

(Image: National Archives & Records Administration.)

GENDER ON THE HOME FRONT

BY KARA DIXON VUIC, PHD

World War II changed the lives of women and men in many ways. Wartime needs increased labor demands for both male and female workers, heightened domestic hardships and responsibilities, and intensified pressures for Americans to conform to social and cultural norms. All of these changes led Americans to rethink their ideas about gender, about how women and men should behave and look, what qualities they should exhibit, and what roles they should assume in their families and communities.

Wartime gender changes for women are encapsulated by one of the most popular icons of the war, Rosie the Riveter. For many Americans, Rosie is a strong and self-assured woman rolling up her denim shirtsleeve to reveal her right bicep as she confidently exclaims “We Can Do It!” She was one of 19 million women who worked for wages during the war, five million of them for the first time. More married women than single women participated in the workforce during World War II; many of them were mothers. The federal government and wartime industries insisted that these women were key to victory, but working women presented several challenges to most understandings Americans had of the proper roles of women and men.

Most women labored in the clerical and service sectors where women had worked for decades, but the wartime economy created job opportunities for women in heavy industry and wartime production plants that had traditionally belonged to men. Male coworkers interpreted the completion of physically demanding and skilled tasks by women as encroachment on “their” work, and some men responded with harassment and resistance towards their female counterparts. Employers attempted to preserve a measure of the prewar gender order by separating male and female workers and paying women less wages. Many Americans were also troubled by women who earned their own wages and spent time away from the supervision of family. Especially for white, middle-class families, these working women threatened to uproot the prevailing



“We Can Do It!” poster for Westinghouse, closely associated with Rosie the Riveter, although not a depiction of the cultural icon itself.

(Image: National Archives and Records Administration, 535413.)

ONLINE RESOURCES

ww2classroom.org

- ▶ The Home Front Overview Video
- ▶ America Responds Video
- ▶ Lorraine Taix-McCaslin Oral History
- ▶ Rosemary Elfer Oral History

ideal of male providers and female homemakers and caretakers.

The federal government and industrial leaders attempted to reassure a skeptical public and limit the potentially radical gender changes that women's work posed by casting them as patriotic and necessary and by portraying women workers as the epitome of femininity. "Rosie" might have taken on new roles riveting airplanes or producing munitions, countless posters, films, and newsreels, but she remained feminine with manicured nails, carefully applied lipstick, and styled hair. Moreover, despite her confident attitude and capabilities, she was only a temporary aberration, eager to give up her welding goggles and steel-toed boots for domestic bliss at the war's end.

When victory came, some women were more than ready to return to domestic life, but even those who wanted or needed to continue working found their options severely limited as men returned home and demands for war materials decreased. Without the war to justify the unconventional work of women, many employers pushed women out of the higher-paying positions they had held during the war, out of the workforce entirely, or into lower paying and less secure "pink collar" jobs. Wartime work proved transformative for many women who had embraced its challenges and enjoyed its benefits, but personnel policies at the end of the war moved men and women back into the roles that aligned with prewar gender understandings.

Men on the Home Front likewise found that the war introduced a number of potential challenges to common understandings of their proper roles. While many men perceived the expanding roles of women as a threat, their own status as civilians posed another. The popularization of combat soldiers as ideal men excluded civilian men on the Home Front who, in response, associated themselves with acceptable ideas of masculinity in other ways.

Although the image of a hearty, muscular GI fighting in combat became the image of the ideal American man during World War II, few men actually served in that role. Most men who remained on the Home Front were simply not selected in the draft, were too old to serve, or were disqualified or exempted from service for a variety of reasons. While they were not the idealized GI Joe, they insisted that as "soldiers of production" their wartime contributions were just as valuable and that they were just as manly as the soldiers fighting abroad. Many men emphasized the physical dangers of their work as evidence that they were real men. Government and industry **propaganda** images of male workers supported this association by adopting the image of the muscular laborer as the equivalent of the soldier and by insisting that the laborer was essential to the soldier's success.



"Chippers", or women war workers of Marinship Corporation, Sausalito, California, 1942. (Image: National Archives and Records Administration, 522889.)

Perhaps most removed from the idealized image of manhood were the more than 50,000 men who received conscientious objector status. Often described as weaklings, cowards, traitors, effeminate, or homosexual, these men faced great pressure to prove their bravery, loyalty, and willingness to defend their ideals. Many of them volunteered for dangerous work fighting forest fires or risky medical experiments in an effort to prove that, while they objected to military service, they were no less men than soldiers.

Wartime demands brought great changes to the daily lives of women and men on the American Home Front. Many Americans embraced war production work as a way to expand their roles and image in society and to connect themselves to the work of soldiers. Others resisted any perceived threat to conventional divides between the work of women and the work of men. People reevaluated these roles in the context of their own experiences that were shaped by race, class, region, religion, and a host of other factors. By the war's end, understandings of gender had both expanded and remained firm. In most ways, popular notions of gender remained intact although cracks had emerged that would in later years break the mold.

Kara Dixon Vuic, PhD
LCpl Benjamin W. Schmidt Professor of War, Conflict,
and Society in 20th-Century America
Texas Christian University