Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize 2019

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~~"Men's~~ work"
"Men and Women's work"

"HOW MIGHT AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY'S PERCEPTION OF WOMEN CHANGED BECAUSE OF WW1?"

Before the outbreak of World War 1 Australian women played an important role in Australian society. Their role however was generally limited to housework and committing their lives to the needs of their husbands and children.[1] Most paid jobs were performed by men.[2] This was despite the fact that the female population was nearly equal to that of males.[3] It was when war broke out on 28 July 1914 that society needed women to take on the working roles that were traditionally performed by men. The capability of women to undertake these roles meant that by the end of the World War 1 women were starting to be perceived differently, in particular, they were seen to have the ability to play a bigger role in society and wider community.

A total of 416,809 Australian men between the age of 18 to 44 enlisted for service during World War 1. This figure represented 38.7% of this age groups population.[4] The fact that there were fewer men available to work led to a need for many of their roles to be filled by women. The difficulty faced by Australia however was the perception that the role of women was that of a home-maker, not a paid worker. An illustrative example of society's view of a woman's role at the beginning of the twentieth century is the *Public Service Act 1902*. This stood as a law that required women in the public service to resign their job when they got married.[5]

Even though there was a perception during the war that women should not work, in many cases this was overlooked because of a need for workers. The main areas that saw additional women working were clothing, boot and small arms factories. However, Australia did not appear to have the same number of women join the paid workforce compared to other countries closer to the warzones.[6]

As well as paid work, women performed a lot of voluntary work to help the war efforts. An example of this was Vera Deakin White who set up the Australian Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau to help families of wounded soldiers.[7] There were many other groups of women who volunteered to help throughout the war, with "an estimated 10,000 patriotic clubs, societies and sewing circles formed that sprang up to knit socks, vests, mufflers and mittens, pack parcels of cakes, magazines, medical and recreational equipment, kitchen appliances, tobacco and as well as writing encouraging letters to men they had never met".[8]

Although the Australian Imperial Force stated that it did not need the services of women, and that women would be "a liability, not an asset"[9] women also performed

[1] Asmeeta Singh "Impact Of World War I On Women's Roles": Essay dated May 19, 2016
[2] "Women in wartime" https://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/women-in-wartime
[3] Australian Census 1911
[4] E. Scott, *Australia during the war, the official history of Australia in the war of 1914–1918*, vol XI (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1941, p. 874). Referred to by Australian War Memorial (https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/enlistment/ww1)
[5] https://timeline.awava.org.au/timeline (published by Australian Women Against Violence Alliance)
[6] Rae Francis "Women's Mobilisation for War (Australia)": https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/womens_mobilisation_for_war_australia?version=1.0
[7] Australian War Memorial Collection: https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P156
[8] Rae Francis "Women's Mobilisation for War (Australia)": https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/womens_mobilisation_for_war_australia?version=1.0
[9] Rae Francis "Women's Mobilisation for War (Australia)": https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/womens_mobilisation_for_war_australia?version=1.0

work in warzones as nurses and as other medical workers.[10] The statistics for women who served overseas in World War 1 are: 7 under age 21, 1184 aged 21–30, 947 aged 31–40, and 91 aged 41 and older.[11]

The courage displayed by countless women during World War 1 remains extraordinary. Forced to keep their household going, look after children and filling roles left by men who went off to war. They also had to care and comfort soldiers when they returned from the war. In some cases, they were forced to continue to keep the responsibility of those 60,000 soldiers that did not return.[12] They also showed great courage on the warfront. The Military Medal for bravery under fire was awarded to seven Australian women and many died of injuries or disease.[13]

The experience of working during World War 1 gave many women "a new confidence in their abilities and new understanding of their role as workers".[14] It also showed that women were more than capable of doing "men's work". The fact that women had to make decisions on their own, relating to both family and work, would have given them the confidence to perform roles that traditionally were not acceptable for them to do.

There is a strong link between the increase in women working and the process of obtaining equal rights and equal pay for women. In 1919 shortly after the ending of WW1 there was a case where women were given a minimum wage for work, known as the Clothing Trades Case of 1919.[15] Whilst the minimum wage was just above half of the minimum wage for males, it was the beginning of important workplace rights for women.

The increase in women working also led to other social changes. The more relaxed attitude such as less gender-specific clothing and hairstyles contributed to the women obtaining a sense of freedom and self-respect. While undertaking work that was traditionally performed by men a lot of the jobs required the wearing of uniforms, including trousers. Women became less obliged to dress in the way that was previously called 'appropriate.' They started to wear less jewellery as well as wearing much plainer clothing.[16]

When World War 1 ended many Australian women had to give up their jobs for the soldiers that returned. The experience of Australian women during the war however did have a permanent change in how they perceived themselves, as well as how society perceived them. This change was similar to what happened in other parts of the world and was summarised by Susan R. Grayze as follows:

[10] Australian Women at War, Unit 2: https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/file/1013/download?token=KblCtzsY
[11] Australian Women at War, Unit 2: https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/file/1013/download?token=KblCtzsY
[12] The Great War "The War to end all Wars" 1914 – 1918 https://www.rslnsw.org.au/commemoration/australias-military-heritage/the-first-world-war/
[13] Australian Women at War, Unit 2: https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/file/1013/download?token=KblCtzsY
[14] Rae Francis "Women's Mobilisation for War (Australia)": https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/womens_mobilisation_for_war_australia?version=1.0
[15] https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/1464734
[16] Women's Fashion During WWI: 1914 – 1920 https://bellatory.com/fashion-industry/Women-and-Fashions-of-the-World-War-I-Era-Clothing-of-1914-1920

"We can begin to understand what happened to women in the war by looking at them from a comparative perspective that acknowledges the diversity of their experiences. In general, World War One accelerated the pace at which women across class lines entered the public sphere, both to support and to condemn the waging of the war and gained new economic and social opportunities. In some cases, this was "for the duration," but in other cases, women acquired new skills and participated in new activities that enabled them to achieve more than had been possible prior to 1914."[17]

There is no doubt that life for many Australian women was very difficult during World War 1. Not only did they say goodbye to their sons, brothers and husbands as they went off to war, they also took on a significant amount of work to make sure that life back home continued so that when it came to the time for men to return they had a home to come back to. In doing all of this, women showed all of society that they were capable of doing "men's work". They additionally started the process of greater choice and equality for women, not only in the workplace but in how they dressed and acted. The responsibilities and work of women during World War 1 was not easy but it led to a positive change in how society perceived women. It was an important step towards the equal treatment of women which is now valued in today's society.

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[17] "Women's Mobilisation for War"https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/womens_mobilization_for_war

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[3] Australian Census 1911

[4] E. Scott, *Australia during the war, the official history of Australia in the war of 1914–1918*, vol XI (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1941, p. 874). Referred to by Australian War Memorial (https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/enlistment/ww1)

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