



Yale-New Haven
Teachers Institute®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2002 Volume III: War and Peace in the Twentieth Century

How War Changed the Role of Women in the United States

Curriculum Unit 02.03.09
by Joyce Bryant

Introduction

This unit is designed for seventh and eighth grade reading and history classes. Its focus is on the role of women and their changes during World War I and World War II. Its purpose is to increase students' knowledge and understanding of World War I and II. It will provide an introduction to students who may be interested in a career in the military service and understanding the effects of war.

It can be taught in part or can be ongoing throughout the school year. It will be taught to seventh and eighth grade middle school students. It can also be taught to students on a high school level especially those interested in a career in the military. This unit's focus is on World War I, World War II and the causes and the role changes of women in the United States.

War tears families apart. Factual accounts and information will lead the learner to ask many questions, such as: what causes war and what are some of the dilemmas of war and how does the family solve their problems during war times.

The goals and objectives of this unit are as follows: to use World War I and World War II as a means to teach some history and skills, to improve students' achievement in scientific concepts, reading comprehension, vocabulary and critical thinking skills. Also, I hope that students will grow socially, emotionally and intellectually. My objective is for students to learn their self worth and empowerment to be able to deal with the loss of a brother, friend, or father due to war.

Women In The 1800's

Women were always an integral part of any and are permanent parts of all movements and settlements. In early America, a woman's life tended to center around farm and family. For the most part labor was observed, whereby, men did the outside work such as planting and harvesting the crops while the women worked inside

the house, transforming the raw products into usable commodities. All of a woman's work comes under the general heading of housewife and it varied from region to region. Despite variations, the activities were much the same throughout the different regions. First came supervision of the house. Women swept, scrubbed, polished, made their own brooms, soap and polish. They carried water, made starch, ironed, carried firewood, built fires, and made candles. They sewed and made everything and they were usually in charge of the family bookkeeping. They also worked outside the house.

Women kept their own gardens and every fall canned and preserved vast amounts of homegrown fruits and vegetables. They ran home bakeries and dairies, did the milking, made butter, and kept the hen yard. Women performed usually jobs held by men. They were blacksmiths, silversmiths, and sail makers, tailors, painters, and wheelwrights and shopkeepers of every sort. Many women practiced medicine. They became nurses, unlicensed physicians and midwives. The kind of doctoring they did at home caring for the well being of their families extended outside the home.

Many women worked side by side with their spouses without being given any power or able to share in the political power with men. Most women simply accepted the division of political labor and their role as women, being described as their husbands "better half." Family membership had always been women's most important affiliation. In the past it had been an affiliation women shared with men. The significance of the family as a primary economic unit was maintained throughout the 1800's for the majority of Americans who continued to live on farms. Among the new emerging middle class, however, such was not the case. For the new middle class home and family was seen as separate from the world of work and money. The middle class women continued to perform their traditional work but it was no longer considered real work, because unlike men, they earned no money. Cut off from the money economy, women might labor all day, producing all sorts of goods and service vital to the well being of the family and yet in the eyes of the world they did not work. When World War II broke out and the United States entered things changed for women as they did during World War I.

World War I Experience

During World War I the rapidly expanding war industries dipped heavily into the labor force of women. In 1918 nearly three million new women workers were employed in food, textile and war industries. Many taboos and restrictions thrown up to keep women out of large-scale productions industry were broken down. Women worked as streetcar conductors, radio operators, and in steel mills and logging camps during the war. Women roles began to change rapidly because of the war. Not only did women maintain their households, but also they played the roles of helping to support the war. One of the women's major contributions to the war effort was to take over the running of the farms and grow much needed food. Women worked long hours providing the support that was needed. They learned many new skills and as a result their roles continued to change. During World War I the labor force of women expanded to almost three million. They were employed in food, textile and war industries. About twenty thousand women worked for the military. Women and girls washed the clothing of the officers and soldiers. They sewed and knitted coats, underwear, and socks. This was important because the army did not have resources for new uniforms. The women and girls cooked for the soldiers, nursed the wounded and sick and helped them survive their injuries and their sickness. *Exploring American History* : p. 533.

As men went off to war women took on more responsibilities. Factories that had produced merchandise such as coats, suits, and other garments began to make uniforms for the soldiers. Carmakers made tanks and military trucks. Women took over the production lines in factories. They also replaced men as police officers, mechanics, train conductors and even barbers. It is believed that women became soldiers in the American Armies. They dressed in men's clothing and pretended to be men.

