Working Women:

The Triumph of Women in the Workforce and the Tragedy of Dismissal

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Even though it is misguiding to state that women were entirely superannuated in America’s workforce before the Great Depression, their duties were, however, not considered significant. Women, from the end of the Great Depression through World War II, experienced triumphant times as they were finally embraced as critical to the workforce. Unfortunately, upon the return of soldiers returning from battle, women became once again repelled back to their original state of assumed incapability. With many women against this concept, fighting for their rights gave women the momentum that still propels their actions today.

**Women in the Great Depression (1929-1939):**

In the early 1930s, women found innovative ways of “secretly” finding jobs. Women had to be creative because society and the government generally undervalued women in the workforce, even though they did hold some jobs. “Womanly jobs” typically consisted of secretary jobs and clerical work, which were commonly deemed “light”. Women's primary roles were still taking care of the home and children. The leader of the League of Women Voters said, “We of the League are very much for the rights of women, but...we are not feminists primarily; we are citizens” (Banner 171). Women felt awkward in public situations, and some felt they were in the wrong for standing up for what they believed was fair. From a governmental standpoint, it appeared women did very little although their housework duties were essential. Production factory jobs were reserved for men. If a female were to work outside of the home, only limited jobs were available. Also, many of the female-friendly workplaces had extremely low pay and not many benefits.

Various social groups wondered why it was taking women so long to celebrate their “firsts”. Although it was definitely exhilarating for a female to celebrate her first time being allowed to vote, or some similar accomplishment, they were happening much later than men’s. Men had many more privileges in various circumstances, and women were still struggling to achieve the basics. In the *Sentiments of An American Woman* in Philadelphia, it is stated that, “...if the weakness of our Constitutions, if opinion and manners did not forbid us to march to glory by the same paths as the Men, we should at least equal, and sometimes surpass them in our love for the public good” (Evans 3). An “ideological apparatus” is established. The public holds a standard that it expects all women to meet. Some things that women are “required” to do are acting proper in public, providing dinner and a clean home for their family, and not interfering with her husband’s work. It is the husband’s responsibility, and only his, to provide money for the family.

**Propaganda for Women Entering the War**:

In 1941, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States of America was brought into World War II with the Allied Powers. The transition of men entering the war opened opportunities for women, but it wasn’t that way at first. The process of sending men off for war raised the question of who would fill their places in the workforce. The suggestion of women entered the situation. Many “traditionalists” hated the idea of women being anywhere but home, and the idea sounded especially revolting to them once the government was pushing it. Eventually, when no other clear solution was in sight, women were recruited to the workforce. Minimal amounts of them joined at first, but over time, more and more women began careers outside of their usual habitat. The population needed to accept the fact that women were stepping up to help their country, and nobody was stopping it. Contrasting to the previous situation, women now were offered wonderful job benefits and other catches to lure them into what they imagined were careers. New jobs offered higher pay than they had been offered before, and the women had the chance to learn new skills at their jobs. A “triumph” of positivity was beginning for women.

Propaganda was used to promote “women’s power” rather than keep it in secret captivity, like it had been for years past. The song, “Rosie the Riveter” was first established in 1943 to promote the image of women in the workforce. “All day long, Whether rain or shine, She’s part of the assembly line. She’s making history, Working for victory, Rosie the Riveter” (Sheridan). The War Production Board (WPB) wanted to ensure that the United States had plenty of materials while preparing for the war, and women were primarily the ones responsible for manufacturing those products. Another thing that women were responsible for was collecting excess goods that people had rationed. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the WPB and encouraged women to find scrap pieces (of sheet metal, tools, and any other discarded items to be reused) all over town. The next step in this process was to find uses for the scraps in the war. Sheets of metal could be used for side paneling, and so on. The production of regular products had already been minimized, and this was because many of the supplies those products needed, were also needed for war materials.

War bonds were suggested to many Americans and advertised everywhere. Even young school kids liked buying stamps. This was yet another strategy to raise war funds. After the song and a couple other methods of encouraging displays, the original Rosie the Riveter poster was created. It showed a muscular woman wearing work gear. It then evolved to the more popular “We Can Do It!” image. These inspirational devices were only part of the effort to convince the population that women were helping the nation, not doing something that should be frowned upon. Not only did this feminine propaganda suggest ideas of many people, but it also comforted women with the idea of it being okay to work and support their nation. Unemployment rates were dropping, with all of the men away. The complete opposite situation was occurring than in the Depression. The U.S. was going through a labor shortage (where there weren’t enough workers), and that was greatly altered from the times of the Depression, where unemployment rates were vigorous.

