

THE WORKING WOMEN OF WW1

When we talk about women empowerment milestones over the history, we take examples like Abigail Adams writing to her husband to “Remember the Ladies”, or the “Me Too” movement, or dedication shown by Mother Teresa, or the first women to be CEOs etc. What we’ve never spoken about is the dearth of power women acquired during World War One. It was indeed commendable for the womankind. The war brought about a revolution for women which sparked a new sense of capability and strength for them. Not much now but all through the years leading up to the war and during war, women’s efforts and successes are spoken about quite often. Propaganda and enlistment posters targeted women by appealing to their emotions, sensitivity, and patriotism. They were “appealed” to send their men to fight. Some posters urge them to work or volunteer as nurses. Other sources like albums, photographs, books, and videos tell us that the women worked in jobs which men used to do in all kinds of industries like munitions, chemical, electronics, food etc. The World War One women were living a life full of transformation. My argument here is that we need to re-open talks about these women because they are forgotten. These women are never mentioned as examples in public speeches. There are infinite reasons for which they should have been, but they aren’t.

A documentary from the *Imperial War Museum (IWM)* quotes Mairi Chisholm, an ambulance driver during the war¹. She says, “It was a man’s world, totally and completely. Women were not supposed to have much in their brains”, “the one and only career for them was a good marriage”. For much of the 19th century, the legal custom of “coverture” linked a woman’s legal identity with her father or husband.² The war had led to a substantial amount of change

¹ Imperial War Museums, “Did the First World War transform women’s lives?”, IWM published on March 3, 2021, <https://youtu.be/XULMUWmg1Uo>

² “Women’s Suffrage”, The National WW1 Museum and Memorial, accessed on May 24, 2021, <https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/women/suffrage>

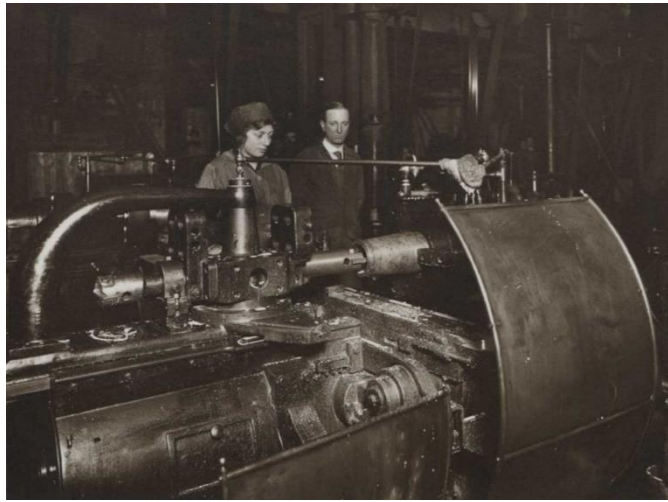
in that. However, such customs still exist in many Asian countries like India. The females supposedly don't have an identity without a male in her life to support her. Today, sometimes one can feel that mentality of a patriarchal society.

Thus, it is fair to say that the role women played during this war is forgotten. Ella Parton, curator of IWM, says in the documentary that Britain, after the war ended, was in deep crisis. It suffered from severe poverty and unemployment. It soon found itself preparing for another war. The women's role was thus, made to vanish, and not considered important anymore given that there were more 'pressing' issues for the economy. Another factor for this disappearance is that men who returned from the battlefields took their jobs back. Much of the change was temporary for women. However, a transformation did happen in those four years and commendable were the achievements of women.

The first step towards the transformation was a job. Whether or not they were working before, a job during the war was different. It was a necessary to sustain life, buy food, manage the family etc. Initially working women comprised of only certain "classes" in the society. Mostly the middle-class and lower middle-class women were working in the domestic market. The war made every woman take up work of some kind or another, it could be volunteering as a nurse, working in munitions factories, farming, domestic chores, chemical industry, police, transportation workers, day-care centers, teaching etc. Work brought women of all classes together, building a sense of team. Ruby Ord, a clerk with the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (W.A.A.C), says that the girls showed a lot of courage and that she learned how to really admire women³. Why the job was a crucial element of the transformation is that the circumstances were different this time. Pre-war a job for them might not hold that

³ Ibid., Imperial War Museums, "Did the First World War transform women's lives?"

important a significance than it did during the war. The situation leads to a variety of experiences for women.



