

Discuss how important women were
(economically, socially, and politically)
to the war effort between 1939-45

CHC2D

Mr. Read

14th December 2020

Previous to the Second World War, men and women's roles in society were traditionally set. Men were the breadwinners of the house. They should be strong, brave, and hard-working. Men were the providers. Women on the other hand, were the supporters. Women were held up to the expectations of being dainty, feminine, quiet and polite as they are the accessory of their husband. A woman's responsibilities were quite different from a man's. She would cook, clean, take care of the children and household, while looking nice to be the joy of her husband's eye when he would return from work. This "perfect" lifestyle would quickly fall to an end, however, once war broke out across the world. Approximately 1,159, 000 Canadian men were sent out to serve for their nation during the Second World War. Thus leaving the women and their families to survive on their own during this troubled time. Women had to take on the men's responsibilities whilst obtaining their own. Women could not continue with life as if nothing had happened while the men were away, women took on great responsibilities such as working in manufacturing factories for the military, charity work for the military, as well as gaining the great skill of independence by taking on what was considered males responsibilities. Without the women during the Second World War, our military would have greatly struggled to win the war. There would not have been military supplies such as weapons, ammunition, aircraft, and warcraft in general if it was not for the women. Soldiers would not have received anything from home, and Canada's economy would have been greatly weekend. Specifically, taking on military-based work, advocating for women, and taking on work in the government all graphically illustrate why women were important to the war effort in 1949-1945.

The first facet to examine when looking at why women were important to the war effort of WWII, is women taking on military-based work. Previous to the war, a woman's job was to be

a nice housewife, taking care of the children and her domestic duties, while keeping up her physical appearance for her hard-working husband. However, this stereotype was quickly put on hold as soon as the nation's men went to war. During the war, women were greatly needed in their nation to support the military through their volunteer work and filling empty jobs. "Out of a total Canadian population of 11 million people, only about 600,000 Canadian women held permanent jobs when the war started. During the war, their numbers doubled to 1,200,000" (Canadian Women at War). This shows the great demand for employees during the war, since men were away serving. Women served in newly formed military organizations, allowing them to serve in uniform for the first time. During the second World War, women wanted to help the war effort by actively taking part in the military. In Canada, military organizations for women were formed so that women could serve the military through their volunteer work. "The Canadian Women's Army Corps had 21,600 members, The Women's Division, Royal Canadian Air Force (WDs) had 17,400 members, and The Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (Wrens) had 7,100 members. 4,480 Nursing Sisters (as Canadian military nurses were known) served in the war - 3,656 in the Canadian Women's Army Corps, 481 in the Women's Division of the Royal Canadian Air Force and 343 in the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service. Many of these women found themselves within range of enemy guns and some lost their lives" (Marshall 2018). Clearly the majority of women were eager to be engaged in the military, and help the war effort as much as they could. Women risked their lives volunteering in these organizations to help support and provide for the men at war. Women's services in these organizations included taking on positions as mechanics, parachute riggers, wireless operators, clerks, nurses, and photographers. This is relevant because it proves that women were providing their service in the military by volunteering in these organizations that served Canada's military. Another aspect of

women working for the war effort, is women at the home front taking on civilian jobs that were once filled by men. Not only for the military, but for keeping Canada running smoothly, women had to fill vacant positions throughout the country while the men were away at war. Not only did women build parts for ships, aircraft, and manufacture ammunition, they worked in jobs such as driving taxis, buses, streetcars, farming, and many civilian jobs that were in need of employment. “It’s estimated that up to six million women joined the civilian workforce during World War II in both white and blue-collar jobs” (Striking Women). This shows how once the war started, many women started to work in many areas of work which were considered “men’s work”. This is relevant because not only did women work for the military, but in many different aspects of work to keep the country running, due to the lack of employees in fields that were considered a men’s work. Not only did women take on men’s work, they thrived in it due to “Women’s smaller physical size and manual dexterity helped them develop a great reputation for fine precision work in electronics, optics, and instrument assembly.” (Gender on the Home Front). This proves that women excelled at jobs that were previously considered work that only a man could thrive in due to males physique, however this proves that claim wrong, showing that women actually excelled in the workfield due to their smaller physique when working with precise work. This is relevant because women in the workforce were working efficiently during the war to support the country and the military by getting the work done that men had to leave behind. Hence, women volunteering for the military, women working civilian jobs during the war, and women working to keep the economy going were all important to the war effort.

