

Why rosie the riveter? essay

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Why Rosie the Riveter? Answers for the Future of Women History is often taken for granted in today's society.

Without certain events in our nations past, the America we live in today would be vastly different. More specifically, women in the 21st century would live dramatically different lives if it were not for the women who changed the image of women in America forever. The New Women of the Progressive Era resisted domesticity and the Flapper allowed women to have fun. Rosie the Riveter told women that " We can do it! while the " Happy Housewife" brought on political and economic changes during the post war era. Though not all of these groups put women in the best light; they all helped form the path for future women of America. During the Progressive Era, a new wave of women was emerging; quite literally, these women were referred to as New Women. These women were college-educated, frequently unmarried, and self-supporting.

Their rise surfaced after the Civil War, and by 1870 there were eleven thousand women enrolled in higher education. The New Women moved into growing female careers, like teaching and nursing, and they began to find new ways of living outside of the family. However, they were also being accused of unnaturally refusing motherhood, and people claimed that research proved too much education could harm the reproductive system. Women thus began to turn to solidarity and reformation just as the generation of their mothers did before them. They formed clubs, such as missionary societies, and women's clubs like the WCTU (Woman's Christian Temperance Union) and made a new claim to domesticity. Their policies stated that those who chose careers over marriage would reveal maternal

skills when needed. Teaching the young, tending to the poor, and improving the health of women and children were their goals. This claim rested on the success of new, female-dominated institutions, which allowed women to support one another in creating new ideas, publicizing them and beginning political battles to defend them.

Settlement houses and reform associations, like the National Consumers' League, wished to shape a public policy for the next generations of women. Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr began the Hull House in 1889, which was equipped with a nursery and kindergarten for children, gave cooking and sewing lessons, and held lectures and cultural events celebrating immigrants' cultures. All women were welcome in to this institution as it was the center for labor activism by middle and working class women.

The work that Addams and Starr started became the foundation for social work as a profession, just as New Women created the foundation for the next generations of women. After the suffrage movement won women the vote, the birth of a new youth culture came about in the post World War I America, a period of relaxation and fun. The Flapper was born, a woman that sought out new experiences, like dancing and smoking and flaunting her sexuality, such activities that were once uncharacteristic of women to do. The Flapper Era was a result of the boredom women faced in politics; " they wanted to have fun".

Women were able to experience more freedom in what they wore, in what they did, and in being public. There was a consumer increase as women began spending more money to fit the Flapper ideal. The new found freedom

was quite literally elating for most women, as it became a sex positive time period. Marriage was no longer for the economical benefit of the family, but was out of true love.

However, the Flapper lifestyle was not as free living as it made itself seem. Relationships were defined as being heterosexual, and lesbian relationships became deviant. So, women competed with one another for male attention, in hopes of finding marriage, replacing the “ female friendship”. Purchasing power proved to be too great of a power for some women, as the industrial economy shifted from products to the consumer economy. Eating disorders also emerged from the Flapper Era, as women tried to fit into the flapper body. It was not until the Second World War, that women began having a greater role in society, one that was not long lived. With World War II at large and many men leaving to go fight for our country, women were asked to take the place of men in various establishments. Women began to cater to the needs of society during the war and felt it was their civic duty to contribute to the war in this way.

In actuality, it was simply a convenient way for factories to keep their business up and running, and by turning to the housewives for employees they were able to do just that. An astonishing level of legislative intrusion in the economy, and in the forming principals and position accomplished during the war demonstrated the recruitment of women for industrial work. A great shift in how women in the workforce were viewed occurred as the all famous “ Rise the Riveter” became and increasingly popular mascot for their “ We can do it! ” mindset. Most propaganda ads displayed women dressed nicely at work to attract women to the job and advertised the simplicity of some

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jobs by comparing them to stereotypical household tasks. During the war, women would work making gun bayonets, building ships, working in factories usually making bombs and aircraft parts, air raid wardens, plumbers, ambulance drivers, WRVS volunteers and nurses. As a result of pressing demands that women be allowed to serve their country by women's organizations, the WAC, WAVES, SPARS, MCWR and WASP were formed as well as the army and nursing corps. However, even in these various military positions women were faced with the traditional labor force segregation, and each branch avoided placing women in positions where they may be able to have authority over a man, and also prohibited women to fly over seas. Moreover, women who had children, were lesbian, or black, were not permitted to enlist in any military group.

Employers had no interest in training the women for skilled work for they saw the women as temporary employees. They refused to hire the black women and even went as far as to lower the wages of women who were working " male jobs". Because the shortage of housing and transportation was affecting them, it limited their options a great deal. Mothers of small children found it difficult to find childcare; while the mothers were away at work the infants and children were often left at home or in the car. Men would harass women continuously and women were even subject to sexual harassment. Even the media was playing out on this discrimination; they would assure Americans that women would return to their traditional roles, as the Happy Housewife once the war was over.

What it meant to be a wife took on an entire new meaning in the 20s. She must remain attractive and interesting, and with the new wave of products,
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the woman was more capable of caring for her family. It was still commonly thought that the woman was in charge of the caring of her family, so naturally, advertisements for such products revolved around the housewife. Although women were encouraged to be independent, they were still sought after for reproduction and childcare. Mothers were expected to stay at the core of the family, and thus were the symbol of safety and security for both the family and the world. On the outside, these women were presented as being the community provider, the wife, mother, and cook, while in reality these women were depressed, unfulfilled and isolated. Again, these women were not always put in the best circumstances; they faced unrealistic molds, and discrimination.

Yet it is these molds that allow the women of today to have the freedom they deserve. Though it is important to remember there is still a lot to be dealt with to meet the goal of equality all women should strive to accomplish. These women took some of the first steps towards that direction, and have passed the torch onto the generation of women today.