Assessing How the Understanding of Housewives' Stress Changed Before and After WWII

A Research Paper submitted to the Department of Engineering and Society

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science

University of Virginia • Charlottesville, Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Science, School of Engineering

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Spring 2025

On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

Did Rosie the Riveter trade her jeans in for an apron after World War II (WWII)? During the Second World War, women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers, filling roles previously held by men and reinforcing the war effort. While many assumed that women's employment was only temporary, the reality holds more to it. Looking at the factors that influenced female labor during and after WWII shows the complicated interplay between societal expectations, economic needs, and individual choices, highlighting how wartime empowerment contrasted with post-war restrictions. However, after the war, women saw a reinforcement of traditional gender roles, with concerted efforts to be pushed back into domesticity, influenced by media portrayals of the ideal housewife and the marketing of temp jobs. This historical analysis suggests that stress in housewives was not merely an individual medical concern but was significantly shaped by shifting cultural norms and economic pressures. Ultimately, recognizing the factors that contribute to stress can help prepare society in supporting women's well-being and gender equality movements in the future.

Female Employment Data During WWII

Data on female employment during WWII reveals important insights into the distribution of women's work. While women worked in war-related industries and were placed into new jobs by the United States Employment Service (USES) in every state across the country, wartime employment was largely concentrated in select areas in the West Coast, Great Lakes, and the Northeast. The top ten labor markets accounted for more than 40% of female War Manpower Commission (WMC) employment by the end of 1944, including more than a quarter million in the Chicago area and similar amounts in Newark-Trenton and Detroit (Huntington, 2023).

Analysis of Manpower Mobilization and Industrial Shifts

Recent studies have employed manpower mobilization as a proxy for female wartime work, examining the effects of WWII on various outcomes for women such as labor supply and education (National Archives, 2016). Mobilization refers to organizing and allocating the nation's human resources for the war effort, encompassing the recruitment of men into the armed forces and the encouragement of civilian participation in essential war industries–especially important for the women in America. This involved measures like the draft and campaigns promoting civilian war work (National Archives, 2016).

However, the connection between this overall mobilization effort and the specific levels of female employment in wartime industries appears to be weak. This suggests that the intensity of national mobilization did not directly and proportionally correlate with the extent of women's participation in the wartime workforce. The fact that men were not there to work is not the main reason women went into the industry–the necessity for war supplies was.

The increase in female employment during WWII was primarily driven by the expansion of industrial capacity due to war contracts and the consequent demand for labor. Statistical analysis indicates that war contract spending explains roughly 30% of the spatial variation in war-related employment, highlighting the significance of industrial shifts over simple replacement due to the draft (Huntington, 2023).

With this data, it is once again important to note the driving force behind female employment. Environmental shifts and the needs of the war effort are explicit factors in female participation in the industry, and thus are directly linked to the stress women felt at the time. The

remainder of this paper will look into how the changes in employment affect the mental health of housewives as they take on a new role in society, just to have it removed after the war.

Pre-WWII Era: Medicalization and Pathologization of Stress

Prior to WWII, societal understandings of stress in housewives were largely characterized by medical and societal norms that often pathologized women's experiences. Stress was framed as hysteria or "nervousness", with medical professionals prescribing solutions that focused on individual adjustments within the home. Abraham Myerson's *"The Nervous Housewife"* serves as an example of this perspective, recommending household management techniques rather than addressing underlying structural issues and systemic factors (McLaughlin, 2023).

The concept of hysteria itself has a long history, dating back to ancient civilizations. In ancient Egypt, around 1900 BC, hysterical disorders were attributed to the spontaneous movement of the uterus within the female body. Similarly, ancient Greek physicians believed that hysteria was caused by a "wandering womb" and prescribed various treatments aimed at repositioning the uterus (Tasca, 2012). Throughout history, hysteria was often considered an exclusively female disease, linked to the female reproductive system and hormonal imbalances. Treatments for hysteria ranged from herbal remedies and sexual activity or abstinence, but never towards the structure of society or looking past the patient (Tasca, 2012).

The medical perspective on hysteria began to shift in the 19th and 20th centuries, with researchers recognizing that it was not exclusively a female disease. However, the association of hysteria with women persisted, and the diagnosis was often used to reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations, especially during the women's suffrage movement where doctors pathologized women's demand to vote. By 1980, the concept of "hysterical neurosis" was

removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III), insinuating a growing understanding of the outside factors that contribute to mental health. This approach indicated that individual adjustments were enough to alleviate stress, failing to recognize potential external or systemic factors. Stress was largely viewed as a personal failing or a result of inadequate household management, rather than a consequence of societal expectations or economic pressures (Tasca, 2012). Major war efforts will bring a new definition for stress in women as time goes on.

