troops ." *'The Hello Girls' Tells Story about Army's First Women Troops - World War I Centennial*,

telephone switchboard operators, these women connected a total of 26 million calls in World War One²³. They were the first women to be sent by the US Army to war. These women played an enormous role in the running of the war. They were true war heroes.

Before the war, women were looked down upon should they make an atypical decision, but in these times women found it was necessary to think outside of the box; not only was it helping the country in the war effort, it was also helping the women's revolution. Women who were not recruited or working for the Red Cross found alternative routes if they wanted to work for the war. Many women took advantage of a loophole. Noncommissioned officers called "Yeomen" were allowed to work in the war. If women declared themselves as Yeomen, they could work alongside men as drivers, mechanics, radio and telephone operators, translators, and spies²⁴. Once again, though they were working exactly the same job as men, they were paid less than half as much as their coworkers. Other women found a completely different way of being treated as men: they disguised in order to fight as soldiers directly in the war. Some women even made their way to the skies this way as pilots²⁵. The cross-dressing phenomenon has been happening for centuries, and World War One was no exception.

In order to help the war and fight for women's rights, many female workers were willing to risk their lives. One of the most dangerous yet important jobs was munition workers. The United States needed powerful weapons and ammunition in order to fight

www.worldwar1centennial.org/index.php/communicate/press-media/wwi-centennial-news/4391-the-hello-girls-tells-story-about-army-s-first-women-troops.html.

²³ The Hello Girls

²⁴ Inscription on the Liberty Memorial Tower

²⁵ Lindsay, Kate. "The She-Soldiers of World War One." *World War I Centenary*, ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/unconventionalsoldiers/the-she-soldiers-of-world-war-one/.

in the war, and hard working women created these weapons. These women risked their lives, as working with TNT was incredibly hazardous²⁶. There were also poisonous fumes which caused accidents. One example was on the first of July, 1918 which killed 134 people²⁷. After the war, an agreement within the government was made that women would no longer be allowed to work as “munitionettes”²⁸ as they were nicknamed. The jobs would be returned to the men who worked there previously. Though women risked their lives to work hard through long hours and uncomfortable conditions, their time ended as soon as the war did.

Although many women received a new respect in WWI working important jobs where they were needed, many others found that the easiest jobs to come by paid little to no money. Motivation to risk their lives and work with little compensation stemmed from the constant aspiration to equalize men and women in the US.

Women’s Political Movements During WWI

Even before WWI women had been fighting for their rights through rallies, strikes, pageants, demonstrations, parades, street speakings, and protests. One of the largest protests was put on the day before Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration in 1913²⁹. This was key timing because so many people had their eyes open as the government and politics were changing. As well as gaining support from the public, getting President Woodrow Wilson on their side was crucial³⁰. They aspired to get the president on their side in order to convince the government to change critical laws in favor of women. Between

²⁶ A Day In The Life Of A Munitions Worker

²⁷ A Day In The Life Of A Munitions Worker

²⁸ A Day In The Life Of A Munitions Worker

²⁹ Historical Overview of the National Woman's Party

³⁰ Women during WW1 - Readers' Stories

5,000 and 8,000 women marched through the streets of Washington DC on March 4th, 1913³¹, raising awareness and getting the attention they so needed to continue their fight. However, as the war had not yet started and men had not left for war, the attention the protesters recieved was not entirely positive. Most of it was opposition from the government and police. Police and spectators threw objects, grabbed the women, spit on them, shouted horrific insults and curses, and beat them. Many women finished the protests badly injured. Some were arrested and put in prison³². Before the war, it was difficult to gain support. When the US joined the war three years after the protest, a more indulgent, less male-dominated audience existed for the protesters. The war allowed women an opportunity to gain support once several million men had left for war.

A group of educated women from the National Women's Party, established in 1912³³, met with the War Cabinet in 1917 to discuss their demands³⁴. The women's primary issue in these meetings concerned workers rights regarding pay; they wanted equal pay for men and women. In response to the women's demands, a committee in the War Cabinet decided to allow equal pay for equal work³⁵. However, the government's way around truly paying women as much as men was to say that the work outcome of a woman was less than that of a man. In other words, women would not be paid as much because they wouldn't work as efficiently due to "lesser strength and

³¹ Historical Overview of the National Womans Party

³² Historical Overview of the National Womans Party

³³ "Historical Overview of the National Womans Party : Articles and Essays : Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party : Digital Collections : Library of Congress." *The Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/collections/women-of-protest/articles-and-essays/historical-overview-of-the-national-womans-party/.

³⁴ Striking Women

³⁵ Striking Women

special health problems³⁶.” Although women would often deliver work that was done as well or better than her counterpart, she was still paid less based solely on the theory of female weakness. The women who demanded rights did not give up here. As members of the NWP they continued the fight. As long as the war raged on, many women continued to work proper jobs with little fear of male competition and have leverage over business owners while others fought for women’s rights.