The war tore families apart, forcing women to take on new roles. During the war they needed to replace men who had left for the battlefield. They worked long hours in factories making guns and ammunition, some worked in government jobs as clerks and managers. Women learned many new skills. They were becoming independent without their knowledge or their spouse's knowledge. The wars made many positive and negative changes in all facets of society. For almost three years America tried to remain neutral, but were unable to do so.

World War I began in 1914 and America entered the war in 1917 and that caused a labor shortage among men and women who had to and did take over. First, the government had the task of raising troops and gathering supplies. Then they had to produce the food, uniforms, and weapons to equip the forces and to re-supply the allies in Europe. Next the government had to retool the industry to produce war material and find people to man the machines. Factories that had made coats began to make uniforms. Carmakers made military trucks and tanks. As men left their jobs for the military service, women replaced them. They took over the production lines in factories. Women served in the First World War in a number of ways. The armed forces accepted women into non-combat roles, supporting troops as nurses, cooks and administrative assistants. Organizations, such as YMCA, Red Cross, and the Salvation Army sent women to Europe to help the service men. Professional women such as doctors were few and had a tough time being taken seriously. Doctor Mary Crawford a female physician forged her own pass to service in World War I. Women who served in the military during World War I did not find it easy. All citizens were urged to conserve because so much was needed to support the war effort. These changing roles were all very new to the women.

Women At War With America : pp. 20-21.

America's women were at work everywhere during World War I. They labored on the home front and overseas. They took jobs on the nation's farms in factories, and in shipyards, and served in its military forces. Approximately a million women filled the vacancies left by the men who were now in uniform. Many were young girls who had previously worked in local shops and department stores or who had never worked before. Many were wives who had once worked, but had left their jobs to raise families.

Women on the farms were nicknamed "farmerettes" by the press. In the factories and shipyards, they served mainly as clerks, secretaries, typists, and bookkeepers. World War I also marked an important "first" for American women. For the first time in the nation's history, women were permitted to join the armed forces. Some 13,000, known as "Yeomanettes," enlisted in the navy to do clerical work stateside. Nearly 300 entered the Marine Corps as clerks and won the name "Marinettes." More than 230 women traveled to France as part of the U.S. Army Signal Corps. There, they served as telephone operators for the American Expeditionary force.

World War I : p. 32 and 48.

But they were not the only ones to travel overseas. Some 11,000 women, although not actual members of the armed forces, served abroad as nurses; others became ambulance drivers. Women were also among the 6,000 Red Cross workers who sailed to France.

About 3,500 women served in the cafeterias and recreation facilities that the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) operated in England, France, and Russia. Members of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) also provided service for woman overseas and at home. More than fifty women of the Society of Friends tended wounded soldiers on the western front and helped to feed and clothe civilians who lost their homes in the fighting.

World War I : p. 63-64

Two groups of American women also served on the western front before the United States entered the war. One group was made up of the wives and daughters of American diplomats who were stationed in Europe at the time the fighting erupted in 1914. They tended to the needs of families left homeless by the fighting. The other was a unit of ambulance drivers formed by women living in France.

Like the men the 25,000 American women who served overseas risked death, disease, and injury. An estimated 348 lost their lives. Some were killed in air raids and artillery bombardments. Others died or were left debilitated by the diseases and disorders bred by the filthy and worse-than-primitive conditions along the western front.

The exact number of women who were injured is unknown. There are individual stories, however, that leave no doubt as to the seriousness of some of the injuries. When a hand grenade accidentally exploded near a writer and Red Cross worker they sustained wounds that kept them hospitalized for two years. A women doctor caught in a gas attack suffered burned lungs. A study conducted in the 1920's revealed that, among the women injured in the war, at least 200 were permanently disabled.

A group of women known as the Hello Girls were the telephone switchboard and operators of United States Army Signal Corps and they supported communications among, General Perishing troops and with other allied forces in France. A small group of women, bilingual took on the duty of running the telephone switchboard for the American Expeditionary force coping with operators of the French telephone system, who rarely spoke English. Women actors, singers, musicians, and entertainers traveled to the front line to provide some moments of pleasure to soldiers during their allotted rest periods.