About 350,000 women also had the choice to serve their country in any of these female-specific branches: Women’s Army Corps, Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, United States Coast Guard Women’s Reserve, Marine Corps Women Reserve, and the Women Airforce Service Pilots. The horizon of opportunities for women just kept expanding. Captain Mary A. Hallaren, the Commander of the First Women’s Army Corps Separate Battalion, said in 1945 that, “You are the pioneers. There were many bets against you when you first came...that you couldn’t take it with the boys; that American women couldn’t endure any discipline; that you’d use your femininity when the going got rough; that you’d break within a year. Everyone who bet against you, lost” (Yellin). Unions fought for equal pay for females, in fear that if they didn’t, the women might leave. Individual businesses thought they should be paid substantially less. Now that women had a hold of things, they did not want to stop. Many hoped their new position would be permanent.

**Triumphant Working Women:**

The rapid pace at which women learned how to pick up new skills astonished lots of people. From acting as housewives to operating drill presses, these women's knowledge was quickly advancing. Particularly for underclass women, the job chance represented bright hopes for a successful future. The experience re-shaped women’s opinions and perspectives on varying topics. As women began climbing higher ranks in their workplace, they felt proud and accomplished with their progress. However, on the reverse side of things, unions had to bargain with the men they were working for to plead them not to quit just because women were in the situation.Still, some institutions were not fond of women assembling arsenal, but, fortunately, the majority of the United States was on board with working women. Drafting women came into the conversation. The vision for women was becoming so highly regarded in people's’ minds that they were even considered to be sent out in large amounts, just like the men were.

In cities with large manufacturing companies - like Seattle, Washington; Buffalo, New York; and Burbank, California; the populations sky rocketed. Women and whatever parts of their family weren’t in the war moved closer to these cities. The towns became more popular as the number of women willing to dedicate their lives to the war also grew. With the population growing in such condensed areas, the economy in those areas also revitalized. This brought people even further away from their economic failure state in the 1930s. Instead of drafting women, only those who lived next to factories with shortages were sent to work. Not only did factory jobs appeal to women in hopes of helping, but also army jobs, especially those designated for their use. For instance, WASPs were Women Air Force Service Pilots. “The first women military pilots in the history of our country helped ease the pilot shortage in World War II and then stepped quietly into the pages of history” (Cole). In order to apply to some workplaces, women created a resume-like card with some of their basic information on it. Registration fairs were held to make the process of getting jobs to women in big cities even more simplified. Still, when more women needed to be recruited, motivational messages were sent out. War advertisement specialists said things like, “Women in the War: We Can’t Win Without Them,” and put the phrases on posters. Businesses hoped women would begin to think work life was the best life and join their businesses.

America had come to another labor shortage period, and the women they needed to join the workforce were the ones currently staying home with their children. In order to grab their attention, child labor laws were weakened, so women didn’t have to stay home with their kids. With most adults out of the homes, child labor laws became less restricted. Millions of working women had children below the age of fourteen. Many worried that the teens without parents at home would start getting into trouble. To avoid their predicted rambunctious behavior, child labor laws lessened. Now, teenagers and other kids could, and were encouraged to get jobs, too. The U.S. had definitely taken a turn from their position in the Great Depression.

At this point, people became content with the fact that the United States of America would not be able to win the war without women in the workforce. In 1943, Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War, said, “The War Department must fully utilize, immediately and effectively, the largest and potentially the finest single source of labor available today - the vast reserve of woman power” (Hoesley 1). Women were producing materials at extreme rates. President Franklin Roosevelt was in favor of working women, and he was extremely thankful for their hard work. Defense industry jobs provided decent pay, at about 60 to 90 cents for every hour they worked.

**Women that Won the War:**

When Japan surrendered from World War II, all of America was exhilarated. Women were especially thrilled because they contributed to the war. Feeling the effect of their dutiful work made them feel very proud. They couldn’t help but feel that it was, in part, because of them. If women wouldn’t have been producing war materials, soldiers wouldn’t have had anything to fight with. The only thing was that, the men were now returning. Nobody knew what to do. A conflict approached many citizens as the men automatically thought they would receive their jobs back, and the women thought the same.

