

# Role of women in the american civil war



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**Were the women of the North better at complementing their men than their Southern counterparts during the American civil war effort?**

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### **Part I: Introduction**

Introduction to thesis statement and to background of reading done: This research paper seeks to explore this self-framed question in relation to an important aspect of the American civil war. In the course of this narrative, this paper relies heavily on three works to address the specific exploratory thesis question: Drew Faust's 1996 *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, the same author's contribution, *Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War*, which is part of the 1992 book, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, and Marjorie Greenbie's 1944 work, *Lincoln's Daughters of Mercy*. This <https://assignbuster.com/role-of-women-in-the-american-civil-war/>

is for the reason that while the first two make a perfectly appropriate source for the most important part of the paper, the third one speaks about the way Northern women were organised better through their association, whose details are discussed in later paragraphs. All other sources are supplementary to these main works, and augment the thesis statement.

## **Part II: Justification**

Justification for choosing this area for analysis: A lot has been written about why the North won the war, primarily written from the psychological and military perspectives of this result. Among the more popular works in these categories, mention may be made of the famous Black-American, Charles H. Wesley's *The Collapse of the Confederacy*, and Armstead L. Robinson, who introduced a new paradigm when they enunciated the viewpoint that more than anything else, it was the South's loss of motivation to carry on that eventually resulted in its defeat. In the opinion of these writers, the South was burdened physically, too, having to fight for the retention of the slaves, who were almost mandatory to their economy, but were not allowed to take part in the war itself. In the words of Robinson, "[t]he slaves' expectations and actions precipitated deep conflicts among Southern whites, conflicts which preceded emancipation and which devastated the Southern war effort. The evidence suggests that the fear of slave revolt acted as a cancer within the body of the Southern Republic, a cancer first sapping Confederate morale and then ultimately consuming the South's will to fight for national independence."(Foner, 1983, p. 454)

A notable work about the logistical aspects of the war is that of James McPherson, who has argued that the North's victory was a kind of fluke.

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Making an analysis of the patterns of important battles of the war, he concludes that any outcome was possible, and that the North's eventual victory can be attributed more to fortuity than to anything else. He reasons that all other factors, such as economic and political among others, were merely incidental, and made no significant contribution to the outcome.

(Boritt, 1992, pp. 19, 20)

However, relatively fewer tomes have been exhausted on an ancillary field - the contribution of women in organising themselves in the areas of the conflict in which they were the sole in-charge - human, physical assistance. Notwithstanding the vast body of research feminist writers have churned out on this topic, the particular point of whether women from the North organised and mobilised themselves better is worth focussing on. In pursuing this narrowed down proposition, this paper takes the position that regardless of the enormity of the odds stacked against them, the Southern women failed to assemble and apply themselves to being associated players of the war effort. This paper attempts to leave the warfare track behind and take the road less taken, seeking to understand if what womenfolk of the victorious side did was dramatically different from what women from the beaten side did. In the course of investigating this course, this paper forms the notion that the Northern epicene efforts were markedly superior to that of the Southerners; while they fought against heavy odds themselves in ensuring that president Lincoln's rather reluctant endorsement of their association, the Sanitary Commission underwent a complete turnaround, its counterparts in the South, Ladies Gunboat Societies, were not such a great success, limited as they were to mainly literary activities. These may have

boosted the war morale occasionally, but were not good enough to count as action that was as tangible and as forceful as that by Northern women. Even from the beginning, this movement suffered the chauvinism clothed in a façade that was so typical of the male dominated Southern mindset. In seeking to understand the larger, historical and geographical reasons for the less aggressive mobilisation of the Southern women, this paper toes the perceptive line of reasoning that Faust has made in her chapter in the 1992 book, *Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War*. The summary of this stance is that if these psychological obstacles presented formidable hindrances to Southern women, they were handicapped further by physical reasons as well, over most of which they had no control. These factors, seen in their deep-seated context, were in fact the very causes for the civil war in the first place, which are illustrated here. These form the central portion of the analysis part of this paper.

### **Part III: Methodology: Organisation of this research paper and methodology**

In presenting this paper, both the descriptive and comparative methods of analysis of the thesis question are employed in parts. The approach has been to first make a description separately of the ways in which the women from the two sides organised themselves. Since this paper is a presentation of the overall way in which women organised themselves, mention of the names of prominent women on the two sides is made only in passing, since that is not the main focus of this paper. From here, this paper presents its core –an analysis of what prevented Southern women from matching the Northerners in this crucial organisational effort. It finally offers its conclusion.

