

How World War II Affected Women In the Workplace

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Paper

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Process Paper: 493 words

Process Paper

How I chose my topic

I have always been interested in the events of World War II. I have read many books about those events when I was younger. When the NHD project was announced to us, I knew that my project had to be about World War II. My first project was going to be about how women helped us win WWII, but soon into the research I saw it was too basic of a theme. Digging deeper into my research, I noticed that there were many articles about how WWII empowered women in the workforce. I knew, of course, that women did help in the War, but I didn't realize that because of those efforts, the workplace opened up to women with more choices of professions. And then when I read statistics showing the amount of women that started working after WWII compared to before, I was blown away. With other articles depicting the discrimination of women working, I felt extremely impressed that these persevered with helping the war effort despite society telling them no. With this bundle of new information, I knew that this must be the topic I choose.

How I conducted my research

After deciding my final topic, I went ahead and delved deeper into the articles depicting the heroic acts of the women in WWII. I knew that some people may have never heard of what they did, so I delivered a basic summary of what they did in the war, as well as three stories of individual women by looking up autobiographies and finding quotes. I also searched up some statistics showing the amount women received for working and how many women were working at the time to back up my idea that World War II

financially benefited women. I added another story about a woman who faced discrimination, and finally made some finishing touches with analysis.

Why I chose my category and how I made my project

I went back and forth between doing a poster and a paper, but ultimately decided on the paper. I have always been a decent writer and I love the structure for formal writing.

After gathering my sources, I easily distinguished the three paragraphs that my writing would be based on. I wrote up three basic paragraphs, inserted the stories, quotes and statistics, and then did some elaborating and tidying up with my analysis. Afterwards, I wrote up an intro and conclusion.

How my topic connects with this year's theme

While it may not register immediately in your mind, this topic connects very much with the theme of this year's competition, communication. Although men could clearly see the amazing things the women did in the war, they still believed that women were subordinates. The communication between men and women for equality was, as I have stated in my essay, non-existent.

Introduction

“How wise were you to bring your women into your military and into your labor force. Had we done that initially, as you did, it could well have affected the whole course of the war. We would have found out as you did, that women are equally effective and for some skills, superior to males,” - Albert Speer, Master of the German War Production (Tsouras, 494).

Prior to WWII, only 28 percent of women were in the workforce (“American Women in World War II”). Gender discrimination was common and women did not have a voice in the fight for workplace equality. However, with the onset of war, the need for military services such as nursing, assembly work, and clerical staffing created an opening for communication between male employers and female employees. These wartime roles in the war not only helped the Allies achieve victory, it also helped to raise women’s income from making 62 cents compared to a \$1.00 dollar for men, to 74 cents to \$1.00 for men (“Women and Post WWII....”).

Womens’ Work in WWII

“For Your Country’s Sake Today- For Your Sake Tomorrow- Go To The Nearest Recruiting Station of The Armed Service of Your Choice!” (“Use of Propaganda. . .”)

While America's fathers and sons were away fighting in World War II, around 350,000 women were recruited into the United States Armed Forces ("American Women in World War II"). They performed jobs such as nurses, truck drivers, and mechanics, as well as more traditional office or secretarial work. The women that served in World War II made up about 65 percent of the industry's total workforce ("Gender on the Homefront"). Without women filling the jobs left by men in the military, America's military production would have been crippled, making it even more difficult for the Allies to defeat the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, Japan).

However, not all women were working in America. Many women enlisted in the military and were killed in battle while performing their nursing duties. Some were captured as prisoners of war. Over sixteen hundred brave women received various awards of courage for working under fire ("It's Your War....").

Jane Kendeigh, a Navy nurse, landed on Iwo Jima and made history. She was the first U.S. navy nurse to fly an evacuation mission on an ongoing battlefield. "I was a little apprehensive...I was never frightened at the time – only later when I had time to think. I was too busy with the patients to be afraid" ("World War II at 75: The Women at Iwo Jima "). Kendeigh and her fellow nurses evacuated 2,393 Marines and sailors. That means 2,393 men were saved by a woman, and 2,393 men could continue to fight for the Allies.

Another courageous woman, Nancy Harkness Love, became the first female pilot in the Army Air Force. She earned her piloting license at the very young age of 16. Her squadron's mission was to ferry aircraft and supplies to bases so that more male pilots were able to fight. After the war she was awarded with the Air Medal, which recognizes

single acts of heroism or achievement while participating in aerial flight (“These 5 Heroic Women of...”). In 1948, she was also appointed lieutenant colonel of the Air Force Reserve.

“You got to get out in a hurry when you have somebody behind you with a gun” (“Ruby Bradley”). Ruby Bradley, a surgical nurse, had a dangerous and traumatic experience. Bradley was serving at Camp John Hay in the Philippines as a hospital administrator when she was taken prisoner by the Japanese army, three weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor. She was then sent to the Santo Tomas Internment Camp in Manila and got to work caring for sick and injured prisoners. She also smuggled food to those who needed it and often went hungry to make sure others didn’t. Because of that, she lost so much weight that she was able to smuggle medical equipment and supplies into the camp by hiding them under her clothes without raising any suspicion whatsoever. On February 3, 1945, US troops stormed through Japan and liberated Bradley and her fellow captives from three years of imprisonment.

