The great opportunity: how word war i created opportunities in the workforce for ...

Before World War I, gender roles in European culture were rigidly defined and quite different than we tend to think of them in modern times.

Men and women occupied separate spheres, with men dominating public, economic, and political life, while women were confined to the more private and domestic worlds of housework and childrearing. Women were considered delicate and vulnerable—in need of protection—while men were encouraged to be daring, brave, and vigorous. But the Great War, as it was then called, had a destabilizing effect on many aspects of culture, and the effects of the war resulted in the challenging of traditional gender roles, expanding opportunities for women and laying the early framework for the increasingly integrated and increasingly equal world we know today. Never had the world known a war with the scope and size of the First World War. Such a war required the mobilization of every resource.

With European countries sending all their physically abled men to the front, someone had to keep things going at home. Because there was no one else to do these jobs, women stepped into the workplace for the first time. Up until this point, upper and middle-class women didn't work at all, and working-class women received significantly lower wages than men and had little job security, as employers assumed they would abandon their positions as soon as they got married. But women were eager to do their part to help the war effort, and for many of them, these new jobs were much more interesting and better paid than the domestic and factory work that had previously been the only work available to them. Prior to the war, Britain, France, and Germany were very different politically and economically, but women's roles within these countries were nevertheless very similar. As the

war progressed, though, the manner in which European nations mobilized women in the workplace differed somewhat by the social class of the women and by the countries themselves.

In general, however, working class women found their places in factory work while upper and middle class women became nurses or participated in wartime charity work. In France, where there was a tremendous effort to keep factories running, millions of women worked long hours under poor conditions to build machines and weapons for the men at the front. In Britain, working class women, who before the war worked low-paying jobs as maids, moved into munition factories and worked as police officers and train conductors. Posters urged women to join the Women's Land Army. Comparatively few women engaged in heavy farm work in Britain, whereas the peasant farms in mainland Europe depended on women to plant and bring in the harvest. All across Europe, middle class and upper-class women signed up to support the medical services or to do clerical work for the armed forces.

Whereas women had previously been required to stay in the private sphere, keeping the home and raising the children, there was now cultural, and even governmental encouragement for their participation in the public sphere. The shortage of workers that resulted at home from men being sent away to war made women in the workforce a necessity, and posters and advertisements depicted women who worked during this time as directly impacting the war itself. " The girl behind the man behind the gun," was the slogan across one poster for Queen Mary's Auxiliary Corps, indicating

women's influence over the country's success on the battlefield. And, of course, there were many women whose work took them very close to the front and put their lives at risk. Women working as nurses, ambulance drivers, and organizers of field hospitals saw up close the horrors of the war, and they were often in danger themselves.

The role the female workforce played in World War I cannot be overstated. At the height of the war, France had almost 370, 000 women working in defense-related industries. In Germany, the female workforce rose from 75, 000 in 1913 to almost half-a-million in 1918. In Russia, women constituted 43. 2 percent of the war workforce. In Britain, by 1918, 4.

8 million women were working in industry. But although these nations depended on women to aid in the war effort, the idea of traditional gender roles remained fixed enough that almost all countries at that time excluded women from combat. A profession such as nursing kept with the familiar idea of women as caregivers, but combat required strength and courage, traits that were considered exclusively male. Although women workers were paid less than their male counterparts, their participation in the workforce throughout the war proved invaluable and led to changes in society after the war ended in 1918. Peace did not bring about a return to the standards which had preceded the war.

A staggering number of men had lost their lives during the war and many that did return were physically disabled and psychologically damaged. By the end of the war, Germany alone reported two hundred thousand cases of shell shock, while in Great Britain eighty thousand cases were on record. The

effects often lingered, and many men who returned from war remained in psychiatric hospitals and never recovered. As a result of the necessity created by the war for women to join the workforce, society's view of women's roles had shifted. And women's views of themselves had shifted as well. Many women who experienced the social and financial empowerment that resulted from their employment during the war were reluctant to return to the private sphere.

This loosening of the structure of traditional gender roles can be seen in " transgressive" behavior of 1920s, during which flappers bobbed their hair, shortened their skirts, openly drank alcohol and smoked cigarettes. And although women would have to continue to fight for equality for generations, the advances made during and following the war were undeniable. In the United States, Great Britain and Germany, women achieved the vote shortly after the war, while in Russia, women enfranchised as part of the Russian Revolution. Although the effects of World War I were devastating, and the costs of human life unprecedented, the societal upheaval caused by the war ultimately created opportunities for women on such a large scale that the previous perception of gender roles was forever altered. As is typical with widespread social change, there would be setbacks and backlash. Nearly 100 years after the end of World War I, there remain areas in which women are still fighting for equality.

But the opportunities created for women by the Great War allowed them to break free from the private sphere to which they had been previously

relegated. This ultimately paved the way for the countless public and

professional opportunities women have today.