**Part IV: Limitations of this paper**

The efforts women put in organising themselves are not limited to only what is handed down in historical accounts; as Harper, (2003) observes in her work, *Women during the Civil War: An Encyclopedia*, thousands of women who took part in the war effort did not hog the limelight, while only a few became famous. (E. Harper, 2003, p. ix) The work of these unsung women are not investigated in this paper. Also, the brief of this paper is only a presentation of the differences that existed in the ways in which women organised themselves during the civil war, and their reasons. It does not cover within its purview an important angle of this issue: did the role of women from the two sides actually make an important difference to the outcome of the war?

**Part V: Description of the two sides' efforts at mobilisation**

The general idea about the role of women in the civil war is that only a handful, merely by their claim to fame, alone contributed substantially to the war effort. Among the names on either side that have gone down in history are Clara Barton, Harriet Tubman, Mary Boykin Chesnut, Louisa Mary Alcott, Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe. While this is not to deny or even dilute their importance in one or another area during the civil war era, the most important fact that needs to be borne in mind is that women, literally in their tens of thousands if not millions from each side, dared to risk their lives as well as those of their families in the pursuit of the war effort. These nameless, unrecognised women were no small contributors to the civil war; the major ways in which they contributed included dedicating themselves to the war effort in providing vital food and clothing, apart of course, from care and love to injured soldiers. If women in the North were engaged additionally

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in the area of organising rallies in which they made inspiring speeches against slavery, and contributed in the form of writings and artwork, in the South, there were a good number of women novelists, writers, poetesses, factory workers and agricultural workers. The writings and other works from these women served to stir the consciousness of the civil war itself.(E. Harper, 2003, p. ix)

Yet, when it came to formally organising themselves into associations, the most prominent ones were the Sanitary Commission in the North, and the Ladies Gunboat Societies in the South.

North: The North started with some inherent advantages: firstly, it was more industrialised than the South. Secondly, its population stood at 20 million, more than double the South's nine million, adding to whose ineffectiveness of these already small numbers were its 3.5 million non-participating slaves. But in addition to possessing these advantages, the North's cause was bolstered by the work of its women: almost from the time of the start of the war, they were quick to organise themselves into a coherent support unit, volunteering to provide all auxiliary medical services such as bandages, clothing and other medical aids. These voluntary efforts took concrete shape in the form of the Sanitary Commission.(Clinton & Lunardini, 2000, pp. 81, 82)Inspired by the work of their more famous, pioneering Transatlantic cousin Florence Nightingale, the United States Sanitary Commission came into existence when president Abraham Lincoln appointed this commission with the ' power to oversee the health and welfare of the volunteer army, and to serve as a channel of communication between the people and the government'. Apart from having qualified and reputed doctors, scientists and

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army officers on its rolls, it was able to get the best out of women, because it also gave them a great opportunity of being directly employed in government service. In this respect, it was superior to even the war effort Nightingale had made recently in the Crimean War in Turkey. One of its prominent volunteers, the millionaire heiress Miss Louisa Schuyler, best summed up its brief and nature when she remarked that it stood out because “[i]n England those women who with Florence Nightingale did their work in the Crimea had no such channel through which every woman in the land might work with Government itself. As the men went to their work with the national army, so the women go with them, in an organization running side by side with the army, knowing its needs and meeting them.”(Greenbie, 1944, pp. 76-79) Among the other important ways by which they lent themselves to their cause was in organising an innovative idea, ‘ Sanitary Fairs’, in which auctions and sales were held to raise money. These were a great success –just two weeks of these fairs in Chicago alone helped raise no lesser than \$100, 000, surely a massive amount by those days’ standards. Prominent individuals who made the Sanitary Commission a success story were Dorothea Dix, Louisa Mary Alcott and Clara Burton.(Clinton & Lunardini, 2000, pp. 82)

South: From the beginning, women’s participation in the war efforts in the South were different from those of the North; if the North saw perceptible action in the formation of its association, the South was steeped more in rhetoric and emotional talk than effective actions. Paternalistic in its attitude, since it were men who mostly controlled slaves and women, the South, while on the one hand exhorting women to play a moral role in the war, curtailed



their liberty on the other. Even if ordinary women wanted to take part in the war, they were prevented from it. On occasion, this would take the form of outbursts, which would turn out to be no more than grumbling. Among these recorded outpourings made by women, some stand out, such as: ' We who stay behind may find it harder than they who go. They will have new scenes and constant excitement to buoy them up and the consciousness of duty done' and ' The war is certainly ours as well as that of the men'. A movement that crystallised into an actual war support organisation were the Ladies Gunboat Societies. These, too, like the Sanitary Commission in the North, were formed in the earlier stages of the war. But since their hands were tied, they were forced to remain only literary in character, and had little effect in heartening their men. As if to offset these shortcomings, men sought to project a valorous set of deeds of these women, perhaps out of a sense of guilt.(Faust, 1992, p. 175)