These examples illustrate the courage and sacrifice women made as contributors to the workforce at home and abroad. Many brave, unrecognized women were called to fill the jobs left-behind by men, and helped secure the Allies’ victory over the Axis Powers.

An Army of Issues For Women

“We’ll Have Lots To Eat This Winter, Won’t We Mother? Grow Your Own. Can Your Own.” (“Use of Propaganda. . .”)

Although women were vital in America's effort to win World War II and despite their efforts both at home and in war, they still faced discrimination from male employers and fellow co-workers. Skilled female workers in the army made \$31.21 per week, while skilled male workers made about \$54.65 per week ("Women & WW II") for doing the exact same work. This discriminatory pay gap discouraged some women from the workplace.

Women also faced harassment and resistance from their male co-workers. Some men felt the women were stealing "their" work, and taking away their job opportunities, making it harder for men to land a job. It was especially hard for women of color, for they were paid even less than their white counterparts and were accepted in much fewer numbers.

One example is Susan Ahn Cuddy, a South Korean woman, who applied to join the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services) and was at first rejected. She faced discrimination for being a woman and overwhelming hostility for being an Asian-American. When she applied for WAVES, Japan had just attacked Pearl Harbor. Despite this, she reapplied to WAVES and became the first Asian American woman to join the U.S Navy ("These 5 Heroic Women of...").

Women caring for children and a household all by themselves were presented with overwhelming challenges at times. Women were often forced to manage their own finances and function on a tighter budget. Many male employers were resistant to conversations regarding gender equality in the workplace as seen in practices such as separating male and female workers and giving women lower wages.

Elbert D. Thomas, a democratic senator, tried to pass a bill which would allow women to serve “in” the army instead of “with” the army. This bill would have granted women the same rank as male soldiers and would have given them the same responsibilities, except for combat (“Skirted Soldiers”). This bill, however, was blocked by the army, their reasoning being that allowing women to serve “with” the army was already not a popular idea. Allowing women to serve “in the Army” was just too radical for most people.

As victory was secured for the Allies in 1945, many women were laid off. The army was worried that soldiers returning from combat would no longer be able to find jobs. Consequently, the Army often pushed women out of the higher paying jobs they once held and into “pink collared jobs” or even out of the workplace entirely. While some women were more than happy to return to household chores, as many as 75 percent of women planned to continue working after the war, and 84 percent of women wanted to keep their factory jobs (“Women's Roles After WWII”).

Communication about gender equality between female Army personnel and their superior officers was almost non-existent, as shown by the lesser pay and the eventual firing/demotion of many female members of the military.

Short and Long Term Effects Of WWII On Women In The Workplace

“Good Work Sister. We Never Figured You Could Do A Job Man-Sized-America’s Women Have Met The Test!” (“Use of Propaganda. . .”)

Though women were initially forced back into the role of domestic home-makers, they did not stay there for long. The percentage of married women working after World War II increased to 36 percent, compared to the 28 percent prior to World War II (“American Women In World War II”). Throughout the 50’s-60’s it became more common for a married woman to work, and it was not due to economic necessity. Although men’s wages were higher than ever, allowing a middle class family to live comfortably under one income, figures showed that more married women were in the labor force than at any other time in America’s history (“Women and Work After...”). This shows that even though women no longer had to work, they continued to do it anyway. It also shows that there is an obvious connection between the service women did during the war and the increasing number of working married women, for that increase happened during and after the War.

Finally, in 1963, labor activist Esther Peterson drafted the Equal Pay Act. Calling on Congress to support equal pay for "jobs requiring equal skill, effort, and responsibility, and which are performed under similar working conditions," (“Equal Pay Act of 1963”). On June 10 of the same year, the Equal Pay Act was signed into law by President Kennedy. This law helped to close the gender pay gap. In 1963, women made 52% of what men made, but just ten years later in the 1970’s their pay rose to 73% (“The Lost Decade...”). Women competently filling the positions of men during WWII clearly contributed to the Equal Pay Act, which in turn led to shrinking the pay gap. Although much of American society wanted women to continue working in the home, women did not succumb. This progression highlights the lasting effects WWII had on women in the workplace. Even so, in 2021, only 57 percent of women are in the

workforce compared to 69 percent of men (“Women in the U.S Workplace”). In addition, women still make 82 percent of what men earn (“Racial and Gender...”). While there is a long way to go, much is owed to the women of World War II for the gains that have been made.

Summary

In conclusion, the job vacancies left by men in service during WWII impacted the work opportunities for women both in the short term and in the long term. In the short-term, the war increased women’s participation in the workforce from 28 to 36 percent. While their participation in the workforce dropped when soldiers returned home, women steadily increased their labor participation. With many new skills, and in less than 40 years, over half of women were working full-time. In the long-term, womens’ war efforts helped the world see that women were capable of performing “men’s work” and led to the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963. During the next 10 years, women’s pay increased from 52 percent of a man’s salary to 73 percent in 1973. Thanks to the contributions of the women above and countless others, approximately 57 percent of women are in today’s workforce. While equal pay has drastically improved, women today earn only 82% of their male counterparts and much work remains for true equality of pay.

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