

Breaking the Spheres: The Effect of World War I on Traditional Gender Roles

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Abstract

World War I was the first occasion where the most powerful countries of the world turned against each other, leaving 20 million people dead. Millions of men were drafted into their countries' armies and eventually sent to fight and kill all around the world. Stuck at home with empty positions left by men, millions of women began filling in those jobs, aiding the cause of war in any way that they could. That said, their roles drastically changed over the four years of the war, paving the path for changes that would slowly emerge following the end of the war. Men's gender roles were reinforced during the war, as they fought vigorously and continued where they had left off before they were drafted. Women, however, temporarily fulfilled men's vacant jobs only to return to their domestic work. Nevertheless, the end of the war was the beginning of landmark social changes that slowly opened the gates for women to become full participants in society.

Keywords: World War I, Women's Roles, Traditional Gender Roles, Women's Rights

1. Introduction

After the two Balkan Wars, Serbians looked toward "liberating" the South Slavs of Austria-Hungary, which they believed would be accomplished by the death of Franz Ferdinand, the Austrian Archduke (Royde-Smith and Showalter, 2021). The Archduke's assassination was plotted after learning about his visit to Bosnia. On that fateful June day, at 11:15 AM, in Sarajevo, Bosnia, Franz Ferdinand, and his wife, Sophie, were shot dead by Gavrilo Princip, a member of Young Bosnia, a movement promoting Yugoslavist aims of pan-South Slav unification of territories into Yugoslavia (Banac, 1988; Barkan et al., 2004), as well as Serbian nationalist aims of pan-Serb

unification into Serbia. Ferdinand's assassination led to a chain of events that would spark Austria-Hungary to declare war on Serbia, igniting one of the world's most horrific and bloodiest wars (History.com Editors, 2009). The world's greatest powers turned their industrial weapons and soldiers on each other for the first time in history, resulting in four years of blood, sweat, and tears. The Allied Powers, consisting of the British Empire, France, the Russian Empire, the United States, and many more countries, lined up against Austria-Hungary, Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and all parts of the Central powers, and fought to prevail democracy and peace throughout the world (History.com Editors, 2009).

Before the war, "[w]omen were considered

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nurturers and supporters, objectified as something to be protected and as prizes to be won by the brave” (Showalter, 2002). Occupying the private and domestic spheres, women served as mothers, wives, and daughters who tended to housework and childbirth. Middle- and upper-class women enjoyed more flexibility in their daily schedules, and some single women were allowed to work “outside the home to supplement family income” under very few exceptions. Women were actively discouraged from venturing outside “their spheres,” as some aspired to be entrepreneurs or politicians (Showalter, 2002). Even if they crossed into the male-dominated public, political, or economic spheres, they did so “without absolute security.” Women earned considerably less in the workplace than men, even when working on similar jobs. The societal boundaries between men and women’s work barred women from engaging in any skilled trade that required apprenticeship or lengthy training. Even as teachers, women were blocked from teaching at many universities because of their gender (Braybon, 1998). Society told women that male-dependency was necessary to succeed and survive. In Russia’s strongly patriarchal society, women were under the control of their husbands or fathers, and suffered abuse and domestic violence, both of which were common and acceptable (Braybon, 1998). In many countries, society restricted women from aspiring to achieve high roles that require education (or training of some sort) and instead placed them at home as loyal companions and child-bearers, not breadwinners (Boehnke, & Gay, 2020).

Men, the established breadwinners of the family, occupied the public, political, and economic spheres before the war. Many of the “masculine duties included that of provider, and protector, both for their families and their nations” (Showalter, 2002). They exercised authority over family members under their protection. In rural areas, men dominated the workforce in farms and factories. Many men were dragged into the war myth, and for boys, war was a rite of passage to manhood. Requiring virtues of courage, decisiveness, and vigor, men had to maintain these war-like qualities to avoid slipping back into a “boyish condition.” Thus, war was a rite of passage to manhood and a guarantor of that

passage (Showalter, 2002). One soldier wrote in a letter, “The story-books were coming true, and by an extraordinary piece of luck, I was privileged to be a participator” (Wiesner-Hanks et al., 2014).

The war forced both men and women to take on roles that they had never dealt with before, and abruptly altered the lives of millions. During World War I, women challenged gender stereotypes by entering traditional spheres designated for men, while men reinforced their manhood through war. Although after the war, these gender roles shifted back as women were forced out of their newly gained jobs, their social attitudes drastically changed forever. While the gender role shift due to the change of the social and international relationship occurred during World War I, it has been difficult for the author to compare gender roles pre-, during, and post-World War I. This study, therefore, investigated the reinforcement of traditional gender roles during World War I, and how they shifted during the post-war period.

2. Gender Role Movement during the War

World War I provided women with new opportunities as they took on jobs that were previously dominated by men. With so many men drafted, there was a phenomenal rise in demand for women to fill the now-vacant white-collar jobs (Anderson et al., 2000). Driven by patriotism and money, often double of what they previously earned, many rushed to work in factories, supporting their troops globally. In munition factories, for example, thousands of women worked tirelessly, making shells, explosives, aircrafts, and other war supplies. In other countries, such as France, women found different ways to contribute toward the war effort, such as constructing wooden huts. With so many women rushing to get jobs, by 1917, countries like Russia saw an industrial workforce in which nearly half were women. Other countries and their industries also witnessed rising numbers of women’s participation (Braybon, 1998). Within a few years, it was now common to see women road sweepers, lamplighters, delivery van drivers, or shop assistants, something that would have been thought of as absurd a few years ago. Along with an initial lack of white-collar

workers, the war also created a demand for educated women who took on jobs in banks, the government, and public services.