#### **Part VI: Reasons for South's failure to organise itself as well as the North**

Precisely the same conditions that led the two sides to civil war, namely the birth and development of slavery, also turned out to be the reasons for which Southern women could not organise themselves better during the war.

While the attitudes of the two sides differed over a number of issues, the focal point of their animosity was slavery. The sharp differences between the two sides lay in the distribution of natural resources, by which plantations, the lifeblood of the South, required extensive dependence on slavery. On the contrary, the North was industrialising at a frenetic pace, and developing a kind of economy for which the centrality of slave labour, indispensable for the South, was totally absent.(Collins, 1981, p. 29)An inadvertent invention

served to further accentuate the South's already heavy dependence on labour -Eli Whitney's cotton gin. This 1792 invention laid the groundwork for the cultivation of cotton on a large scale, something for which the South was extremely well-suited. In no time, heavily labour-oriented cotton edged out the other profit-making crops such as indigo and tobacco, given its near perfect suitability to Southern climate.(Johnson & Roark, 1984, p. 10)Since the invention of the cotton gin, the spurt in the production of cotton was dramatic - it jumped from about 178, 000 bales in 1810 to almost 4, 000, 000 bales in 1860. This surge was possible because cotton, a labour-intensive crop could be produced only by slaves; naturally, this spurt in production was matched by an increase in the number of slaves employed to produce it -in these 50 years, the number of slaves went up from about 1, 190, 000 to over 4, 000, 000.(Faulkner, 1924, pp. 209-210)

These factors were to percolate down to the matter of women's organisation into the civil war effort. By the basic fact of the overwhelming existence of plantations, and lesser development in industrial development and hence, infrastructure, the South was not able to muster enough or wholesome participation from women in the civil war. The sheer size of these sprawling plantations, which were hardly anything to be termed meeting venues, isolated women from each other, curtailing their interaction. Even if they were organised, they were not as well knit as in the North, which had all these advantages. As a result, most women's contributions, when they were not listed in literary circles in the cities, were limited to stitching clothes for their men.(Faust, 1996, pp. 23, 24)

Yet another critical factor blunted Southern organisation: because of its numerical inferiority to the North, the South had been consistently losing men on the battlefield; this meant that more than half the women in the South had lost any of their male relatives in the war. When more and more men were required for the war effort, the plantations were left without them. In this scenario, women, who till then had been having little experience in looking after slaves, since it were men who were engaged in this practice all these years, were suddenly confronted with a new situation -managing slaves in their huge plantations, with no prior experience. Yet other additional derivative roles were thrust upon them -managing the economy, and receiving corpses of their men and performing the necessary rituals and ceremonies. These left them with little time to pursue the career that they first sought to, nursing, let alone for organising themselves into the war effort.(Faust, 1992, pp. 184, 185)

On the other hand, Northern women applied themselves better to their duty. The panel that oversaw the appointment of the original list of 14 members of the Sanitary Commission was meticulously handpicked. So immaculate was this list that President Lincoln had no alternative to affixing his stamp on it once it came to him for selection. If there was one reason for the success of this commission, it was the effort the women put into it. When the commission's members were first presented to Lincoln, he was unimpressed by the whole idea of the commission itself, remarking that it was no more than '...just the fifth wheel to the coach'. He was hesitant to trust its effectiveness in delivering, and had made it a virtually powerless association

of eminent persons. If the commission carried out important work in spite of government apathy, it was due entirely to its women.(Greenbie, 1944, p. 79)

## **Part VII: Conclusion**

The ways in which women organised themselves in the war effort were symbolic of the larger issue of how the two sides made use of their strengths. On the one hand, the North was fired by the zeal of liberation, and wasted no effort in pulling its women together in the war effort, while fully exploiting their other strengths listed in this paper. On the other hand, hamstrung by both psychological and physical factors, the Southern women's effort never really was able to sustain itself, in the end becoming a victim of a variety of factors, some self-created, and some created by nature.

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