1 - Potter and Johnson semi-automatic lathe

Looking at their experience with the so-called “men’s jobs” at factories, they went into quite a danger and red zone. Among the thousands of photographs in the album, *‘Britain’s War Production 1914-1918, Women in Industry’*, some convey the high level of unsuitable, complex, and strenuous work women did. There is an image of a woman worker in a factory, operating a Potter and Johnson semi-automatic lathe and facing a cylinder for a Clerget rotary aero engine⁴. Looking at the size and complexity of the machine, it does not seem to be an easy job. Not everyone is as capable and well-trained as engineers to operate them, especially those women who have never worked in any field before. For them, this is a challenge, learning the work itself is a challenge. Work is not a simple nine-to-five job. The whole room is fit with machines, levers, engines, and pipelines. It raises questions as to whether she was happy to be in that dark room the whole day? Maybe she was, looking at the smile on her face. Maybe it was interesting for her to seek this ‘adventure’. Another

⁴ “Britain's War Production 1914-1918. Women in Industry”, Adam Matthew, The First World War, accessed on May 23, 2021, http://www.firstworldwar.amdigital.co.uk/du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/IWM_PH_GSA_150

photograph depicts a woman assembling electrical brushes⁵. While the former was handling vast machines, the latter is asked to work with smallest of the parts possible. Such small, electric appliance work requires extensive mental and physical strength. It is tedious work. One is made to think what is it that would be motivating this woman to go to work every day? Where did she find that motivation and energy to sustain herself at this? Maybe it was the urgent need for her to earn money. Maybe it was exciting for her to learn this work. Maybe she found good company at work.

It takes a moment for one to digest how women would have coped with the complicatedness of work. It takes effort, immense amount of effort to learn how to use these machines, operate them on a daily basis, and show increasing productivity. She needs to have the courage to do the job confidently. Today, a woman studies and gets a degree in engineering to work at the shopfloor. Back then, a woman was asked to shift from mopping the floor to pushing buttons, studying meters, and pulling levers – that requires time, hard work, energy, and strength.

It is inspiring to see how some of them went to jobs which may not be adding any skill at all. There is a picture of women sorting out scrap iron at a factory⁶. It does not look like a job needing technical expertise. The rates of pay were as low as twenty shillings for the six-day work week, twenty shillings being equivalent of today's one pound. For the lowest of the wages, the most tedious of the tasks, and the most dangerous and harmful material, these women did it for as long as they could. Doesn't that require a strong resolve, determination,

⁵ "Britain's War Production 1914-1918. Women in Industry", Adam Matthew, The First World War, accessed on May 23, 2021, https://www.firstworldwar-amedigital-co-uk.du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Images/IWM_PH_GSA_151/11

⁶ "Britain's War Production 1914-1918. Women in Industry", Adam Matthew, The First World War, accessed on May 26, 2021, https://www.firstworldwar-amedigital-co-uk.du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Images/IWM_PH_GSA_151/44



2 - Sorting out scrap iron

and muscle to withstand for hours, days, and weeks? We have forgotten how to value the drive that a common woman was showing in every household. Regardless of their backgrounds, each woman was forced into a new habitat which was initially not made for her. But she managed to succeed with “flying colors”, proved her worth and skill. Susan R Grayzel wrote a book, *Women and the First World War*, published in 2002, in London⁷. She mentions that from the war emerged “A New Woman”, “There were no exceptions to the fact that they had to cope with being the primary caretakers of the families”. She also mentions that Britain did not follow conscription for recruiting women. So, many of them came to work voluntarily.

Another photograph conveys an interesting but also sad message, from the ‘*WW1 Subject Album V111: Women at War/Munitions*’, the one from the shell-filling factory⁸. We observe that these women are not just making a random product, they are making the product that

⁷Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War*, (Routledge, London, 2002), https://du.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/view/action/uresolver.do?operation=resolveService&package_service_id=34772462560002766&institutionId=2766&customerId=2765

⁸ “WWI Subject Album V111: Women at War / Munitions”, Adam Matthew, The First World War, accessed on May 25, 2021, https://www.firstworldwar-amdigital-co-uk.du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Images/IWM_PH_Subject_V111/4

is causing the destruction in the frontlines. All the stories of men fighting in the trenches, suffering from shellshock, dying recklessly, come alive as we see where those shells come from. There are several women workers in this picture with what it feels like infinite number of shells around them. Realize the dilemma these people face. While thinking about their father, husband, son or brother at the battlefield, they send to them a 'piece of their suffering'. That would be making them feel terrible. It is not an easy ask to make and send military weapons to your family for them to die sooner or later. This makes us think of what the level of mental strain can be on women. The war went on for four years. For this long span of time, they learned how not to cry, not shed tears, and just "march towards destruction".