Along with working to keep the economy running smoothly, the next area that will be discussed is women on the homefront during the Second World War. While their sons, fathers,

spouses or beaus were away, the women that were not working paid jobs, were at home keeping their families alive, their houses kept, and supporting their men at war as much as they could. Whether this meant, volunteering for a charitable organization, or donating everything and anything they had to the military, the women on the homefront were just as crucial as those working for the military. Charitable organizations were created across the nation to help make and collect anything that anyone could provide to the soldiers while they fought for their country. The Canadian Red Cross was formed in World War II for women to provide their services to aid and support the brave soldiers at war. Women who were not working in the military, were always donating and finding ways to give to the Red Cross to support their men in battle. For example, "They knit socks, scarves, and mitts and prepared parcels for Canadians overseas, gathered materials for scrap collection drives, and helped people displaced by the war by providing clothes and setting up refugee centres." (McDermott). Women at home would donate anything they had for the shortages the military needed for manufacturing weapons, aircraft, ammunition etc. For instance, there was a great need for aluminum in the aircraft industry, therefore women would donate their aluminum cooking tools to scrap metal drives. Organizations like the Red Cross were not only donating quilts, bandages and materials, they were also giving books and special treats to the men overseas. These groups raised millions of dollars to support the war effort. (McDermott). This is relevant because the military needed anything and everything to win this war, and the charity work back at home that the women on the homefront were devoted to, greatly helped supply and provide for Canada's war effort. Not only were women involved in these charitable organizations an important aspect to the war effort, women were working hard to keep their houses run with very little than they were used to, due to the fact that anything useful was going to the war effort. The next area to examine is

women keeping their families alive with little access to daily necessities. All supplies that were needed went to the military for uses such as aircraft parts, ammunition, etc. This meant that there became great shortages in these materials not only for the military, but for civilians at home. Women were trying to keep the fire burning, food on the table, completing the chores done, dealing with the finances while working and donating for the war effort. Women were not only completing their duties previous to the war, they were now dealing with the breadwinners duties. For instance, “sugar, butter, eggs and other scarce food items that were needed to help feed the men fighting overseas. Goods such as rubber, gas, metal and nylon were also difficult to come by because they were needed for the war effort.” (McDermott). Women had to make do with what they had. “Use it Up, Wear it Out, Make it Do, or Do Without.” This spirit could even be seen in advertisements. “I’m patriotic!” says one woman on a Second World War-era poster as she rolls her hair in tissue rolls instead of curlers, thus saving metal and rubber that could be used to make guns and tires for military vehicles.” (Gender on the Home Front). This proves that women had to sacrifice their goods for the war effort. They had to find substitutions for their needs to help keep their households, and Canada, running. This is evident because by women sacrificing their needs to give to the military while taking on great duties that their spouses, sons, fathers, or brothers might have been doing, women were helping the military, making their hard work very important to the war effort. Thus, not only were women struggling to carry on with life, they were being expected to carry on and some more, meaning that on top of caring for their households, they were needed for donating and supplying to the military. Therefore, women’s charitable work and women taking on many responsibilities, made women on the homefront very important to the war effort.

