Women’s support roles in the world wars essay sample

Sociology, Feminism

Women’s Support Roles in the World Wars Right up to the outbreak of World War I, feminists on both sides pledged themselves to peace, in transnational women’s solidarity. Within months of the war’s outbreak, however, “ all the major feminist groups of the belligerents had given a new pledge – to support their respective governments.” Suddenly, campaigners for women’s suffrage became avid patriots and organizers of women in support of the war effort. Many of these feminists hoped that patriotic support of the war would enhance the prospects for women’s suffrage after the war, and this came true in a number of countries.

The more than 25, 000 US women who served in Europe in World War I did so on an entrepreneurial basis, especially before 1917. They helped nurse the wounded, provide food and other supplies to the military, serve as telephone operators (the “ Hello Girls”), entertain troops, and work as journalists. Many of these “ self-selected adventurous women … found their own work, improvised their own tools … argued, persuaded, and scrounged for supplies. They created new organizations where none had existed.” Despite hardships, the women had “ fun” and “ were glad they went.” Women sent out to “ canteen” for the US Army – providing entertainment, sewing on buttons, handing out cigarettes and sweets – were “ virtuous women” sent to “ keep the boys straight.” Army efforts to keep women to the rear proved difficult. “ Women kept ignoring orders to leave the troops they were looking after, and bobbing up again after they had been sent to the rear.”

Some of the US women became “ horrifyingly bloodthirsty” in response to atrocity stories and exposure to the effects of combat. Looking back, the American women exhibited “ contradictory feelings” of sadness about the war, horror at what they had seen, and pride in their own work. Mary Borden, a Baltimore millionaire who set up a hospital unit at the front from 1914 to 1918, wrote: “ Just as you send your clothes to the laundry and mend them when they come back, so we send our men to the trenches and mend them when they come back again. You send your socks … again and again just as many times as they will stand it. And then you throw them away. And we send our men to the war again and again … just until they are dead.”

American Elsie Janis performed for British and French troops starting in 1914, and “ anticipated Bob Hope in her devotion to entertaining the soldiery.” Women entertainers were treated chivalrously by troops, not as sex objects. Doughboys behaved badly towards French women, but put American ones “ on a pedestal that grew and grew,” as Janis put it. One woman who stayed with 200 doughboys in a canteen near the front said she would feel comfortable leaving a 16-year-old daughter there alone, because “ if any man touched her with his finger, these boys would tear him into a thousand pieces.” Women entertained troops not only with song and dance but with lectures, dramatic readings, and poetry.

“ Troops clamored for Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s readings of her own sentimental poems” urging sexual purity: “ I may lie in the mud of the trenches, / I may reek with blood and mire, / But I will control, by the God in my soul, / The might of my man’s desire.” A soldier described seeing Sarah Willmer perform

(after a 10-mile ride through a storm had, she thought, ruined her dress): “ I shall never forget as long as I live the blessed white dress she had on the night she recited to us. We had not seen a white dress … in years. There we were with our gas masks at alert, all ready to go into the line, and there she was talking to us just like a girl from home. It sure was a great sight, you bet.”

Harriot Stanton Blatch in 1918 (with an endorsement by Teddy Roosevelt) urged American women and the government alike to “ mobilize woman-power” for World War I. One reason for US women to support the war effort, she argued, was the character of Prussian culture which glorified brute force, supported men’s domination of women, and treated children harshly. To men dubious of women’s entry into the labor force, Blatch argued that “[e]very muscle, every brain, must be mobilized if the national aim is to be achieved.” Blatch praised women’s contributions in Britain, where participating in the war effort had made women “ capable … bright-eyed, happy.”

She described England as “ a world of women – women in uniforms; … nurses … messengers, porters, elevator hands, tram conductors, bank clerks, bookkeepers, shop attendants … Even a woman doing … womanly work … dusted a room for the good of her country … They were happy in their work, happy in the thought of rendering service, so happy that the poignancy of individual loss was carried more easily.” This happiness seems dubious as a general proposition, but for some individuals it must have been true. One woman wrote that she was “ nearly mad with joy” at being sent to Serbia to do war work. Women at the front used very different language than those at

home – receiving, in the words of one, “ something hidden and secret and supremely urgent … . You are in another world, and … given new senses and a new soul.”

The World Wars shook up gender relations, but only temporarily. Individual British women in the World Wars found new freedoms and opportunities in wartime – “ like being let out of a cage,” in one woman’s words. However, gender changes were short-lived. “ Attitudes towards [women’s] roles at home and at work remained remarkably consistent over nearly fifty years. Both wars put conventional views about gender roles under strain,” but no permanent change occurred in hostility to women in male-dominated jobs, the devaluation of female labor, and the female-only responsibility for home life.

The “ reconstruction of gender” in Britain after World War I constrained women’s roles and reinvigorated the ideology of motherhood. The feminist movement never regained after the war the status as a mass movement it had held before the war. Where prewar feminists had fought against separate male and female spheres and different constructions of masculinity and femininity, feminists in the interwar period gradually “ accepted theories of sexual difference that helped to advance notions of separate spheres.” After the “ horrific events” of World War I, British society “ sought above all to reestablish a sense of peace and security” and this precluded the egalitarian feminism of the prewar years, mandating instead a feminism of separate spheres to avoid “ provoking the men to anger.”

Several major differences distinguish the two World Wars’ effects on women. The first war had more concentrated action, on the Western front and in static trench warfare, leaving civilians relatively safe, whereas the second war was more “ total” (drawing in civilians) and more mobile. In Britain, World War I soldiers were “ invisible” whereas in World War II the US and British forces were a highly visible presence, the blitz targeted London, and fighter pilots could battle the enemy by day and drink at pubs near air bases by night. The first war was more of a surprise to Britons. Although both wars led to shortages of essential goods, the second war made it much harder for homemakers to compensate. Most importantly, in terms of gender roles, women in the military in the first war were “ largely confined to very mundane work like cleaning, cooking, clerical work, waitressing, and some driving … But in 1939-45 in addition … women handled anti-aircraft guns, ran the communications network, mended aeroplanes and even flew them from base to base.” Nonetheless, gender relations quickly reverted to tradition after World War II as after World War I.