Women at War

In early 1942, a popular song called “Rosie the Riveter” captured the spirit of the home front:

All the day long,  
Whether rain or shine,  
She's a part of the assembly line.  
She's making history,  
Working for victory,  
Rosie the Riveter.

—“Rosie the Riveter,” by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb, 1942

One of the country's most popular artists, Norman Rockwell, put his own version of Rosie on the cover of a national magazine, *The Saturday Evening Post*. Two films about Rosie followed. The fictional Rosie the Riveter came to represent all the real women who worked to support the war effort.

**New Opportunities for Women in the Workforce**

The demand for workers skyrocketed during the war, as men left their jobs to serve in the armed forces. At first, industry hired unemployed men to fill those jobs. But as war production soared, businesses and the government started recruiting women, using slogans such as, “The more women at work, the sooner we win!” About 18 million women took jobs outside the home during the war, up from 12 million before the war.

Most women continued to work in occupations that were traditionally female, such as service, clerical, and sales work. Many women, however, took positions held traditionally by men. They became welders, mechanics, and lumberjacks, as well as lawyers, physicists, and architects.

Nearly 2 million women worked in shipyards and other heavy industries. Many toiled as riveters on the thousands of airplanes built during the war. Riveters operated in pairs. One woman used a heavy mechanical gun to shoot a rivet through a pair of metal sheets. The other woman stood on the opposite side to buck, or flatten, the rivet. The rivets held the metal sheets and the plane together. Tough physical labor like this increased women's self-confidence and independence, as well as their income. As one riveter explained,

“The war years had a tremendous impact on women. I know for myself it was the first time I had a chance to get out of the kitchen and work in industry and make a few bucks . . . You came out to California, put on your pants, and took your lunch pail to a man's job . . . This was the beginning of women's feeling that they could do something more.”

—Sybil Lewis, quoted in *The Homefront: America During World War II*, 1984

**Hardships on the Job and at Home**

Not everything about the workplace pleased women, though. They often faced hostility on the job, especially in male-dominated industries. African American women faced the added stress of racial hostility. Another issue was that women's wages did not increase as much as men's pay. In 1942, the NWLB ruled that women should get
equal pay for “work of the same quality and quantity.” However, businesses often ignored this rule. Even labor unions, whose female membership soared during the war, rarely challenged unfair wage rates.

During the war, most working women were married and were expected to keep up with their family responsibilities. Many husbands had gone off to war. As a result, women often faced the hardship of working a “double shift.” They spent a full day at the plant or office and another full day cooking, cleaning, and performing other domestic duties.

By the end of the war, the typical working woman was over the age of 35. Relatively few of these women had young children at home. Those who did usually arranged for their children to stay with relatives or friends during the day. But older children were often left to fend for themselves. As a result, rates of juvenile delinquency and school truancy increased. Many teenage boys dropped out of school, lured by high-paying war-production jobs.

**New Opportunities for Women in the Military**

Soon after the war started, military leaders realized that women could do much of the clerical and secretarial work done by male soldiers, freeing up the men for combat duty. Congress agreed. In 1942, it passed legislation creating a civilian support unit for the army known as the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.

On the first day of registration, more than 13,000 women volunteered to serve in this unit. The following year, the unit was granted military status and was renamed the **Women's Army Corps** (WAC). Women in the WAC became members of the military and underwent rigorous army training. “If the guys can take it,” one volunteer remarked, “so can I.”

In 1942, the navy and the coast guard also established their own branches for women. Navy women were called WAVES and coast guard women were SPARs. Women in all the armed forces quickly moved beyond clerical work into jobs such as truck driver, mechanic, radio operator, air traffic controller, and parachute rigger. A select few became pilots, mainly to ferry aircraft from factories to bases. Only WACs, however, served on the battlefield, working behind the lines in various support roles, including nursing. More than 200 American women died overseas as a result of enemy action.