In addition to taking on responsibilities on the homefront, the next aspect for women were important to the war effort, is because women started advocating for women's rights. With the war came many difficulties for women, however it also brought on the push for women's rights. Women were forced to take on many responsibilities that pushed them to be independent while their men were away serving the nation. The war changed the views on gender roles, how one should look and behave, and qualities that women should possess. The war's push for women's independence was very crucial to women's rights. Women's abilities in the workforce were expanded, and women and their goals became more independent, thus creating the future possibilities of women's rights. After the war, many women wanted to keep working. Women working in the war pushed them to become more confident with their skills and abilities. Working women felt empowered by what they could do, and gained new knowledge on new skills that men previously did, such as handiwork. Women took their skills from work, and applied them in everyday life. Women enjoyed the sense of accomplishment and freedom that they took on during the war, because they were not restricted or held back from work, they were encouraged. After the war, many working women went back to their domestic duties with newly gained skills, however many women wanted to continue to work. Before the war, women's jobs were limited to service work, such as being a secretary, telephone operator, seamstress etc. (The Bren Bun Girl). However, during the war women were working in "manly" jobs such as construction. At first women found it a struggle to work in their conditions. Men did not want women taking on their work. Their behaviour towards women in the workplace included sexual harassment. (Canadian Women and the War). Gradually, once society noticed women's exceptional work, their workplace conditions became better. However, after the war, men came back from war and got their jobs back, leaving working women either jobless, or underpaid

compared to what they were paid for during the war. This did not stop women from working though. The war opened many women's minds to see their true capabilities and possibilities. This mindset is one that pushed women's rights to become possible. Many agree that "Though progress was slow over the next two decades, serving their country in the military and at home empowered women to fight for the right to work in nontraditional jobs for equal pay and for equal rights in the workplace and beyond." (McDermott). This proves that the war empowered women to live up to their capabilities, and see that men are not superior to women, women can do anything that a man could. This newly developed mindset created from the war, was very important to women in the future years to push for women's rights. The next area that will be discussed is how gender stereotypes towards women questioned and proven wrong during the war. Women were expected to look nice for their husband, take care of the children and household, and possess a lovely atmosphere. When the war began and continued, this stereotype was put on hold. Women had to serve their country by working to keep up the economy and keep the country moving. Most of society was shocked by this new perspective of women, taking on men's responsibilities. To ease society's uproar, whilst still encouraging women to continue this new outlook, posters and advertisements across America were put up of Rosie the Riveter, the new kind of woman. She was strong, showing off her muscles, while still being feminine with her makeup and freshly painted nails. This empowered women of any kind to get up and work yet still remain a woman. Mostly all of the women throughout the nation followed her example. Canada had their own Rosie the Riveter as well, she was called "Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl", possessed beauty while working hard, and was the initial inspiration of Rosie the Riveter, who is now a great symbol of the Second World War. These propaganda posters during the war symbolizes women in a new way. The stereotypes of dainty women were disproved, and women

grew confident and independent, even after the war. “Along with the famous cigarette-and-gun photo, the campaign highlighted pictures of Ronnie playing baseball, doing the jitterbug, and touching up her hat in a mirror. These photos sent a distinct message to women that they could have it all.” (The Bren Gun Girl). This proves that Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl, and Rosie the Riveter set an example to women that their limits were endless and they could do anything. Even though after the war, most women were forced back into “pink collared” work, (meaning work for women), the war showed women a taste of independence and freedom from the traditional views and stereotypes of their gender. Although it was gradual, the push towards women’s rights was started from the war. Hence, women were important to the war because the idea of a woman and her capabilities was expanded, and thus was the start of pushing women’s rights.

In conclusion, during the Second World War, women were forced to take on many responsibilities which men once possessed, obtaining their own to keep Canada running smoothly, and to serve for the military to the best of their ability. Women were crucial to the war effort in 1939-1945 due to their work for the military, charitable work, and because of their independence. Working women, either in the military or working civilian jobs kept Canada’s economy running while providing for the military. Women’s charitable work and donations for the war effort provided many needed resources for the military. Finally, women’s roles during the Second World War carved a path of independence and freedom for future women’s rights. Therefore, women’s efforts during the Second World War were very important for the war effort.