Women Workers in the Second World War

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During World War 2, Britain was engaged in 'total war', which involved unprecedented demands on its population. Nowhere was this more apparent than on the home front where the role of women was vital in all areas of life. By 1943, over 7.25 million women were employed, a rise of over two million from the prewar figure. In addition, many thousands of women all around the country were involved in voluntary work for the Women's Voluntary Service, running rest centres and mobile canteens for bomb victims and countless other valuable tasks. By 1945 nearly half a million women were in the women's armed services (principally the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRENS), the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). Although women worked in exciting (and often dangerous) work such as code breakers or with special operations in occupied France, the majority of service women were engaged in mundane clerking, cleaning or cooking as befitted the official role of service women to release enlisted men for combat duty. The nation's food supply was kept going by the addition of over 80,000 women on our farms from the Women's Land Army. Nurses were also vital for the war effort, both at home helping victims of the bombing and overseas where those imprisoned by the Japanese in the Far East were enduring terrible suffering.

By far the greatest addition of new women workers was in industry, where there were over 1.5 million women working. The workforce in engineering increased from 7% of the prewar workforce to 40% by 1944, representing three quarters of a million women. Contrary to the popular image of the young, 'happy-go-lucky' munition worker, the largest group of new workers was actually women over 35 whose children were at school and who were constantly torn between the demands of work and home. Many women in industry were actually already experienced in factory work. The new consumer industries of the 1930s in the Midlands and Southern England had become increasingly reliant on female labour, which employers favoured for being cheap, docile and deferential.

The large rise in the numbers of women in paid employment during the war was not achieved by voluntary means alone. The wartime Coalition Government went further than any other state in the world in enforcing the mobilization of women, principally for munitions work. From March 1941, all women aged 19 to 40 had to register at Labour Exchanges for work. By 1943, the upper age limit had crept up to 50. Beyond this military conscription was introduced in December 1941 for women aged 20 to twenty four. In theory women could choose between the women's services, civil defence or munitions. In practice both the WRENS and the WAAF were extremely hard to get into and women already working in factories tended to stay there. Women with children under fourteen (or even just a husband working from home) could claim exemption from war work. In reality many women with dependant children whose husbands were enlisted were forced to work for financial reasons, as separation allowances paid to service families were inadequate.

It was soon apparent that to meet the needs of wartime production women would have to move beyond the narrow confines of routine assembly and packing and into areas previously occupied exclusively by male workers. As it was the usual practice for men's and women's work to be entirely separate with correspondingly different pay rates, this created much concern both from employers and unions. The Extended Employment of Women Agreement of 1940 gave women doing men's work without extra supervision or assistance the right to graduate towards the male rate. In practice, equal pay was rarely achieved and the majority of women continued to work on a process called 'women's work' for 'women's pay rates' which represented roughly half of the wages of skilled male labour and two thirds the wage of unskilled men. The only group of women manual workers to achieve equal pay were women bus and tram conductors (they were barred from driving). Towards the end of the war, progressive trade unionists had come to recognize that the best way forward was to argue for a rate for the job regardless of the gender of the operator. Groups such as the Equal Pay Campaign Committee and the Women's Parliament won some important victories, most notable being a commitment to equal pay for teachers in the 1944 Education Act.

The government were keen for women to work, but it was always made clear that women's primary responsibilities remained at home. The Restoration of Pre-war Trade Practices Act of 1942 guaranteed women's removal from 'male' areas of work at the end of the war. Women's work was defined as temporary, therefore they were always regarded as second class workers. For women workers the tension between home and work was always apparent. Even where men were still at home the government never suggested that men should take any responsibility for household chores. Many turned to the unions to take up issues relating to women. In 1942, the previously all male bastion, the Amalgamated Engineering Union, agreed to recruit women members and the general manual unions also recruited women members. Women's trade union membership increased from just over 1 million in 1939 to 1.6 million in 1945. Many women became shop stewards, although the male culture of evening pub meetings prohibited many women from full participation in their union.

One of the biggest problems facing women was long hours. A standard 54 hour week, including Saturday morning, was common, with overtime expected for 'rush jobs'. This left women with family responsibilities in a state of exhaustion. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that women were reluctant to work in industry or that rates of absenteeism among women were high. From 1943, employers began to make part-time work available and were delighted to find that women's productivity rates for part time work were higher than those working full time. By 1944 900,000 women in industry were working part time. It helped to resolve women's dilemma, but it also confirmed their status as second class workers. 750,000 women in industry had children under fourteen. For women with pre-school age children child care was a pressing problem. The most common solution was for relatives and neighbours to help out, but this was not possible for many women. To meet this need, the Ministry of Labour funded local authorities to provide nurseries so that by 1944 over 1500 nurseries were established, a few of which

provided residential care. There were also government funded schemes to pay for child minders. Working women were also very concerned about shopping as long hours prevented them from reaching the shops whilst rationed good were still in stock. To overcome this problem, some factories paid for professional shoppers, but women preferred to do their own shopping. Eventually many factories conceded a regular extended lunch break or 'shopping hour' to meet this need. Under emergency powers legislation, the right to strike was removed, although in practice disputes over grading sometimes led to stoppages, particularly towards the end of the war. Also the compulsory direction of labour meant that individual workers lost the right to freely change jobs when it suited them. In return, the government recognized that happy workers were good workers and that minimum standards of welfare were necessary to provide a congenial working environment. Consequently, the government funded schemes to build canteens providing cheap, nourishing hot food, washrooms and other welfare facilities. The BBC radio programme Music While You Work was also introduced to help pass the long hours.

Even so, collective action by women was vital to assert their demands. Strong oral evidence suggests that, although reluctant to enter industry, once women were at work they enjoyed the experience, particularly financial independence and the company of other women. Even without equal pay, women earned a great deal more than before the war. Gone were the timid, deferential attitudes of the 1930s, replaced by a much more assertive and confident women's labour force. More pay in their pockets and loosening of moral codes meant that young women enjoyed themselves as never before, using their hard won cash and leisure time for the cinema, dancing, roller skating, clothes shopping and seaside trips. Overall, women were not liberated by the war, but they did in some sense 'discover' each other and the power to produce change by concerted, collective action. This situation changed rapidly at the end of the war. With demand for women's labour no longer at a premium the government ceased to fund nurseries with the result that the great majority closed down within a short time. The dramatic fall in the birth rate produced a 'moral panic' about falling population by 1945. Women who had previously been welcomed into the workforce were now told to go home and have babies. Integral to the post war settlement was the notion that returning soldiers should have a woman waiting at home for them. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the equal pay campaign all but fizzled out. The 1950s heralded in a new era of domesticity for women when so called child care experts guilt tripped them for leaving their small children even for short periods. When the women's liberation movement erupted onto the scene in the late 1960s it appeared that these women's activists had little in common with their mothers. But it was their mothers who had been the strong assertive, women of war time Britain. Perhaps they wanted something better for their daughters.

Further Reading:

Penny Summerfield, Women Workers in the Second World War, Production and Patriarchy in Conflict, London, Croom Helm, 1984.

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Sue Bruley, Women in Britain Since 1900, Macmillan, Basingtoke, 1999, chapter 4.

Sue Bruley, Working For Victory, A Diary of Life in a Second World War Factory, London, Imperial War Museum/Sutton, 2001.