**Where Women Worked During World War I**

**By Tae H. Kim**

Before the World War I, women typically played the role of the homemaker. Women were judged by their beauty rather than by their ability. Their position and status were directed towards maintaining the annual duties of the family and children. These duties consisted of cleaning and caring for the house, caring for the young, cooking for the family, maintaining a yard, and sewing clothing for all. Women had worked in textile industries and other industries as far back as 1880, but had been kept out of heavy industries and other positions involving any real responsibility. Just before the war, women began to break away from the traditional roles they had played.

As men left their jobs to serve their country in war overseas, women replaced their jobs. Women filled many jobs that were brought into existence by wartime needs. As a result, the number of women employed greatly increased in many industries. In the U.S. there were, before the war, over eight million women in paid occupations. After the war began, not only did their numbers increase in common lines of work, but as one newspaper stated, “There has been a sudden influx of women into such unusual occupations as bank clerks, ticket sellers, elevator operator, chauffeur, street car conductor, railroad trackwalker, section hand, locomotive wiper and oiler, locomotive dispatcher, block operator, draw bridge attendant, and employment in machine shops, steel mills, powder and ammunition factories, airplane works, boot blacking and farming.” Many of these women were married, and some were mothers whose husbands or older sons had gone to front. Women were also seen as vital resources for wartime aids and various wartime slogans such as “You should aid nation in the war” and “Everyone has to be a helper” emphasized patriotism and created the environment for women’s active involvement in many industries. By looking through various newspapers including the Seattle Post-Intelligencer and the Seattle Times, dated from 1917 to 1918 as my main primary sources for the research, I began to understand the role that women played during World War I.

**A. General feminine jobs** *(Lola & Jacari)*

Even though many women were in high demand for industries where previously men were dominant, long-established feminine jobs were still common during the war. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer and Seattle Times had a full listing of open positions for general housework and other general domestic jobs. The war actually created more domestic jobs because many women who worked in factories and outside their homes were not able to care well enough for their children. Help wanted ads and situation wanted ads looking for general housework were very easy to find in newspaper “help wanted” sections. Ads such as: “Widow: 40; very good appearance, whose only support has gone to war would like some light work to help out” and “Wanted – Reliable neat school girl to assist general housework. Nice home” were evidence for the fact that there were many women, regardless of age and status, who were willing to work, either to help the nation to win the war or to sustain the life of their family in absence of their husband and father.

**B. Increase in war emergency jobs** *(Lola & Jacari)*

As more and more men were drafted and had to leave their jobs, the U.S. government and various industries were seriously looking for female workers who could replace their men’s jobs. Especially during 1917 and 1918, there were a vast number of demands for female stenographers, telegraphers, and phone operators. The Women’s Defense League was also placing a lot of effort to fill the gap. Potential telegraphers had to learn the code through memorization or by familiarizing themselves to carry out their work efficiently. One newspaper wrote, “Women are more apt than men in this line of work.” The various railroad companies of the country employed hundreds of capable women operators, because they were known to be not only skillful, but also dependable. In many newspapers, ads looking for stenographers and other clerical works were increasing over time. In “situation wanted” sections of the newspapers, two thirds of the total ads were looking for female stenographers, an example being, “Thoroughly competent bookkeeper, cashier, and stenographer, six years with last firm in charge of books and collections, desire position of responsibility.” Evident in this ad, women were willing to take more responsible jobs and were becoming not just a substitute labor force, but skillful workers. The government was also in need of thousands of wartime positions open to women to work as government clerks, stenographers, and telegraphers.

**C. Red Cross, Patriotic League, and YWCA** *(Anna & Sara)*

Organizations such as the Red Cross, Patriotic League, and YWCA also made efforts in supporting wartime hardships that the nation might face. The Red Cross organized non-professional women to aid in relief work. To help the war effort, many women joined the Red Cross as nurses. While they were in the Red Cross, they rolled bandages, knitted socks, and worked in military hospitals. Most of the women were wives and mothers of soldiers of all classes. The Red Cross war council also created a women’s bureau, which appointed a national advisory committee of women that made an effort to recruit every available woman in the campaign to make adequate funds and supplies. Women in the Red Cross were also helpful in recruiting men who had not joined the war. One method was by showing a man in civilian clothes with white feathers as a mark of cowardice. Another method was by making women speak at public meetings, encouraging others to have nothing to do with men who had not joined the war. Women also went overseas as members of the Voluntary Aid Detachment of the Red Cross. Volunteering brought them out of the house and into the public. Women had no trouble filling the gaps left by men who went to war. The Red Cross continued to encourage many women to join the Red Cross by saying “It’s the patriotic duty of every man, woman, and child to join the Red Cross. Why wait to be asked? Be a volunteer.”