There was another direction from where women faced extreme pressure. This was due to propaganda and enlistment. The posters which were used at the time were incredibly powerful and strong with the language and visuals used. To ensure that the government pushes through the public and urges them enough that enlistment is necessary, they might have actually hurt women in the process. Unfolding a poster used in Lancashire, Great Britain, in 1915, it targets women and asks them, "Do you realize that if you keep back a son or sweetheart you are prolonging the War and adding to the peril of those who have gone?" Women are made to feel guilty about family attachments. Their emotional dilemma would put them in a fix. It would be pestering them mentally. They would want to do the "right" thing. It feels as though the authorities are taking advantage of women's emotional sensitivity. The poster serves its purpose but, it leaves women in a tough mental situation. They are made to feel afraid, succumb to the war, and let go of their loved one. A broader thought to think about here would be if patriotism was forced on them?

A very important and great quality to point out about women is that they were able to find moments of happiness in the midst of this struggle. The *'WW1 Subject Album: Women at War:'*

Industry and services – Boots to Flour’ compiles many images, among which there is a very beautiful photograph of some women working in the flour mills⁹. Standing in a line, next to each other, with one hand on the waist, posing proudly and happily just like today’s teenagers do for social media. Some are giggling, some are busy posing, some standing in style, some innocently confused and shy. We do want to know what it was that made them laugh. It seems as though they were happy but conscious at the same time on being clicked. There is a sense of togetherness reflecting off this image. Maybe this togetherness was a source of motivation to come to work!

The BBC Production produced a documentary film called ‘*Women of World War One*’ which talked about several of their work and experiences¹⁰. A particularly tough segment to watch is their work in the munitions and explosives industry. Women were working with hazardous and poisonous chemical material. For example, TNT was extremely dangerous for their skin and health. It turned their hands and faces swollen and yellow because of which they were given a nickname. They were mockingly called ‘The Canary Girls’. A woman worker, Mabel Lethbridge sadly recalls that “people looked at you and said what was wrong with you!” It must be so risky to go home with the effects of such material. It endangers the young children and threatens their health too. It must be such a dilemma to face as mothers.

Amidst the various tensions – physical ailments, mental strains, psychological issues, sociocultural problems – which were taking a toll on them, it is good to see the level of wit

⁹ “WWI Subject Album: Women at War: Industry and Services – Boots to Flour”, Adam Matthew, The First World War, accessed on May 23, 2021, https://www-firstworldwar-amdigital-co-uk.du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Images/IWM_PH_WAW_IS_BF/33

¹⁰ “Women of World War One”, BBC Worldwide Ltd, Infobase, Film Distributor, BBC Enterprises, published in 2015, https://fod-infobase-com.du.idm.oclc.org/p_ViewVideo.aspx?xtid=86566

and power these women show. The above-mentioned photograph especially tells us how they brave their issues and seem to overcome them with a smiling face.



3 - Flora Sandes

Talking about wit and bravery, an excellent example to mention would be Sergeant-Major Flora Sandes, an Irishwoman who served in the Serbian Army and the only British woman to officially fight on the front lines in World War One¹¹. She was also a nurse with Red Cross. Her story is unique. She is not the typical prototype of how women were in that era. She was a woman who craved excitement and adventure and did not give in to middle-class household chores. She was one of the few who won fame in Macedonia after the stalemate. She also attained the rank of captain. In the printed book, *'The Great War... I Was There!'*¹², published in 1939, written by Sir John Hammerton, there is an image of her standing very proud and jolly with another soldier. She was severely injured and badly wounded several times. She certainly faced a lot of tough situations. But what was actually tough was her personality,

¹¹ Ellen Castelow, "Flora Sandes", Historic UK, accessed on May 24, 2021, <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Flora-Sandes/>

¹² Hammerton, Sir John, "The Great War... I Was There!", London, The Amalgamated Press, The First World War, https://www.firstworldwar-amdigital-co-uk.du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Images/D_640.G74_V21-30/78

withstanding every obstacle. If we just look at the photograph published, she is standing no-less courageous, strong, happy, or proud than any soldier. Her personality reflects what a stature she has. Was having a female force in the army accepted by other male troops? Yes! Flora was accepted warmly. She was even found playing a game of chess with other troops!¹³ Her story makes us recognize the potential that women have. They showed immense persistence and resistance during the war. Whether it was fighting on the battlefield, or nursing the wounds of the soldiers, or working in the home front, they were 'holding on' to this struggle for four years. This means they did not give up and continued performing their duties to the best of their abilities.