With males back in the picture, women were relocated to the proletariat class. Once unions started telling women that they needed to vacate their jobs, women became furious. They had worked so hard, and practically won the war for America, and now, they were just supposed to give up all they had worked for. It felt like the U.S. used them in a time of need, and then were ready to give them up again. Before the war, their fight probably wouldn’t have been as strong because they had never obtained the opportunity to work. Once they knew what it was like

to work, not having the privilege felt like being stripped of all personality traits. Many women felt like their triumph had directly turned into a tragedy.

**Working Away From Tragedies:**

Women never lost the momentum that fighting for their jobs in WWII gave them. The struggle continued, with minor successes along the way, until the victories became greater. Society had greatly altered from what it used to be, and perspectives of women weren’t what they used to be. In 1968, the women at Ford Motor Company went on a 7-day strike for equal paychecks. This allowed them to receive 92 percent of what men were.

In 1970, the Equal Pay Act was established to prevent future situations like this. Labor Unions felt like they were already doing the women a favor by hiring them, so paying them more felt like a stretch. Back at the Ford Motor Company, various events like the strike had to happen until women were able to get the same pay that the men were getting. Gradually, work benefits were available. Those included things like maternity leave, and other options for women with children.

On March 22, 1972, a strong-willed feminist by the name of Alice Paul created the Equal Rights Amendment. In this document, it is stated that, “Section 1. Equality of Rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex” (Equal). Previously, if a woman were to try and argue certain conditions, a document or law that they could refer to did not exist. Now, there was support. Because of the Equal Rights Amendment, women could back up their opinions with laws that stated what rights they obtained.

After recovering from both the triumph and tragedy of workplace dilemmas, women remained powerful throughout their battle for equality. With higher labor standards, the issue of muffling women’s power was partially solved, but probably will never have a full solution. Many men appreciated the women who helped them win the war more. Without the desperate need to allow women into the workforce for war production reasons, the country may have never truly understood their capabilities.

Annotated Bibliography

**Primary Sources**

Cole, Jean Hascall. *Women Pilots of World War II.* Salt Lake City: Athaneum Press, 1985. Print.

Jean Hascall Cole published this book after reflecting on her experiences as a pilot in World War II. She tells the stories of her fellow female pilots and their many experiences throughout their journey as WASPs.

“Female Majority in U.S. Seen Near.” *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1943.

As opposed to the lack of unemployment opportunities in the Great Depression, there were employment shortages in WWII, meaning that more jobs were open than the amount of people taking the jobs. I used this turnaround in employment circumstances to show the great rates at which women fled to the workplaces.

“It’s a Woman’s War.” *New York Times*, 4 Oct. 1942.

I used this newspaper article to recognize the rate at which women were truly taking control of their duties in the war. They took what they needed to do, and they did it with pride. Any objections to their choice of path were pushed down and ignored, and this reading proved that.

“LibGuides: Women in the Military - WWII: Overview.” Primary Sources: Archives & Records - Women and the Home Front during World War II - LibGuides at Minnesota Historical Society Library. Accessed 14 Oct. 2018.

This article helped to describe the progression of women in the military throughout history, and especially how that changed in World War II. Not only were they about a general group of women, but also about more specific gatherings of them. For example, a group of women from Minnesota is detailed in this reading, which narrowed in the process of realizing how the war impacted people’s lives in many more ways than one.

Margaret, Culkin B. “The ‘Indispensable Woman’.” *New York Times*, 29 Nov. 1942.

This newspaper from mid-World War II explains how, gradually, the nation was able to realize how much a valuable asset women were, and how unfortunate the nation would be without them throughout the war. The news article also told how various parties reacted to this new change.

“President Warns of Lag in Output in Labor Day Message to Country.” *New York Times*, 3 Sept. 1944.

This article from a New York Times newspaper proved that even the president of the United States was pushing women to get out of their homes and into the workforce. Much of the country despised the concept of working women, so when the president announced it, it became even more of an alarm. This journalist analyzed reactions of certain parts of the country and their opinions.

War Manpower Commission United States Employment Service. Public Letter.

This letter to the women of Mobile explained how women could stay at home and fight Hitler away, but instead the better use of them would be preventing Hitler’s invasion by building fighting mechanisms. The letter also expressed the urgent need for working women, detailing that the process shouldn’t be extended over a lengthy period of time.