World War II

After World War I some women returned to the place society had destined for them while others refused. They had learned new skills and was prepared to use them. The United States entered the World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and women power again was in demand. Their roles continued to change tremendously. By the spring of 1942 there was a growing manpower shortage in the military. In American Wars prior to World War II, there had been a debate about and opposition to using women in the armed forces. As men went off to battle, women were needed for non-combat jobs such as switchboard operators, telegraphers, mechanics, and drivers. During World War II, more than one hundred thousand women served in the women's Army Corps later became known as the Women's Army Corps. Women also joined the United States Navy. During the fall of 1942, the Women's Auxiliary Air Squadron became known as the Women's Air Force, began training women pilots who flew planes to various military bases in the United States. They tested aircraft and performed other non-combat flight duties. Many women believed that they might never be allowed to serve in the military again if they did not prove to be capable in a chosen role.

Women at War with America : pp.20-21.

During World War II, so many men were sent off to war, and so much new production was needed to support that war effort that there was a gross shortage of manpower to staff factories and manufacturing plants. As a result, propaganda was distributed thorough print, film and radio to encourage women to take over their jobs for the duration of the war. There was a catch. When the war was over, the women were supposed to give the jobs right back but some women resisted because there was a need to continue working.

Rosie the Riveter was the name given to the women depicted on many of the propaganda posters. In the most famous one, she is wearing a red and white bandana to cover her hair, and she has rolled back the sleeve of her blue coverall to expose a flexed bicep. The expression on her face was confident and determined. The caption above her head reads, "We Can Do It!"

Women who had been employed in fields predominated by women-pink collar secretarial positions, domestic jobs and lower paying industrial positions were eager to try their hands at the new opportunities. Soon they were successfully doing things only men had done before. Women became taxi and streetcar drivers, operated heavy construction machinery, worked in lumber and steel mills, unloaded freight, built dirigibles, made munitions and much more. Men's jobs always paid more, and this was women's only chance to step up and earn more. "Do the job he left behind" said a lot. Women could do it as long as men didn't want it or wasn't around to do it.

Before the war, men, who were then considered the breadwinners and heads of' the household, held most of the jobs in the factories. When some sixteen million males enlisted or were drafted into the military, employer's recruited women to fill the roles on the assembly lines of what were referred to, as essential industry opportunities. The field of science, once dominated by males was opened up for women.

Many women began working outside the home for the first time. Media propaganda urged American women to get a job that would help in winning the war. Over six million entered the work force during the war making them one third of the labor force and this number increased as the war escalated. Millions worked six days a week, forty-eight hours a week. Over four hundred thousand women left their domestic jobs and went to work in war industries. Eighteen million women were in the work force during World War II. Women learned the new industries quickly from a marginal to a basic labor supply for munitions making them classified.

Women At War With America: pp.241-243.

One of the women named Rosie the Riveter was strong, serious, and competent. She symbolizes the vital importance of women workers to the defense position. As the supply of experienced male pilots began to dwindle, Nancy Love a woman pilot proposed the recruitment of the most qualified women pilots in the nation to assist the air transport command as civilian's employees. Love's proposal was adopted in the summer of 1942 and 25 female pilots were recruited to become members of the WAAF's, with Nancy Love as commander. Each of the women had more than 1,000 hours of flying time and they quickly proved capable of the kind of duties for which they had been envisioned. Originally assigned to fly single-engine airplanes, the women demonstrated that they could handle fast pursuit ships as well as the four engine bombers on the transcontinental ferry flights. Eventually as many as 303 women pilots were on duty with the Ferrying Division, but the numbers dropped to an average of 140.

Women At War With America: pp. 73-79.

While Nancy Love's pilots were highly experienced women, Jackie Cochran had another idea in mine. Jackie used her influence with Eleanor Roosevelt to convince the War Department to create the Women's Flying

Training Department, a program to train young women as pilots with her as director of the program. Consequently, the military found itself with two programs using female pilots, one a valuable asset that took advantage of the skills of experienced women who could make a significant contribution from the outset and the other a politically motivated program requiring extensive training. General Arnold called a meeting of officials from ATC and Cochran and told them there was not room for two programs; they would have to get together. Cochran's political connections held sway, and her plan was adopted. Cochran also used her political influence to gain control of the program. In August 1943 the programs were merged to become the Women Air force Service Pilots, with Cochran as Director, of women pilots.

