Deconstructing Myth of "Rosie the Riveter": Evaluating Impact of Government Propaganda on Women Employment during WWII

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Abstract: This article deconstructs the myth of "Rosie the Riveter," a symbol of female empowerment during World War II, to evaluate the actual impact of U.S. government propaganda on women's employment. It posits that while the iconic image was influential, it had inherent limitations in effecting lasting change in women's employment and societal attitudes towards gender roles both in the short and long term. The article delineates that, in the short run, rather than being a direct consequence of wartime propaganda, the significant increase in women's labor force participation was primarily driven by factors such as job vacancies due to men going to war, higher wages offered in manufacturing jobs, and supportive government policies including daycare services and other amenities. In evaluating its long-term impact, the article finds that women's employment rates returned to pre-war levels after the war ended with traditional gender roles persisting. It concludes that the propaganda's portrayal of women as temporary war heroes in the workforce inadvertently perpetuated societal norms, rather than challenging them.

Keywords: Rosie the riveter; Propaganda; Female employment; Labor force participation; Gender stereotypes; World War II

1. INTRODUCTION

During WWII, "Rosie the Riveter" was a well-known poster extensively circulated and considered a depiction of the significant role played by women in the war. The poster was created by Norman Rockwell in 1943 and was publicized by the Office of War Information (OWI), an agency established in 1942 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The function of the OWI was to explain government policy and release information to the public during WWII. After the poster was released on the cover of the "Saturday Evening Post" magazine in May 1943, it quickly and widely spread across the US. (Shown in Figure 1) [1,2] During that period, "Rosie the Riveter" symbolized all US women who moved from their traditional roles at home to work in factories. This new female image was printed on various OWI posters and other promotional materials and was commonly seen as an icon of the US government's success in propaganda during WWII.

Figure1: The Rosie the Riveter posters, painted by J. Howard Miller on the left, and painted by Norman Rockwell and released on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post on May 29, 1943 on the right

From the perspective of some, it even represented female liberty and promoted women's job participation both during and after the war. However, the impact of propaganda was limited in both the short term and the long term. In the short term, compared to propaganda, job vacancies, wage increases, and government support had a greater impact on the rise in female job participation. In the long term, propaganda had no effect on the expansion of women's roles or modification of social stereotypes regarding women's traditional gender roles.

2. SHORT-TERM IMPACT EVALUATION

Compared to pre-war statistics, roughly 6.7 million additional women went to work during the war, increasing the female labor force by almost 50 percent in a few short years, as reported in the U.S. Census Bureau, Department of Commerce (1947). [3] Behind the government's propaganda, the key drivers of female employment in the short term were job availability, wage increases, and governmental support.

Firstly, job vacancies were a primary catalyst for women entering the workforce. Before the war, factory jobs were not open to women. As 16 million men went to the war and left their jobs behind, factories had no choice but to employ women because of a labor shortage, although some were very reluctant. Even though women did not have work experience, the factories were willing to train them at that time. After the war, the jobs went back to male workers, and women were laid off, although most of them had work experience and showed their ability to handle these jobs during the war. Ford, for example, employed women as one-fourth of its wartime labor force producing airplanes and military vehicles, but by 1946, only four percent of Ford's employees were women.

[4] Therefore, propaganda did not create jobs for women; it was labor shortage that forced companies to recruit female employees.

Secondly, wage increases during wartime played a significant role in fostering greater female participation in the workforce. In order to improve their family's economic situation, women chose factories that offered them higher wages rather than remaining in their original occupations. This was a rational choice. For instance, in 1944, women earning $20 a week in a New York beauty parlor or $13.95 as a waitress in Mobile could enter machine shops, airplane factories, or dry docks, where the average weekly wages were $36, $39, and $44. Military factories offered higher wages than textile factories, leading many women to transfer their jobs. Research in Lowell, Massachusetts, showed that women rapidly abandoned textile work after 1943. Before the war and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, most women started in mills at $13 per week. However, Remington paid women up to $37 for a normal 48-hour work week in mid-1943 [5,6]. The reason why women worked in factories was not because of propaganda, but rather the improvement in wages that led them to make this rational decision [7,8].

Thirdly, government support played a crucial role in increasing women's labor force participation. The support from the government included daycare facilities, meal services, laundry assistance, etc., which freed women from their housework and allowed them to work during wartime. By the summer of 1943, over 4,400 communities had sponsored childcare and welfare committees. [4] Through childcare services, women were able to go out and earn money without paying someone else to take care of their children, which was economically beneficial. However, when the war ended, the services also ended, and women had to go back home to take care of their children and do housework. Thus, it is clear that propaganda alone was insufficient; rather, it was government initiatives coupled with factory provisions that facilitated female workforce participation.