As women’s role in the workplace increased during WWI, so did the impact of their involvement in the Suffrage Movement of 1848 to 1920³⁷. Women who marched and protested were in serious danger of getting beaten, injured, arrested, or jailed. The protesters were tried for crimes related to their picketing. However, it was clear that there was nothing illegal about the forms of protest these women were involved in. Freedom of speech and press gave these women a right to protest and speak freely without risk of committing crime³⁸. Because their work was so controversial and upsetting for many people, the law was overlooked, and the women were tried anyway. No matter how much opposition women faced in their fight for equality even during the war, they continued to push.

For the achievement of women's rights and suffrage, suffragettes were willing to risk severe punishment no matter how painful. Conditions in jail were astoundingly hard. Sheets went unwashed and were used by multiple prisoners, the cells were unsanitary as was the entire building, and the food close to inedible. Many of the women being

³⁶ Striking Women

³⁷ Dodson

³⁸ History.com Editors. “Freedom of Speech.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 4 Dec. 2017, www.history.com/topics/united-states-constitution/freedom-of-speech.

jailed were from wealthy or middle class backgrounds, and were completely appalled to see the conditions prisoners were living in. Even these middle or upper class women, who had enough money to be bailed out of prison, stayed in principle to fight for their cause³⁹. However, women were starting to realize that jail was causing them physical harm; so much so that when they were set free, they were at risk of serious injury when they returned to protesting. They were beat and forcefully dragged to police cars and cages. People were concerned that the brute force by police and the weakness of the women from being in jail was enough to kill some of them⁴⁰.

As women's roles were changing throughout WWI, laws needed to follow suit. The suffragettes were determined to reach the minds of male politicians who would decide their voting fate. In order to do this, the suffragettes changed their strategy by using the fragile infrastructure as leverage. The workplace was finally reliant on female workers, so the women used this to their advantage. In the form of "non-violent, 'passive' resistance,"⁴¹ many women stopped doing manual labor in their jobs. Starting in late 1917 and following the lead of British Suffrage Movement leaders Alice Paul and Lucy Burns, American Suffragettes refused to work until they were given their human rights⁴². This was a strong tactic in raising awareness and supporting the movement. Though these new jobs gave women the opportunity to finally do important work, it was

³⁹ "Tactics and Techniques of the National Woman's Party Suffrage Campaign : Articles and Essays : Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party : Digital Collections : Library of Congress." *The Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/collections/women-of-protest/articles-and-essays/tactics-and-techniques-of-the-national-womens-party-suffrage-campaign/.
www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/11/10/night-of-terror-the-suffragists-who-were-beaten-and-tortured-for-seeking-the-vote/.

⁴⁰ "Tactics and Techniques of the National Woman's Party Suffrage Campaign"

⁴¹ "Tactics and Techniques of the National Woman's Party Suffrage Campaign"

⁴² "Tactics and Techniques of the National Woman's Party Suffrage Campaign"

also the first time women across the country had real power over their employers.

Despite how important these jobs were to these women, it was crucial to use them as leverage to gain equal rights. WWI not only provided women with job opportunities, but it gave them the power to use them to their advantage.

Though the movement caused women to risk their lives, in 1917 when many of them were arrested, suffragettes were all the more determined to fight for their equal rights. In Virginia, to protest against their imprisonment and the circumstances in prison, many women went on hunger strike. Initially the response to the hunger strike was force feeding⁴³. Prison workers forced tubes down the women's mouths to keep them from starving to death. When women fought back, there were other forms of force feeding that came about. At the Occoquan Jailhouse in Virginia, one woman struggled enough when a man was attempting to force feed her that instead of getting a tube shoved down her throat, it was shoved up her nose, which caused injury and bleeding⁴⁴. Other women had long lasting injury to their throats and vocal chords. Sometimes in order to get women to eat, the women were isolated and told lies such as they were the only one left still part of the hunger strike⁴⁵.

The women's resilience paid off in late 1917 when Washington D.C's public cried out about the police brutality in the streets. Outside of the prison, members of the public were having their own campaign against inhumane treatment of prisoners. As a result of the public outcry, many women were released in November of 1917⁴⁶. However, even

⁴³ Gibson, Megan. "A Brief History of Women's Protests." *Time*, Time Inc., 12 Aug. 2011, content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2088114_2087975_2087964,00.html.

⁴⁴ "Tactics and Techniques of the National Woman's Party Suffrage Campaign"

⁴⁵ "Tactics and Techniques of the National Woman's Party Suffrage Campaign"

⁴⁶ A Brief History of Women's Protests

after these women were released, other protesters were still imprisoned and force fed for shorter periods of time. By 1920, 168 women had been imprisoned for legal protest⁴⁷. Significantly, though the women endured horrid treatment, they gained attention and support from members of the American public who were witnesses to their cause.

Because women hadn't yet gained the power they were striving for, they needed a strong political figure to speak with them as a member of their fight: President Woodrow Wilson. Suffragettes had been hoping for Wilson's vote of approval since 1912. After years of protest and rallies in attempt of getting his support, Wilson announced his support on January 9th, 1918⁴⁸. In February of 1919, President Woodrow Wilson met the women to join them in support and speak publicly for their cause⁴⁹. In 1920 the 19th amendment which gave women the right to vote was ratified.

