Rosie the Riveter Pittsburgh Style: The Representation and Experiences of Pittsburgh Working Women During the Second World War

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The advent of the second world war created a huge national demand for industrial products, munitions, and manpower. The draft removed men from the workforce creating a gap that American women were called upon to fill. This situation was complex due to cultural ideology about women, the previous period of economic depression, and an immense need for workers. Government and industry leaders manipulated notions about gendered work in order to find a solution to the problem without creating social upheaval. In comparison to national tendencies, Pittsburgh's story is interesting because of the strict gender roles, division of labor, and industrial capabilities that characterized the city. I will explore Pittsburgh working women's experiences and media representation of them, focusing in part on how they were called into action, the ideology and propaganda forced on them, and the conditions they faced during the war effort.

Previous to the war, the Great Depression solidified conceptions about gender and work. Since there were so few jobs during the economic crisis, society felt that men were the rightful wage earners. Women were supposed to remain in the home in order to give the men jobs and earning potential. However, the financial realities of the era required women to take jobs outside the home and in some sense the depression reaffirmed women's economic importance. Jobs were rare and frequently wives needed to supplement their husbands' meager and unstable earnings. Moreover women have always worked in certain industries, such as electronics which included them from its inception. Women's participation in the labor market was ignored and unappreciated, even though it was substantial and important. For example, by 1920 there were 686,232 female electrical workers in Pennsylvania, comprising twenty percent of the workforce in the field. Yet ingrained ideologies were extremely difficult to overcome, and women still were not recognized as proper wage earners. The gender segregation of labor created stereotypes about physical and mental capabilities. Women were blamed for taking jobs, intruding on men's territory, and bringing the wage scale down. They entered the war era with the experience of struggling for wages and were hardened by an acute awareness of their gender and its accompanying inadequacies.

The numbers of men removed by the draft created a large labor void. This necessitated calling on women's help with the war production effort. Both government and industry campaigned for women's assistance. Even if
they did not take factory jobs, all women were asked to conserve food and materials in order to help the country win the war. America urged other women to actually take jobs in areas previously dominated by men. The country faced a conflict between realistic needs and beliefs. Appeals to female workers included frank discussions of wartime problems, emphases on family members in combat, and the importance of helping the country as good citizens should. All of these encouragements were tinged with how the evils of guilt and laziness would harm families as well as America. Both print media and film aided in the recruitment of female laborers. Newsreels were effective and abundant, with four fifths of newsreel footage between 1942 and 1946 devoted to war themes. Productions such as “The Hidden Army” were replete with evocations of guilt and horror about the men dying on the front lines. In the film, American women were to form the secret ranks at the home front in order to defeat Hitler and his evil plans. The ghastly images and frightening rhetoric were obvious ploys to engage women in the manufacture of weapons to help save their men folk. The film includes personal interviews with women already working for the war, which are glaringly contrived to encourage sympathy and civilian action. Movies and newsreels often trivialized women's work, portraying them as less than serious and superfeminine. The jobs were shown as glamorous and patriotic, yet always submissive and temporary.

Across the nation, female labor in industrial plants was likened to domestic activities in order to ease the transition. The Sperry Gyroscope Company declared: “Notice the similarity between squeezing orange juice and the operation of a small drill press.” What emerged was a tendency to describe jobs using stereotypes about women, a condescending attitude that assumed all women were unfamiliar with working outside the home. The War Manpower Commission stated that women had a primary duty to their families but should help the country if able. This official declaration legitimized industry’s portrayal of war work as domestic and feminine. What is interesting is that factory work had previously been male oriented and never described as feminine. War jobs involved strenuous physical exertion, yet were portrayed as analogous to domestic duties in order to show women that the factories were neither foreign nor impregnable.

