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## **‘ Subject’**

### Women in World War I

Women are one of those factions of society who historically suffered oppression and marginalization. Before the turn of the twentieth century, a woman's place was considered to be limited to their home and their lives were tied to domesticity. During the late nineteenth century, many movements fought for more rights for women, and these movements gained momentum during the early twentieth century. The World War I gave these movements the much needed impetus and it proved to be a major turning point in women rights struggle. During WWI, when the men marched to the warfront, women took their place in factories and offices, and also played a huge role in war support activities, and these efforts were rewarded with better rights and greater freedom in the aftermath of the war.

A discussion on women's life and influence during WWI would not be complete without shedding some light on how their lives were before 1914. Their role was primarily looking after the family. Their duties to their husband and, in particular, to their children were considered to be their primary obligation. The society strictly believed that motherhood was the highest calling of a true woman. Though industrial revolution had opened up the job market for women, their wages were much lesser than those offered to men.

Before the Great War, the opportunity for women to find jobs was limited. The employment practices concerning female workers were rooted to traditional social structures and cultural systems. Textile industry was the largest employer of women workers. However, the working conditions were

appalling, and led to the onset of widespread tuberculosis among women.

There were only a few sectors that actively recruited women. They were mainly employed as domestic servants, and were also offered other jobs that were considered fit for their gender, such as nursing and teaching.

In the words of Gail Braybon, many women found the war a truly liberating experience. According to her, the patriarchal system co-exists with the capitalist system, and the women, like the working classes, were oppressed and exploited. Before 1914, many married women were sacked from their jobs when they got married or at the latest when they gave birth to their first child. However, from 1915 this attitude changed and women, who stepped outside their home to work in factories, were no longer seen to be 'deserting their children.' The society acknowledged the need for women to work, because the family needed the extra income.

Initially, when the war started, women felt that they had little to do to aid the war effort. But, governments of the warring nations used the images of women to garner support for war and motivate the men to enlist. The defense of women, family, and honor was supplied as the motto to the young people going to the warzones. Such taglines were used in posters and movies to spread the message of war. By doing so, the governments tried to invoke the medieval tradition of bravery, chivalry and nobility.

One direct consequence of such propaganda was that the governments were forced to look after the women, when the men were in the battlefield fighting the war. Funds were allocated, in the names of 'separation allowances' and pensions, for the women. Women were told that, to uphold the honor of the men of their families, they should be cheerful in their

sendoffs to the men. Images of cheering crowd comprising of women and children were circulated in Europe, during the initial phase of the war. Thus, cheering on the departing troops was the first duty given to women during WWI.

Jennie Randolph Churchill wrote in 1916, in her book ' Women's War Work' that women's war contribution brought into light, women's virtues and hidden talents. She states that these virtues, which were hidden during the peacetime, were brought out in such prominence that the whole world was able to witness it. Many of the women workers of the WWI were both mothers and workers. They retained the traditional position assigned to their gender, and, at the same time, took some important steps towards the role, which was traditionally denied to them.

Women were employed in various sectors, in between the years 1914 and 1918, like post offices, factories and government departments. They also were employed in dangerous munitions factories, and many women left the domestic servants job and joined such factories. They did very well in their jobs, and surprised the men with their efficiency and hard work. To encourage women to enter into workforce, the government followed a policy called dilution, whereby complex tasks were broken into simpler tasks, thus facilitating even non-skilled women workers to procure a job.

The women reformers in the US also helped the war activities by selling bonds and conserving food. They sent relief supplies to Europe, and some women delegations were also sent to Europe to aid the American soldiers. The Women's Committee of the Council of National Defense, headed by suffragist Dr. Anna Shaw, was appointed by the government to oversee the

women's war efforts. The World War I helped the women suffrage movement to further strengthen, and work closely with the government.

Inside the factories, the working conditions for women were far from safe. An explosion in a TNT factory in East London claimed the lives of 73 people in January, 1917. Also, the dangerous chemicals in the munitions factories had health implications that outlasted the war itself. Dubbed as the 'yellow peril' the chemicals involved in producing TNT caused the skin to turn yellow.

Though women were able to earn more than before, they still were paid half the wages that were paid to men. Also, in order to keep up with the demands of the warfront, women were forced to work for long hours, sometimes working in 12 hour shifts without a break.

Almost, 11, 000 women from the US travelled to Europe to work as nurses for the armed forces. Some others travelled there to be ambulance drivers, and some 600 women travelled to France to become Red Cross members.

Close to 3, 500 women served in the cafeteria and recreational facilities of the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), which had bases in UK, U. S. S. R. and France. A group comprising of wives and daughters of American diplomats helped the people who were rendered homeless in Europe.

Women musicians, actors, and entertainers travelled to the warfront to motivate and entertain the soldiers.

With the exception of a few, mostly women did not fight in the warfronts.

Flora Sands is a British woman, who attained the rank of Captain fighting with Serbian forces, and there are many stories about women actively fighting in the Russian army. An all women fighting unit called the Russian Women's Battalion of Death was formed after the 1917 Revolution. Many

other women, though they did not fight, were very close to the firing line as they worked as nurses and ambulance drivers.

Before the war, there was a general feeling that nurses were subservient to doctors, but the war brought to fore the importance of this profession, and many women were encouraged to receive a medical education. The flu epidemic of 1918-19, which inflicted more casualties than the war itself, killed almost 200 US nurses who were serving outside the country.

Some of these women saw the horrors of the war firsthand, and returned back to their normal lives with the weight of this information. War services were hard and the overseas nurses faced cold, unsanitary conditions and long work hours. After the war, when the men returned from the fight, in many places, women were asked to vacate their jobs to make way for them. Also, women had to take care of the men who returned with permanent injuries, wounds and psychological trauma. Some women also had to endure the loss of loved ones.

At the end of the war, some women returned to their place destined by the society, while others refused. They had learnt some new skills and, more importantly, had shown to the world what they were capable of. In US women were rewarded for their efforts with rights such as right to vote, which was a major milestone in the women suffrage movement. Though most of the things pertaining to gender relationships returned to where it was before the war, WWI had given a major boost to the women rights movements. The role of the women underwent gradual but tremendous change, and when the next world war was fought couple of decades later, women had made rapid strides towards equality.

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