Women's Role in Society After WWI

Many women wanted to believe that the war was a massive turning point for women's roles in America and after it was over. In some ways it was, but in others, it wasn't. Though the 19th amendment was ratified on a national level, many individual states took years, even decades, to allow women to vote⁵⁰. Additionally, while steps for women were being taken on the home front during the war, there were still 4.7 million men who had been away at war, completely uninvolved and unaware of changes happening in the US at the time⁵¹. When they returned, many of them were not ready to accept change.

⁴⁷ A Brief History of Women's Protests

⁴⁸ Dodson

⁴⁹ Dodson

⁵⁰ 19th Amendment By State

⁵¹ The U.S. Military and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919

Although women's changing roles in WWI helped spur the Suffrage Movement and gave them the right to vote, the old role of women was more or less reinstated as soon as WWI was over. As Vladimir Lenin once said, "It is necessary sometimes to take one step backward to take two steps forward"⁵². As men returned from war and things went somewhat back to normal, so did women's role in society. Women weren't able to continue to work like they had in WWI, as the previous male employees took back their jobs⁵³. With the return of the men came the return of housework, much lower pay, less job opportunities, and the end of the independence the war provided for women. The empowerment age was over; for now.

Significantly, the way women were dismissed in the recognition for their contributions to the war after it was over is symbolic of how society would continue to treat them for years to come. After the war, male soldiers, doctors, and switchboard operators were immediately recognized as war veterans and were rewarded with bonuses and awards. However, women weren't recognized for their many contributions to the war. Even the "Hello Girls" who worked as direct counterparts with many of these men were not recognized. It was not until 1977 when Jimmy Carter took office that these women were recognized. By then, however, there were only a few survivors left to enjoy the benefits and recognition which Carter provided them with almost 60 years later⁵⁴.

Conclusion

⁵² Lenin, V. I. *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*. China Books & Periodicals, 1976.

⁵³ "Changing Lives: Gender Expectations and Roles during and after World War One." *The British Library*, The British Library, 9 Dec. 2013, www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/changing-lives-gender-expectations.

⁵⁴ Inscription on the Liberty Memorial Tower

After almost 100 years of protest, starting in 1848, much of which occurred during the first World War, women's suffrage was won. The 19th amendment which granted women the right to vote in the United States was ratified on August 26th, 1920⁵⁵. By this time, the war was over and millions of men had returned. Though some men disagreed with women voting, the law was now official and in practice. In that year, on November 2nd, over 8 million women voted for the President of the United States⁵⁶. Once the amendment was added to the constitution, each state ratified the amendment one by one. Thirty-seven states ratified it before the vote of 1920, but the other eleven states (not including Hawaii and Alaska which were not states yet) took longer to ratify the amendment. Mississippi was the last to ratify in 1984⁵⁷. While the national law was ratified largely thanks to the work women did during WWI, it is significant that only a fraction of the country's individual states actually allowed women the right.

It wasn't until the 1960s when the next wave of women's rights movements came. This started with the FDA providing the world's first ever commercially produced birth control pill in May of 1960. Shortly after in 1963, John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act, then in 1964 the Civil Rights Act was signed by Lyndon B. Johnson. In 1966 Betty Friedan founded the NOW, or the National Organization for Women which is still active today⁵⁸. Since then, women have continued to set records and gain rights in the

⁵⁵ "19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Women's Right to Vote (1920)." *Our Documents - 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Women's Right to Vote (1920)*, www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=63.

⁵⁶ History.com Editors. "Women's Suffrage." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 29 Oct. 2009, www.history.com/topics/womens-history/the-fight-for-womens-suffrage.

⁵⁷ "19th Amendment By State." *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, www.nps.gov/subjects/womenshistory/19th-amendment-by-state.htm.

⁵⁸ Women's History Milestones: A Timeline

country. The latest major milestone for women occurred in 2016 when Hillary Clinton became the first woman to ever receive a presidential nomination from a major political party⁵⁹. Though women's roles did not remain changed directly after WWI, the progress made during the war was enough to set the stage for women in the future.

Upon Reflecting on the original question, "To what extent did World War One affect the role and rights of women in the United States from 1919 to 1940?" it is clear that the effect of WWI on women's rights in the US was gradual in these years. During the war the change was radical for women, especially in societal roles. But once the war ended the changes were reversed. Though certain laws were changed, the role of women was not much different until the 1960s. During the war, women's role in society changed drastically. From working government operations to saving human lives, women found a new place during the war. For about forty years after the war, however, many women who weren't further involved in continuing the fight for equality had to endure the same treatment and status as they had before the war. Without the steps made in the war, however, shifts that occurred years later, starting in 1960, may not have been possible. Although with every two steps forward comes one step back, women have continued to push forward throughout the years, one step at a time. Though it took forty years before women made their next monumental step in history, the roles and rights women experienced and gained through WWI were essential in laying the framework for women's rights and roles in the future.

⁵⁹ Women's History Milestones: A Timeline

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