“Woman’s Day Here in War Production.” *New York Times*, 17 Aug. 1942.

I used this document to observe the celebrations for encouragement to the working women in the war. It expressed in words how, once everyone was on

board with women in the workforce, they embraced it. The groups of people opposing women in the workforce greatly diminished, and many more people took part in congratulating the women for their accomplishments.

**Secondary Sources:**

“American Women and World War II.” Khan Academy, Web. Accessed 12 Nov. 2018.

This article explained how women pushed through the immediate adversity, so they could enjoy the benefits of working later. They didn’t listen to people that told them they were in the wrong position for wishing to work. I used this information to describe how quickly women adapted to the new position that they were assigned.

Banner, Lois W. *Women in Modern America: A Brief History.* Philadelphia: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1974. Print.

The gender roles, and their differences throughout time, are described in this title. The effects of women’s accomplishments on social and political roles are also explained. I used this information to portray the male standpoint on the event.

Blakemore, Erin. “These Women Taught Depression-Era Americans to Use Electricity.” *History.*29 Mar. 2018.

In this document, there were examples of the inventive ways women found of working. One of these consisted of women opening a clinic, where families could come and learn how to use home appliances. This shows that it was not socially acceptable for women to have public jobs, so they had to be creative in the ways that they obtained money.

Colman, Penny. *Rosie the Riveter: Women Working on the Home Front in WWII.* New York: yearling, 1995. Print.

This book told the story of a girl named Dot Chastney, and her experiences in the war. She witnessed her neighbor get stopped by Hitler, while traveling, and her parents experience while dealing with rationing. The genuine feelings and emotions of families in the war were expressed in this book. I also used pictures from this book to depict what work life was like for women inside of factories.

“Equal Rights Amendment.” *Digital History*, 2016. Accessed 5 Feb. 2019.

I used this source as an example of the Equal Rights Amendment. It went into detailing the purpose of this document, and its effects of various groups of people, especially women who were thankful for the law to rely on. Before, there was no technical document clarifying women’s rights.

Evans, Sara M. *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997. Print.

This book broadly explained women’s roles all the way from the 16th century to the 1980s. It zoomed in on the moments that women made major progress, like during WWII. Many pictures were also given in this book, showing how conditions in factories were for women.

Fogarty, Richard. “World War II.” *American History,* ABC-CLIO, 2018. Accessed 18 Sept. 2018.

I learned basic facts about World War II, but then this article explained how those facts tied into the results of women working in the workforce. This article also detailed the timeline of women’s fairly short-lived careers.

Foner, Philip S. *Women and the American Labor Movement: From the First Trade Unions to the Present*. New York: The Free Press, 1979. Print.

This book especially explained the miniscule triumphs and tragedies that women went through on the road to success. It showed that many struggles can occur before a goal is accomplished.

Francis, Roberta W. “The Equal Rights Amendment: Unfinished Business for the Constitution.” *Equal Rights Amendment*. Web. 11 Oct. 2018.

The Equal Rights Amendment was a document created on March 22, 1972. I used it to analyze one of the first laws that was created after WWII referencing women and their status in society. It guaranteed that women could stand up for their rights, and how men were going to accept it.

Gallow, Lauren. “The Sixties, 1960-1969.” *American History,* ABC-CLIO, 2018. Accessed 11 Oct. 2018.

I studied the aftermath of women’s opinions when they were asked to leave the workforce. During the 1960s, there was a major outbreak in self-expression, which was quite possibly a result of muffling women’s feelings immediately after the war.

Gluck, Sherna Berger. *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, The War, and Social Change.* New York: Penguin Books, 1988. Print.

This book was a compilation of letters from women who took on jobs in WWII. Each of their letters tells the stories of the times they experienced, and who they met along the way. they met along the way. The author analyzed these letters, and compared them to one another.

Hartman, Susan M. *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995. Print.

This story described the direct change women experienced from their home lives to their new jobs. Some women had difficulty with this transition, but most of them smoothly transferred from one lifestyle to the next.

“History At a Glance: Women in World War II.” The National WWII Museum, New Orleans. Accessed 14 Sept. 2018.