Pittsburgh was one of the primary war manufacturing centers, and like other cities, solicited the labor of many women in order to fill jobs and remain productive. Pittsburgh had been represented and admired as a masculine symbol of industrial achievement and economic power. The war effort only increased this hardworking image, which created dissonance in light of the need for female labor. Industrial production in 1942 had increased 186.8% from 1939. Pittsburgh was important for its foundry, aluminum, coal, glass, electronics, steel, rubber, and transportation products. Individual plants made rapid transformations to meet war needs. Things like bombers, plane parts, and parachutes took the place of baked beans, pickles and corsets. This was typical in every city. Similar to the national situation, women were
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the last source of labor. One journalist felt they were untrained and temporary, and angrily dubbed them the "powder puff brigades." It was estimated in 1941, at the onset of the drive for womanpower, that by 1943 thirty thousand women would be employed in Pittsburgh war plants.

Pittsburgh's industries and governmental bodies employed various methods to solicit the help of women. Local newspapers were the most effective propaganda tool as they had wide readership. Their columns called every woman to be socially active, and her duties depended on her class. Working class women were recruited for industrial jobs, while middle class women were pushed to join social clubs such as the Citizen's Service Corps, home nursing organizations, the Red Cross, and war bond groups. Interestingly, the women portrayed in propaganda films, posters, and newsreels appear typically middle class. These images of glamour and model citizenry were subtle devices intended to lure working class women into war manufacturing jobs.

However, the main focus of the war production effort was to get women into factories, whose need was the most immediate. Reports about women's capabilities and restrictions emphasized the need for more labor while ardently portraying war jobs as womanly, respectable accomplishments. The media devoted most of its attention to the specific jobs and conditions for which women were not traditionally suited. Propagandists tried to convince women to enter the male sphere of factory work, yet thoroughly reminded the public that women were only qualified for certain tasks and only as temporary workers. One article, "Why Women Here Can't get War Jobs," describes how Pittsburgh's industries were different from other manufacturing city's, thus legitimizing labor segregation. Its author mused "Although woman's ability with the broom is unquestioned, there's little cleaning work she can do in a mill." The dank steel mills were built for men, and women needed to pay attention to their personal appearances and health. Clearly the media propagated gender divisions and stereotypes, but these stereotypes reflected the prejudices that dictated actual industrial practices. Thus, employers recruited women to perform ladylike tasks such as putting finishing touches on munitions and using their slender fingers to do delicate electronics work.

Pittsburgh's media consistently described women workers as attractive, modest, ladylike, and middle class in order to rectify the tension between a societal need for both their femininity and their labor. Women workers were deemed "Pittsburgh Pretties" and "Victory Belles" in an attempt to make the overriding masculinity of Pittsburgh's industries adaptable to the need for female help. One article claimed that even grimy male work such as welding could be molded to female attributes. Women could work during the day and still maintain their natural roles as homemakers during the weekends. Welding was typically a dangerous male job, yet women were trained in the craft at places like the Welding School of Pittsburgh on S. St. Clair Street. There, the female welders could "still stay feminine in spite of wearing..."
overalls all day." The government intentionally glamourized descriptions of war jobs. They felt that women would be hesitant to take dirty male labor and that attempts to disillusion them were valid in such a time of crisis. After tempting women with fulfilling and exciting jobs, bosses and industrial leaders were surprised that women complained about their wages and sexist treatment. This shows the factory management's opinion that women were mere temporary fill-ins for the men who left to fight the war.

Did Pittsburgh's media accurately portray women's experience during the war production movement? The image of a working woman was that of a clean, respectable middle class heroine, overflowing with glamour, relative wealth, and desirability. There is much evidence that the workers were mainly from the working class, and that the war was a time of greater prosperity, giving them a chance to take advantage of better wages, conditions, and public views about them. Nationally, only 10% of war workers had attended college. The majority of female workers in Pittsburgh were young girls from the working class hoping to earn money before marriage. Most women working in Pittsburgh plants were high school graduates from the east side of the city. Women had always worked in Pittsburgh, but in small numbers relative to the national average. Suddenly the kinds of women who had always worked outside the home, out of necessity or simple enjoyment, were icons to be praised for their loyalty to the war labor movement. The vast majority of female war workers had already worked before the war. Indeed, of the nineteen million women who worked at some time during the war, only five million of them had not been in the labor force prior to the war.