Transitioning from specific examples of work to certain macro-level impacts of women's contributions, some interesting statistics present evidence for the fact that the macro-level impact was huge. In July 1914, 3.3 million women worked in paid employment in Britain. In July 1917, that number was increased by 4.7 million¹⁴. This shows that women came in masses to serve their countries and families, that too voluntarily. This certainly was a consequence of propaganda and enlistment. But it also attributes to the change in recruitment strategies that the government, parliament, and armies implemented. The Parliamentary Recruitment Committee in Britain¹⁵, laid out a very detailed and organized plan as to where women were needed, where they can contribute best, what they can do etc. There are separate sections in the book talking about the different industries where they can "substitute" men. It is good to read that the officials took a moment to appreciate the success

¹³ "The Daily Mirror", Adam Matthew, The First World War, accessed on May 29, 2021, https://www.firstworldwar.amdigital.co.uk/du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Images/MG_Front_cover_Jan_1918/12

¹⁴ Ibid., "Women in World War 1", The National WW1 Museum and Memorial, accessed on May 24, 2021, <https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/women>

¹⁵ "Parliamentary Recruitment Committee", Adam Matthew, The First World War, accessed on May 23, 2021, http://www.firstworldwar.amdigital.co.uk/du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/World_War_1914-1918_collection_Box_14_Folder_1

of women's work and acknowledge that they've done much better than expected - "it has been found that processes which some manufacturers have considered to be quite beyond a woman's powers were being carried on with complete success by women". There are sections which mention arrangements to be made for women in new industries through facilities or Factory Acts. These make us think of why women might have chosen to apply for some jobs. Maybe it was because accommodations were being provided or maybe the tasks were easy and well-explained. This book also makes us think of how urgently and desperately women were needed everywhere.

There were a hundred challenges in the process of recruitment for both employers and employees. A compilation of recruitment records, letters, and data explains the many unhelpful circumstances for women¹⁶. This compiled report presents an interesting fact that at one point during the war, more and more men were being called to enlist. Thus, more women were being asked to come to work. Little did we know that the demand for female labor far outpaced the supply of female labor. There was a severe shortage. (Page 161) This was not because women did not want to serve. Of course, they did! In fact, an official from the Man Power Distribution Board says that, "when the need arises, you will have a far more useful body to draw upon", "they are keen to help and they are keen to train but they simply cannot afford to do it". (Page 55-57) The real issue was the organization of women in the economy. On part of the failure of authorities, there was lack of coordination, organization, and opportunities. Many women were unoccupied or unoccupied to the national advantage, labors of some were being misdirected and misapplied. There was immense overlap, confusion, and waste of effort which is why women's work was going in various directions,

¹⁶ Markham, Violet; Henry, J S; Durham, J A; Tennant, May; Newman, George; Harmsworth, Cecil., "Recruitment of Women", The First World War, accessed on May 23, 2021, https://www.firstworldwar-amdigital-co-uk.du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/TNA_NATS_1_1298

without any consensus or destination. This makes us think of how regretful one can feel if their daily hard work is not even useful. They had to deal with such chaos while also not having any proper or formal guidance. Wouldn't they feel perturbed and unsettled knowing that their newfound purpose was leading to nowhere?

A "roller-coaster" of feelings that the females experienced and a plate full of diverse tasks in one day put them through a lot. Whether their experiences were pleasant or unpleasant, it definitely made them the strongest human beings. Even though it seems normal in today's day and age to picturize a working woman juggling the personal and professional realms, in those days, it was a novel idea. A piece of artwork by artist Orpen William summarizes my argument of why working during the war as a woman was so different, unique, and, new and why it should be appreciated. He paints a picture of French peasant women on the fields.¹⁷ The main woman in the focus, holds her baby in her arms while working on the field. She is trying to breast-feed the baby while the child looks at the audience with a crying face. This is war work. Just like the train tracks run parallel, concurrently throughout, women have to equate priorities in their lives and keep them in tandem – a child who is the apple of her eyes and the work which is a necessary for the child. We are also made to think of the toll it takes on these children and infants, which is probably why the child is made to cry in the painting.