Women could relieve male pilots for combat duty in 1942-43, when the war was still going against the Allies and the War Department believe there would be heavy casualties among the male pilots who went to war. As many of the women trainers demonstrated superior abilities, General Arnold directed that training in heavier and more difficult airplanes could be initiated to the maximum extent possible. In 1942 General Arnold wrote that the Air force's objective was to replace as many male pilots in non-combat flying duty as was feasible. Cochran's training programming did not lack applicants. Advertisements over-glamorized the program, leading to a flood of applicants of more than 25,000 women applied for training. Only 1830 were admitted of which 1,074 completed the training and were assigned to operational duty. The training program began initially at Hughes Airport in Houston, Texas, but moved to Sweetwater, Texas due to lack of facilities. In the first months of the program, when training standards were relaxed, the washout rate among women was 26% but increased to 47% in 1944, when the lessened needed for pilots allowed more stringent requirements. Still the comparison to men was favorable as the washout rate for men went from less than 25% to more than 55% over the same period.

Women At War With America: p. 242.

The glamorization, of the WASPS was to a large extent responsible for their ultimate demise. The women were in civilian status and were thus denied the military benefits of the male pilots who had accepted commissions as service pilots. A bill was submitted in Congress in 1943 to militarize the WASP. Cochran and General Arnold proposed the creation of a separate organization of female pilots headed by a woman with the rank of colonel, but the War Department opposed such a move. The USAAF felt that the women should be commissioned with the Air WAC's who were already members of the military, many of whom were serving overseas in combat theaters. While Congress was still considering the bill, the Civil Aeronautics Agency's War Training Service program came to an end in January, 1944 while college training programs and civilian-contract flying schools were scheduled to close, thus freeing large numbers of previously draft-exempt male flight instructors for military duty.

World War II: pp. 27-30, 144 and 180.

The grounding of so many well-qualified male pilots and their possible assignment to ground combat duties led to a feeling of indignation against the women pilots who were seeking military status. Simultaneously as the war began to turn in the allies favor, large numbers of returning combat pilots were available for ferrying, training, and other duties then filled by WASP pilots. In June, 1944 a Congressional Committee On Civil Service matters reported that the WASP program was unnecessary and unjustifiably expensive. The committee recommended that the recruitment and training of inexperienced women pilots be halted. The final, class of female pilots was allowed to graduate from Sweetwater on December 20, 1944, but with their graduation the entire program was halted.

In addition to their role with the flying division, women were also used in Training Command and the domestic

numbered Air Forces. In the summer of 1943 some women were assigned to target-towing duty training antiaircraft gunners. The women were judged better in the mission than returning combat pilots. In the Troop Carrier Command some women 'were assigned to fly tractors for glider practice. This was one area in which women proved in-equal to the task due to the physical strength required to fly the Lockheed C-60's that were serving as tractors. Some women were trained as instructors while they were not assigned to basic-flight instruction and they served quite well, in the instrument phase of training. In, the inaction of the program. WASP pilots had suffered 37 deaths while seven women received major injuries and 29 other minor injuries while on the job.

While the WASPS were in civilian status, large numbers of women served with the United States Army Air Forces in World War II with full military status. The one group of women who shared the same dangers as did male air crew members were the female flight nurses who flew with troop carrier squadrons in all of the combat theaters. By 1944, more than 6,500 nurses were on duty with the USAAF, of which 500 were in Louisville, Kentucky for an extremely strenuous eight-week course. During the course the women learned how to load and un-load patients onto a transport as well as military training including survival skills, the use of parachutes, and simulated combat since the women would be required to fly into combat areas.

Upon completion of their training, the women were assigned to air evacuation units overseas, where they flew as crew members aboard troop carrier C-47s operating into airfields on battlefields and everywhere from New Guinea to Sicily, and later on the European continent. The use of flight nurses exposed women to combat dangers that had probably never had experienced women as a group. Their skill and diligence saved the lives of hundreds of wounded soldier's who would have died on the battlefield in previous wars.

During World War II there were many hardships throughout the countries. The tolls of the war were hitting hard and many more soldiers were needed in battle. As the men went off to fight in the war, problems arose due to lack of people in the work force at home. Times were very hard and money was tight. The women were not able to perform the typical household duties, there was to much outside the home to do in order to survive.