Women were given special treatment in the factories and plants, due to their fragile and effeminate natures. They received special rest breaks, worked in different areas from men, and were required to maintain a certain appearance. There was a debate in Pennsylvania between labor unions, the state Board of Health, and factory bosses regarding the maximum amount of weight that a woman should be required to lift. Previously the limit was fifteen pounds but in 1943 the enlightened policy makers felt that around seventy pounds was sufficient. It was thought that women would often "slow up after four or five hours," evidence that a man is better at doing a full day's work. Often employers only wanted women under the age of 35, sometimes requiring proof of birth date. In 1944 The Industrial Hygiene Foundation declared that women could do 80% of all jobs in Pittsburgh plants, yet warned against the consequences for the families when a mother leaves the home. The 20% of jobs that were rejected for women involved excessive lifting, uncomfortable heat, dirt, and more training than any woman had at the time.

When the labor shortage became more intense, employers began to realize that they needed to discard many stereotypes in order to remain productive. Thus, 1943 Pittsburgh industries started a massive recruitment of nonworking women in order to fill needs. The Pittsburgh office of the
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Employment Service sent letters to 200 middle class housewives urging them to take war jobs. There were also several door to door canvassing committees targeting women at home with children. Factories even opened their doors to older women and African Americans, two groups that employers did not typically hire large numbers of. However, compared to the rest of the country, there was still not much inclusion of male or female African Americans into the ranks of workers in the Pittsburgh region. The United States Department of Labor declared in September 1942 that Allegheny County had an overall male labor shortage of 35,000 workers, and that 13,300 women were immediately available for jobs, with an estimated 100,000 women indicating potential for war production. The government pressured employers to hire new types of employees, but did not give specific directions regarding the workers’ placement, wages, or treatment.

Training programs and schools began to develop in order to train women for jobs to meet labor needs. Women delved into the “mysteries of slide rules, compasses and mathematical equations” in such training centers. News reports referred to the women who enrolled in government sponsored courses at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Tech as “junior engineers.” There were also other courses in factory work, run by the Pittsburgh Board of Public Education and funded by the National Defense Training Program. Women learned shop techniques and welding in fourteen public schools. Sometimes classes ran late into the evening so the women could maintain their roles as homemakers during the day. Newspapers stated that the women were “landing jobs in rapidly increasing numbers as they show their ability to work as well as men.” The free training programs gave women the opportunity to learn skills for the factories and plants, as well as to experience independence and public importance.

Factory experiences during the war were seldom as exciting or agreeable as the propaganda proclaimed. Nationally, women faced pressure to be loyal to both family and country. They were criticized and shamed if they did not do their part and take a war job, yet they were inept if they could not take care of their families at the same time. America made feeble attempts at installing child care facilities in plants and factories in order to encourage women to work while feeling confident that their children were safe. The government established other centers in neighborhoods and grade schools. Seventy-five percent of working women were married, yet only 10% of children received outside child care in any form, and when they did it was often neither sufficient nor consistent. In Pittsburgh there was some disagreement and stalling on the issue of child care. The Daycare Committee of the Oakland Community Council was formed in 1943, and they found that daycare should be provided if a woman worked in a war plant for more than three days a week and if the children were older than two years. They devised a plan to charge weekly rates of three dollars per child, which was 12% of the average weekly earnings of a Pittsburgh woman. Registration was arranged for a center in the Bellefield School in 1944, but there was little response and
more campaigning was conducted. Finally there was some interest, although the fees probably kept most woman from enrolling their children.33

Women faced other problems including social stereotypes, institutionalized discrimination, and sexual harassment. In some plants, there were lunch time beauty pageants that the women workers put on for the men. Male workers resented women intruding on their labor sphere and frequently make the women aware of their subservient status, often through outright verbal taunting.34 In the April 1943 issue of the Electrical Union News a column described an incident of men whistling at the new women workers. The author put the harassment in a comical light and demeaned the complaints of women. In the same issue an article praised women for doing work at home and at the war job. Clearly, even the workers and union representatives disagreed on the issues of harassment and respect, but that does not negate the fact that badgering and disdain existed.35