3. LONG-TERM IMPACT EVALUATION

Women's job participation rate did not experience long-term consequences from World War II propaganda, as it soon reverted to pre-war levels after the war ended. Female job participation rate dropped dramatically in the fall of 1945 and spring of 1946, returning female labor force participation almost to pre-war levels. [9] This phenomenon was especially prominent in male-dominated jobs. In the manufacturing field, women represented 27 percent of all manufacturing workers in 1947, shortly after WWII. This was not much of a change from the 26 percent in 1940, before the war. Comparing women's job participation rate before and after the war, it is clear that women's overall job participation rate didn't change much in the long term, and the fields that were initially dominated by men still remained for men after the war.

The propaganda poster didn't help to increase women's job participation rate in the long term; instead, it reinforced social stereotypes about women's roles in the society in three ways. Firstly, posters during the period depicted working women as heroes rather than ordinary workers. For example, in "Rosie the Riveter", Rosie was portrayed as a hero. Depicting working women as heroes implied that their presence in factories were unusual. And it only happened in wartime and was temporary. By portraying Rosie in this manner, it implies that women engaged in work out of their love for the country rather than having their abilities recognized. It appears this action was driven by patriotism rather than acknowledging their skills. However, her elevation as a soldier-focused and self-sacrificing martyr further reinforces traditional notions about women's familial role as supporters of their husbands, devoid of personal ambition or drive to leave a lasting impact on the world. [10]

Secondly, posters also portrayed women in manpower, which reinforced social stereotypes. In the "Rosie the Riveter" poster, Rosie was depicted completely opposite to the widely accepted female image of the time - she was covered in dust, had her hair tied up, wore blue work clothes, and placed a heavy riveter on her thigh. This image further reinforced the idea that the only way for women to be qualified for these jobs was to act like men. The liberty of women includes independence, femininity, and free choice. Depicting women in manpower does not represent women's liberty. And this is the wrong direction to pursuing gender equality. Portraying women as men in posters and propaganda during wartime reinforced social stereotypes against women and hindered their ability to keep jobs after the war, making this propaganda ineffective in the long term.

Lastly, some posters focused on family and balancing between family and work, which undermined the efforts of propaganda like "Rosie the Riveter". There were mainly two types of such posters. One type of posters depicted women contributing to the war at home. For example, the poster "I gave a man!" showed a woman holding two children with text underneath reading, "Will you give at least 10% of your pay in war bonds?" [11] This was a poster encouraging people to buy war bonds, but the message implied that women could only take care of the children and that their contribution to the war effort was only to buy war bonds. This poster denied women's ability to participate in the war effort and emphasized their role as housewives. (Shown in Figure 2) The other type of posters emphasized the importance of women balancing family and work. For example, a poster titled "I'll carry mine too! Trucks and tires must last till victory" [12] featured a woman in a military uniform holding vegetables. It showed

that even though women were working, they were still reminded to fulfill their family duties. (Shown in Figure 3)

Figure2: poster titled “I GAVE A MAN!” created by Valentino Sarra (1942)

Figure3: poster titled “I'll Carry Mine Too!” created by Valentino Sarra (1943)

Although the OWI wanted to encourage women to work in factories during the war, they didn’t intend to change the gender stereotypes against women. As a result, many posters undermined the message of posters like "Rosie the Riveter," and the government’s propaganda did not change the society’s stereotype of women’s traditional roles. For example, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover instructed mothers to stop “the drift of normal youth toward immorality and crime”, telling them not to take war jobs if their employment meant “the hiring of another woman to come in and take care of [their] children.” Another example was in Portland, Oregon, where community women criticized female shipyard workers who came into town “dirty and tired” at the end of their shifts. In Mobile, Alabama, a woman berated newcomers as “the lowest type of poor whites, these workers flocking in from the backwoods. They prefer to live in shacks and go barefoot…Give them a good home and they wouldn’t know what to do with it.” [13] It shows the stereotypes ingrained in society about women, including the careers they were expected to pursue. And instead of correcting these stereotypes, the posters amplified them. When people see the posters, they reinforced the stereotypes that women should stay at home or work in traditionally female jobs. Consequently, although propaganda like "Rosie the Riveter" encouraged women to work in factories to some extent, many other types of posters during wartime diminished this effect. [14,15]

In accordance with the perspectives of scholars like Claudia D. Goldin [16], this paper demonstrates that the impact of World War II on female labor supply was not as direct as previously believed.

4. CONCLUSION

The propaganda "Rosie the Riveter," which aimed to increase women's participation in the workforce during World War II, had certain limitations both in the short and long term. While job vacancies, wage increases, government support, and factory encouragement initially motivated women to work in the short run, their long-term participation rate remained unchanged. Moreover, social stereotypes were reinforced by depicting women as heroes or manpower while emphasizing traditional female roles at home or in specific occupations.

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