This article helped me to visualize women working in factories, because it not only showed many images, but also thoroughly depicted special machinery that women would use. The generosity that women maintained towards the men in the war also took a role in this article. They had no issue dedicating their work to their sons or husbands.

History.com Editors. “Equal Rights Amendment Passed by Congress.” A&E Television Networks. 9 Feb. 2010. Web. 13 Nov. 2018.

This source told how the Constitution did not protect many women’s rights, such as the one to vote, and the Equal Rights amendment needed to be created so women had an official document to rely on. In 1972, the Equal Rights Amendment was created, and I used this article to express its importance.

Hoesley, Mimi. *Women in WWII: How Women’s Entry into the Public Sphere helped Win the War and Influence Gender Workplace Discourse.* 2 May 2013. Print.

I used this paper to analyze one of Henry L. Stimson’s quotes regarding the use of women in the workplace. His standpoint explained that they should wait no longer before asking women to help them win the war.

Klein, Renate D. and Deborah Lynn Steinberg. *Radical Voices: A Decade of Feminist Resistance from Women’s Studies International Forum.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997. Print.

In this book, I learned that although women had been making progress in the workforce all throughout history, the advances they made during World War II were far superior than before. The way that they made changes also altered.

“Laws Against married Women’s Work.” *American History,* ABC-CLIO, 2018. Accessed 11 Oct. 2018.

Before the war started, while many Americans were suffering in the Great Depression, laws formed about working women. Some standards were that if a woman’s husband was working, there was no way that she could too. Unemployment rates were high, because less jobs were available than the number of people that needed them.

Lips, Hilary M. *Women, Men, and Power.* Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1991. Print.

This book was told in a female perspective, and it showed how relationships changed once the war began. Many procedure opinions altered, like in what order or how young people should be when they get married.

Mundy, Liza. *Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II.* New York, Hachette Book Group, 2017.

This book describes the journeys of women pulled out after college to confidentially work for the U.S. government as codebreakers during World War II. They couldn’t tell their close family or friends about this duty, and this novel explains how they still managed to complete their work successfully and help America win the war.

Newman, Jason. “Women in the Workplace.” *American History,* ABC-CLIO, 2018. Accessed 9 Oct. 2018.

This piece begins to explain how the realization of women’s importance gradually spread throughout the country. It also detailed how women’s general style and fashion also changed as they began to be treated more and more like men.

Pruden, William H., III. “The Feminine Mystique (Book, 1963).” *American History,* ABC-CLIO, 2018. Accessed 25 Oct. 2018.

In 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* was published, and this source detailed it. The book helped the country to thoroughly understand feminism, and tell why some women wished to embrace it. The novel is analyzed and considered in multiple ways in this document.

Ryan, Mary P. *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present.* New York: Franklin Watts, 1983. Print.

This novel explains the rapid burst at which women entered the workforce, and then were expected to snap out of it. I used this information to explain how short lived the experience was that women got in the workplace, and how they were expected to exit, without any further attachments to what they went through.

“U.S. Home Front: World War II.” *American History,* ABC-CLIO, 2018. Accessed 18 Sept. 2018.

This passage explained how most Americans who lived at home during the war had no objections to many of the government’s suggestions. Since they were thankful to be out of the Depression, they wanted to obey their country’s ideas.

“The War at Home.” *American History,* ABC-CLIO, 2018. Accessed 11 Oct. 2018.

With this article, I learned how the War Production Board helped communities throughout the duration of the war. They strived to help everyone in every situation. Many people benefitted from their services.

“Working Women During World War II.” *American History*, ABC-CLIO, 2018. Accessed 18 Sept. 2018.

In this reading, the precise numbers were given to the rates of change as women fled to the workforce. It also described the thoughts of campaigners and their viewpoints on strategies to bargain women into the workforce.

Yellin, Emily. *Our Mothers’ War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II.* New York: Free Press, 2004. Print.

I used this book to show that the little population of women that had jobs before the war started also went through changes, too. For some, pay rates increased, and for others, just the concept that the country was supporting them enlightened the workforce atmosphere.

Zimmerman, Dwight. “Women in America’s World War II Workforce.” Defense Media Network. Web. 12 Sept. 2018.

The reading explained how America’s delayed entrance into the war enabled them to be more prepared. The moment men left, women came rushing in. Because they were so prepared, women’s production rates in the workforces were extremely great. This let them produce supplies for the war with ease.