Even though this country needed women workers, no one was prepared to treat them as equals with men. A strong feeling of patriotism and duty propelled the recruitment, yet employers didn’t treat women as workers with the benevolence portrayed in the media rhetoric. Discrimination was institutionalized through wages, unions, and hiring practices. Intentional or not, in retrospect the employers acted in ways that would assure women would leave the workforce after the war. There were strong prejudices against married working women even before the war. Westinghouse officially banned married women until the war, and then still hired only a few during the war years. Women were the lowest paid and did not receive the training they needed to advance or attain management positions. The most desirable employees were those with children under ten, assuring that as mothers, they would feel compelled to return to the family after the war. Sometimes employers even sought women related to previous employees—men on the front lines who would deserve their jobs back when they returned from the war. Women also were not eligible for insurance plans, and thus dependent on their husbands for insurance.36 So, while money motivated women to take war jobs, they were celebrated as heroines who only cared about the war, not about steady or well compensated labor.37

Stereotypes and accusations emanating from the public, government, and media were other sources of hardship for women. They were forced to justify their choices of work or family, and asked to work for social justice and human welfare.38 Propaganda forcefully encouraged women to achieve the goal of helping the men on the front lines. Such a goal was well suited to traditional female roles of service, cooperation, and denial of self-interest. Wartime fiction written for an audience working woman focused on a competent heroine with a good memory, confidence, and helping attitude. Rarely authors included creative, independent, or bossy characters. The novels emphasized how ordinary people could meet the challenges of the war years and still remain romanticized idols of femininity. The war re-
deemed working class women through their important jobs, and put them on a more or less equal plane as middle class women. It was hard for society to rid itself of its perceptions of gender and work even though women's involvement in major war industries increased 460% between 1940 and 1944. This huge leap did not even put a dent in most cultural notions. As a result, women often felt inadequate, submissive, and childish, even as they enjoyed their productivity and importance outside of the home.

Women did enjoy their war jobs. Several surveys in 1944 showed that 70–80% of all female workers wanted to remain in the work force after the war was over. They preferred working outside of the home to in it. Yet employers did not agree and quickly laid off many women—rendered voiceless because they had not effectively been incorporated into industrial bureaucracy or unions. The majority of wartime propaganda made no mention of requiring women to leave their jobs after the war's end. Some even promised prosperous and exciting careers that could be built from war work. Many women needed to keep working, especially those from the lower classes or that had lost family members to the war. These women faced unfair backlash during the movement to lay off female workers. They were portrayed as greedy and unamerican. Many new propaganda campaigns were launched in order to convince women to give men their jobs back.

Because of Pittsburgh's great industrial strength, America called upon it heavily during the war production movement. With large numbers of men leaving the workforce, leaders in industry and government quickly and forcefully asked women to take over male jobs for the duration of the war. Women faced new experiences in Pittsburgh due to the clashing ideologies of exalting working women and yet still criticizing their abilities outside the home. Most employers felt that the heavier industries could not use women and imposed severe restrictions and silly rules. At the same time, society praised women for their accomplishments and often cited them as better workers than men. Nationally women faced similar circumstances, but in Pittsburgh the heavy emphasis on male work, large working class population, and little prior experience of middle class women's work provided for an interesting mixture of propaganda and reality. There is little doubt that women have always worked, that they faced discrimination in wages and treatment, and that they were viewed as temporary fill-ins. There needs to be a greater awareness of what the women of Pittsburgh really contributed to the war effort—hard work, determination, and selflessness.

Endnotes

29. Milkman 56.
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36. Schatz 120.
37. Honey 10.
38. Honey 49.
40. See Milkman (p. 50) for a discussion of their feelings of inadequacy.
41. Honey 23.
42. Kessler-Harris 296, 299.

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