The Patriotic League also organized girls for wartime activities. A branch of the Patriotic League, the National Organization for Girls, was active in social service work and war services. It was organized in Seattle in 1918 to organize the city’s patriotic girls for real war activities. An editorial piece in the Seattle Argus newspaper covered the story of young girls who had donated bed shirts to the Red Cross with the money that they had made at work. One article pointed out that, “Hundreds – Probably thousands are doing their utmost to help win the war. They are the private soldiers.” Girls and women were soldiers armed with patriotism and hard work.

The Young Women Christian Association’s northwestern field committee was also concerned with the needs of the war. The committee occasionally discussed the great increase in the duties of employment agencies of the YWCA because of the war. In those discussions they came to the conclusion that training girls to take the place of the men was necessary. One newspaper wrote, “The necessity of training girls to take the place of men, and also work in connection with the hostess houses at Camp Lewis, Vancouver barracks and Bremerton, has made as many demands upon the Northwest.” Further advancement in the development of women’s work was strengthened by the withdrawal of millions of men from the American industry.

**D. Non-traditional jobs** *(Maisa & LaTonya)*

Before the wartime, it was unusual in this country for women to enroll in higher courses of mathematics because the women’s role wasn’t to work in male dominated industries. Therefore, getting higher education and obtaining specific skills wasn’t a common road that most women followed. During World War I, however, women worked in virtually every field of industry. Newspapers started to cover more women’s work related articles, help ads, and spoke out about women’s great successes in education, sports, and various other areas in society. There was the example of an Argentinean woman who had become a civil engineer, and was praised in U.S. newspapers, showing the development of women’s statuses visible through the period of war. Women were replacing men’s job such as railroad workers, auto drivers, and other machine operators. One newspaper noted that 4,000 women were working for the Pennsylvania Railroad. “In five months, the number increased from 1,494 to 3,700.” One newspaper I read had several articles about women railroad workers’ accounts. Some of them discussed the need for women workers on the railroads, whereas some of the articles were talking about the disagreement between employers and women employees due to the unequal pay and poor working conditions, even though they performed the same type of jobs that men had done before they went to the war. Women were, “wielding picks and shovels on the American Railroad because of shortage of men for work.” Some women track workers also maintained the roadbed of the Pennsylvania Railroad between New York and Pittsburgh. The President of the company, “…testified before the Interstate Commerce Commission, gave this example of the difficulties the railroads faced in holding their men (due to the draft).” Women also held many jobs besides working in factories that were traditional men’s’ work. They assumed positions of doctors, lawyers, bankers, and civil servants. Harvesting grain, running businesses, and driving trucks were all common jobs for women to take. Because of the war demands, the role of women changed and they had new attitudes.

**E. The Women’s Land Army** *(Maisa & LaTonya)*

With so many men away fighting, someone had to bring in the harvests and keep the farms going. The government decided that more women would have to become more involved in producing food and goods to support their war effort. The Women's Land Army played a crucial role in doing this when the men who would normally work on the farms never returned or returned disabled from the war. One of the comments made by women in the WLA was that, “Their feet were never dry even in dry weather - simply because they had to work early in the morning and the dew on the grass would enter the boots through the lace holes.”

**Working Conditions of Female Workers** *(C.J. & Sam)*

By the late 1918, so many men went to war that women had to take over their jobs. Labor unions fought hard against hiring women in factories. Women were paid half the wages of men and worked in conditions that were sometimes dangerous and unhealthy. In munitions plants, acid fumes from high explosives damaged workers’ lungs. In addition, it also turned their skin bright yellow. Thousands of women worked long hours filling shells with explosives. Accidental explosions were always a risk. Little effort was made to ease the change from working in the home to the work place. Few employers provided childcare for working mothers or even set aside toilets for female workers. Female workers were also less unionized than male workers, “This was because they tended to do part-time work and to work in smaller firms, which tended to be less unionized.” Also, existing unions were often hostile to female workers.

Feminist pressure on established unions and the formation of separate women's unions threatened to weaken men-only unions. Still, women’s unions began to grow, “The National Women’s Trade Union League representing 150,000 organized working women have met together for counsel and for action.” However, the war did not raise women's wages. Employers got around wartime equal pay policies by employing several women to replace one man, or by dividing skilled tasks into several less skilled stages.

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