Apart from factories and labor, women began participating near the frontline as medical specialists, tending to the wounded. Some women, like Marie Curie, drove ambulances, while others, like Elise Inglis, organized hospitals. As shown in Figure 1, women were convinced to join the Red Cross, an organization that gave medical services to armies and brought relief to many civilians across Europe. In the US, the Army and Navy enlisted over 20,000 nurses, all of whom were women, to serve close to home and overseas (Women During World War I, 2019). However, even nursing was arduous and dangerous for women who served near the front lines, close to the bloodshed of the battlefield. Women also enlisted in these wartime organizations in great numbers to aid the war effort as they felt a deep sense of obligation. In some cases, women were able to participate in active services, fighting, and aiding soldiers. Most notably, in Russia, privileged women organized combat battalions after the February Revolution of 1917. As shown in Figure 2, women were even given distinctions and decorations, and were instructed to inspire new recruits. This war would also be the first time that women, who were not nurses, were allowed to enlist in the US Armed Forces. By the end of the war, the US accepted 13,000 women into active duty in the Navy and Marines, while accepting a smaller number into the Coast Guard. Moreover, some women risked their lives to act as spies; an example is Marthe Ricard, who the French Secret Service enlisted and eventually awarded the Legion of Honor. Other women risked their lives to help military communication, such as the Hello Girls and telephone operators stationed inside the trenches in countries such as France (Taylor, 2014).

The focus on turning boys into men through war upheld the traditional societal standards for men. Many young men and boys, lured by the war myth, were encouraged by posters expressing that their country needed them to risk their life for the world, honor of the regiment, and the safety of their fellow comrades. Men were expected to uphold their virtues of courage and bravery in combat. In those grueling

years, men suffered immense trauma and pain, and were constantly exposed to death, bullets, and explosions at every moment (Wiesner-Hanks et al., 2014). However, even war seemed to be too strong of a burden for men. Many men fell into a trance-like state, and were traumatized by the experiences of the war. Rather than the strong, immovable forces men were expected to be, thousands returned from the war as the “living dead” (Meyer, 2007).



Figure 1. WWI Women Marines. Photograph. WWI: Thirty Thousand Women Were There. <http://userpages.aug.com/captbarb/femvets4.html>.



Figure 2. Library of Congress. Young Russian women, having won distinction at the front with decorations, are part of the staff of instructors to inspire new recruits. February 1918. Photograph. The Atlantic. April 27, 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2014/04/world-war-i-in-photos-global-conflict/507335/#img25>.

3. Gender Role Movement after the War

The world witnessed a shift in gender roles after World War I. While most men left their careers for the military, women were left to return to their previous jobs and manage their homes. Such changes led to sustainability and improved cultural performance, specifically in terms of how women performed their duties. During this period, several societal changes affected the status quo by shifting the performance of women’s roles in society. This section reflects on these changes in gender roles after

World War I.

The US experienced several gender role changes after World War I. First, women were allowed to join the military and assist the wounded soldiers (Irwin, 2016). For instance, most of them became nurses, implementing specific programs to help injured men undergo medical procedures, which caused a shift in the cultural phenomenon where women were expected to perform domestic functions. Entry into service of the country instituted better services and revolutionized the significance of women in the contemporary world (Lopez, 2016). These changes were the beginnings of professionalism and a shift in the working methods of women in the country. It facilitated changes that revolutionized ineffective cultural supremacy, which had previously demoralized women due to male dominance (Grant, 2014). After the war, the changes enabled improvements that later developed and enhanced sustainability to advance human rights.

Women were allowed to vote by the Constitution. These efforts were initiated by pioneers such as Margret Mead, who stood firm to organize and fight for women's rights. During this period, the constitution underwent changes that allowed women to have democratic rights and votes (Scott, 2018). These new rights were a developmental milestone because women were considered domestic workers for many years and were denied constitutional practice and democratic rights. Therefore, the changes improved sustainability in the country and recognized women as having contributions to the US national leadership that were significant enough for them to represent their issues.

Professionalism equalized performance in the country. It influenced the displacement where women were involved in economic revolutions due to the improvement of the working culture in the country (Johnson, 2018). Women resumed office functions to ensure that the government ran effectively to enhance development. Before the war, society recognized women as a minority (Belarmino and Roberts, 2019). They were considered unable to contribute to the economy because of the cultural context of the country. In addition, the country saw new revolutions due to the feminist movement that enabled effective government policies, including those for women in

the corporate industry. Therefore, the changes in gender roles facilitated changes in the economy, and women acted as the frontiers of building the economy.

In addition, women experienced dramatic changes in their dressing styles. Modernity began entering the fashion industry, and most women began wearing short clothes and shaping their hair using various techniques (Wingate, 2017). Changes in the fashion industry made women undertake roles in the clothing industry to make clothes for men in the military and sell them in the market. Such subsequent changes have transformed, enhanced growth, and helped women become pioneers in the fashion industry.

In summary, women's roles changed after the war as men entered military service for the country. Most women assumed the roles of men by participating in elections, nursing the injured soldiers, entering offices, and improving the fashion industry. Such changes facilitated cultural shifts and changes, and have improved the social and economic spheres. The onset of modernity has shaped the foundation and future of the American economy, including women in the labor industry.

4. Conclusion

Women experienced dramatic changes in their daily lives during the war, especially when the society expected men to reinforce their traditional roles and virtues. Although, eventually, women had to return to their original professions, they gained suffrage and social freedom in the process. Today's society continues to challenge gender roles in all aspects of life; even the definition of gender has changed. However, discrimination still exists, as certain opportunities are still presented only to certain genders. This indicates that progress is not linear, as society continues to experience constant improvements and setbacks in social change for many different groups.

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