

HOW WWI CHANGED AMERICA:

Women in World War I

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT:

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

In the early part of the 20th century, you were starting to see changes in women's roles. In wage earning, women are bringing in their own paychecks. You see more and more women being interested in the right to vote. What happens during World War I is that rate of change gets accelerated.

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

The first role that women had were as patriotic mothers, sweethearts, sisters. They were both the reason that men were fighting to protect the home front, and they were also important in terms of encouraging men to go.

But then it was important also to have women's labor. There were already eight million women in the workforce, but another million would enter as a result of the war and they would perform roles that they hadn't performed before.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

Rosie the Riveter had her mother, and her mother worked in the plants in World War I, and we've totally forgotten about that. You see the munition factory working. You also see women coming up North to work in the meat packing plants in Chicago for example. That was really changing where women found the workplace.

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

We had women who came in as civilian contractors and they came in as clerical workers, typists, translators.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

There was a group of women who worked in the Signal Corps and they worked as telephone operators.

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

They were not just trained in being a telephone operator but they had to be fluent in French. They had a skill set that the military needed.

The other really essential role that women played was unpaid labor and this was the idea that they would volunteer their time and their efforts to a whole host of services that the country needed.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

You see women helping with the Red Cross rolling bandages. You see women in their kitchens abiding by a kitchen pledge saying that they're gonna cut back on meat 'cause the meat was supposed to go to our soldiers and to our allies.

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

The women would not just participate in these activities but they would organize the women in their communities to play an active role.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

Also, thousands of women went overseas in World War I from the United States. The first round were volunteers. You see women health workers who are volunteering, primarily with the Red Cross. Women volunteered to help drive ambulances and work in Motor Corps.

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Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

A big place that women contributed, in terms of the military effort, was through nursing. This was the moment when nursing was becoming a profession and so here you had highly skilled nurses who were coming into the military and it really elevates the profession as a whole and it also demonstrates to American society that women are trained professionals. Women gained a lot of respect and admiration from American society for serving this important role.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

Women who worked overseas as nurses or as volunteers were mostly affluent women or upper-middle class women who were able to be supported by their families.

Jeffrey T. Sammons, Ph.D.:

...Virtually no opportunities for black women overseas. They were not allowed to be nurses, telephone operators. No ambulance drivers. There were a limited number of YMCA workers and these were the women who read to the men, who served them in the hospitality facilities. They were a very welcome sight for men who had not seen, ya know, an African-American woman for months.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

Women have always helped at times of war. But this is the first time that they are formal members of the armed services and this is an important step forward. They are working in the Navy as Yeoman (F), meaning Yeoman Female, but they changed that to Yeomanette and they were proud to serve in the Navy. They didn't serve on board ships, they served at home. They took positions that freed a man to go and serve.

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

One of the things that becomes common, for example, is seeing women in uniform. You're seeing women wearing sashes or badges that identify them as people in authority. Women that are not just participating, but women who are leading.

When you have this total picture of women being so, so important to the war effort it changed the expectations about what women could do and it changed a lot of women's expectations of what their lives might be subsequently.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

Women come home from the war, they find that their life has changed. Before, women were tied more tightly to the household. After the war, those ties that bind had been loosened.

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

And of course the biggest transformation is the 19th Amendment. The idea that there finally is a federal amendment in 1920 that grants all women the right to vote. This was a recognition that women were going to play an important public role moving forward. It wasn't going to just be a temporary war time blip that women would, in fact, be a voice in public affairs and the direction of the country from this point moving forward.

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Music

"SO MANY FEELS"
WRITTEN BY L. RICHARDSON, R. MACKLIN, T. FORD, & C.G. COCOZZA
COURTESY OF EXTREME MUSIC

"START A WAR"
WRITTEN BY D. GAUTREAU, K. SUTTON, & P. KNIGHT
COURTESY OF EXTREME MUSIC