A personal favorite source which talks about the World War One women is a magazine published in June 1917 in London, *War Worker*.¹⁸ One of the articles in this edition reflects on the importance of what women were doing. It was a "social revolution" for them. The authors, representative workers say, "They started looking at life with different eyes". I

¹⁷ Orpen William, "Harvest", Adam Matthew, The First World War, accessed on May 10, 2021, https://www-firstworldwar-amdigital-co-uk.du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/IWM_ART_004663

¹⁸ "The War Worker", The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, The First World War, accessed on May 7, 2021, https://www-firstworldwar-amdigital-co-uk.du.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/WW1_OPIE_0390

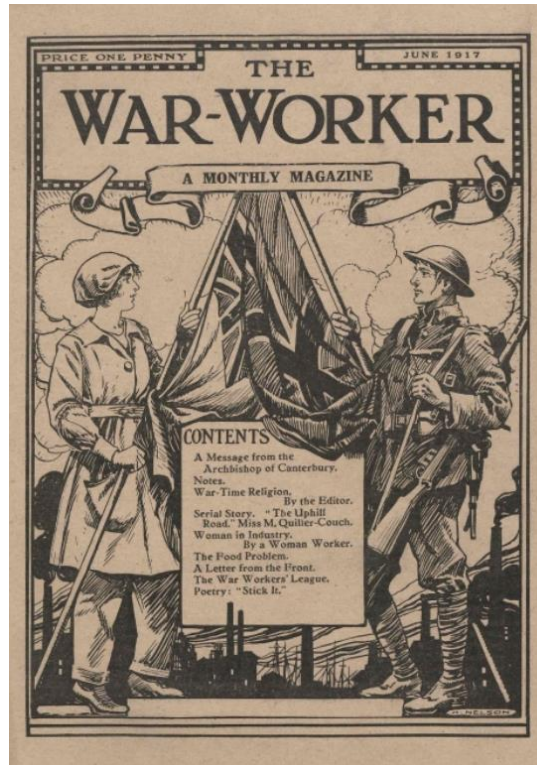
visualize this as the mentality and approach of women towards life changing, for example, how to manage expenses, what to teach the children, where to find resources etc. This gender shift had an “educative” effect on men also. They learned how not to underestimate women with their potential. The former female was the one that distrusted her capabilities and had no self-confidence. She later discovered courage and a newly awakened ambition. From enjoying leisure to operating lathes, the process has so many ups and downs.

It is amazing to know that they had a very inspiring thought-process and approach to work. They liked being healthily tired and hungry. Life was worth living for them now. They found a purpose. The ‘Votes for Women’ section makes one think of how women went through a lot just to prove their citizenship. The place where they were born is not “naturally theirs”. We must ponder upon why is it that women had to prove their love for the country when men did not have to? Why is it that citizenship was based on after the effort of the woman was examined? This geopolitical and sociocultural event also affected their capacity and focus at work. However, this struggle that the womankind lived through shows that they learned teamwork, tolerance, and patience. There is also a small story published called ‘The Uphill Road’ which talks about a young girl being forced by her family to go work at a rich household as a servant. The girl felt it was humiliating and did not give in to this. One night, she escaped and left her house. This conveyed the “road to independence” that each woman had to pave for herself.

It is really sad to know that all this was forgotten. An article published in ‘*The Journal of British Studies*’ by Sonya O. Rose reviews some books written about the women¹⁹. Rose talks

¹⁹ Rose, Sonya O. *The Journal of British Studies* 42, (2003), accessed on June 3, 2021, https://du-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_cdi_crossref_primary_10_1086_374297&context=PC&vid=01UODE_MAIN&lang=en_US&search_scope=everything_scope&adaptor=primo_central_multiple_fe&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,nice%20girls%20and%20rude%20girls&sortby=rank&mode=Basic

about author Deborah Thom's book *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War I*, who has said that women workers were identified during the war in relation to men. They were still seen as "substitutes" and as "producers of future soldiers". Their jobs were only "for the duration". Due to such thinking, their efforts go unrecognized. Their good work and unmatched perseverance are over-looked.



4 - The War Worker cover page

The cover page of the *'The War Worker'* magazine presents the ideal situation which surfaced during the war and which should have stayed on. It shows two Britain flags held by a male soldier on the right and a female nurse on the left. The war got this "balance" with it. The country was being held by both the Home Front and the Battle Front.

I rest my case by proving that the war did bring a revolution, a sense of equality, and that these talented, smart, and brave women should be remembered just like the soldiers and veterans of the battlefields are.