The factory jobs held very little pay. The factories ranged from all sorts of parts for war vehicles and weapons, to radio parts and candles for light. Even things as simple as candles were of dire importance during these trying times.

The women work very long hours but were proud to be able to help out with the war in as many ways as possible. This was an opportunity for women to grow and learn the job skills that they were never allowed to do. The war created employment for women liberating them, while changing their traditional roles.

Problems surface with the introduction of women workers, who's growing influence threatened the men workers still in the United States. They responded with harassment and discrimination, which remained a problem even after the war was over. Even though women outnumbered the men in the labor force three to one they still had problems with the new idea of women as wage laborers. The war had allowed women to get "out of hand" or "out of the house". The liberated woman might be undermining the traditional marriage and family life. Some women started working as young as fourteen or fifteen but were pleased with the new opportunities to use their hands and skills. Rosie the Riveter was the poster of encouragement for women to join the workforce during the women's industry movement. The poster showed women's hidden strengths, promoting power and pride.

Women at War With America : p. 108.

The women that volunteered in factory jobs worked in welding, machining, building aircraft's, repairing tank's, and armament factories, jobs once held by men who were called away to fight in the war. Over six million women took over in these fields for the men. In 1944, the average woman's salary was \$31.21 a week for her labors, even though the men that still remained made \$54.65 a week. The women wore overalls, uniforms, slacks, and bandanas or snoods to cover their hair. These clothes were considered very unfeminine, but the women got used to them and continued to wear them in public.

Women at War With America : p.247.

The greatest effect war has on the people involved is change. In wartime, change occurs, not only in global or national collective consciousness but, in many of the individuals involved. World War II brought about many different thoughts and ideas within the United States. Not everyone who participated in the war stood on the front line with the risk of being shot, but nonetheless, they were all willing to take their own risks to support each other in battle.

One of the most incredible changes within the United States that occurred during wartime was change in identity. World War II enabled people to learn about each other and themselves. People of different cultures, backgrounds, ages, and especially genders, who experienced massive changes in their lives; changes that would continue in their hearts long after the end of the war. This was the birth of many new identities that America had not yet seen.

War, for many women, was about gaining strength and mobility. As more and more men left to fight in battle, women started taking over traditionally male responsibilities. As far back as history can tell, women have been limited in mobility and set in particular spaces by society, but war changed all the rules. War very much became a doorway through which women ventured out of the home where they had been confined. During World War II, women in high numbers were asked to work outside as well as inside of the home. For many women, World War II became a symbol of freedom. It was a time where women were no longer forced into the roles society had created for them.

Women were quoted to have better motor skills than men, which was said to be from the common practice of needle work so they were useful with wire fuses on bombs and to fill metal casings with gunpowder. Many accidents came out of the factories. Over 210,000 women were permanently disabled and at least 37,000 lost their lives.

The women factory workers fought their own battles during the war. They struggled with new horizons, social discrimination, gender harassment, and physical pain from long hours and poor working conditions. The women were very important during the war in keeping the home countries in line and allowing the men to leave by taking over their jobs. The cord was cut after WWII for many women, they obtained many new skills and they were born into a new world. Even though many women went back to being homemakers after the war was over, times would never be the same again.

Initially, doubts and hesitations arose about whether or not women could work within a combat situation. It was during the battles of World War II that women faced the greatest challenge of trying to gain recognition and serve their country in more ways than they had in previous years. Little did they know, their efforts would prove to be victorious, and they would leave an everlasting mark on American society. Women had demonstrated amazing work and courage during World War I and World War II.

After the two wars women became free to create their own lives and senses of self. With this increase in

freedom also came an increase in equality. World War II gave women the chance to prove they are just as capable as men. As World War II continued, greater numbers of women began to take control. For the first time, women in the United States were learning to work as factory workers, nurses, and journalists. Many women even joined the army through an organization called the Women's Army Corps. World War II also brought about an increase in women as subjects of propaganda. Women worked as drivers, farmers, mail delivery personnel, garbage collectors, builders, and mechanics.

Life for women was changing. Women had their own money and could do with it what they pleased. They became more independent. "War taught them how to stand on their own two feet. Though relatively short-lived, World War II provided a way for women to do what they wanted. Far fewer obstacles stood in the way of women proving that they were extremely capable. Women are capable of everything its too bad it took a war to make everyone see it.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>