World War II: A Temporary Shift in Gender Roles

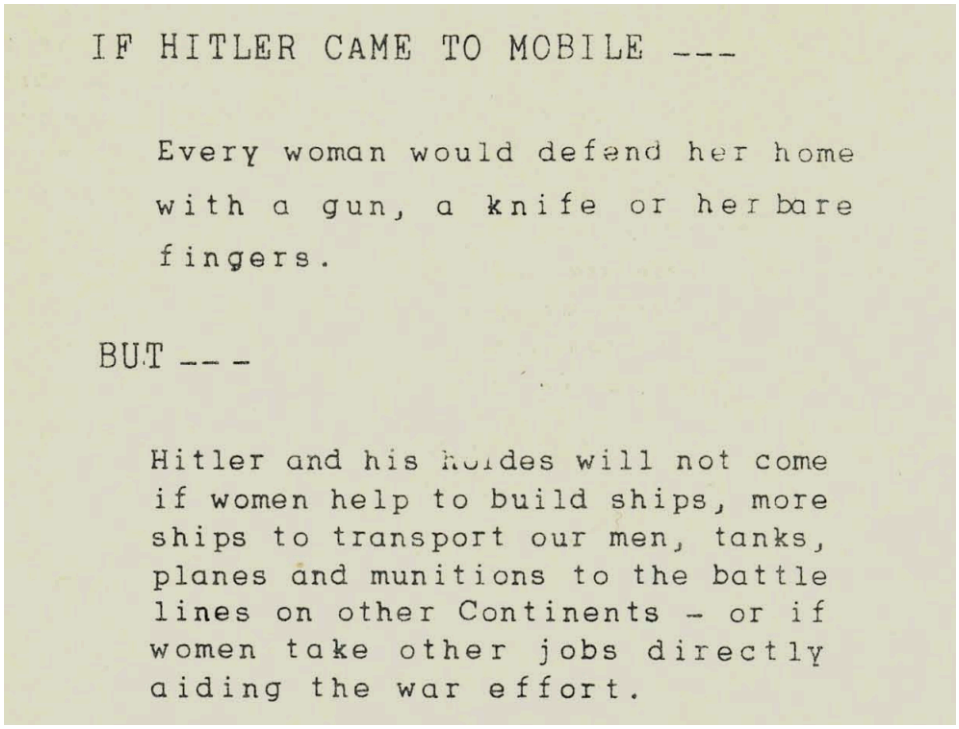
WWII brought about a dramatic shift in societal expectations and gender roles, with approximately 6.5 million women entering the workforce (Fishbein, 1982). Filling roles previously held by men, women contributed significantly to industries such as aircraft manufacturing, welding, and operating radios (Rose, 2018). This period marked a departure from traditional views of women as primarily homemakers and mothers. During the war, women proved that they could perform “men’s” work effectively, leading to increased power and a sense of independence. The federal government and various organizations also actively encouraged women to join the workforce, recognizing their important role in supporting the war effort.

The WMC played an important role in recruiting women into war jobs. While it was created because of the need to mobilize the workforce, the specific push for its creation was from the dramatic increase in labor demands for war-related industries across the country. The WMC conducted regular labor force surveys of employers, tracking female employment and pinning areas where women were needed more. The need to effectively manage and direct the available

labor force, including the influx of women into non-traditional roles, was the primary driving force behind the creation of the WMC.

Figure 1

War Manpower Commission Job Flyer


IF HITLER CAME TO MOBILE ---

Every woman would defend her home with a gun, a knife or her bare fingers.

BUT ---

Hitler and his hordes will not come if women help to build ships, more ships to transport our men, tanks, planes and munitions to the battle lines on other Continents - or if women take other jobs directly aiding the war effort.

Note: This figure shows the introduction of a promotional flyer encouraging women to register for war jobs in 1942. From the National Archives and Records Administration. (n.d.-a). Women in the workforce during World War II. National Archives and Records Administration. https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/wwii-women.html

The USES, a network of public employment offices, also became an important labor market clearinghouse, especially for war-related industries. These organizations further gave women the opportunity to work in society and made their contributions outside of the home seem more concrete. Alice Yick, for example, became the first Chinese American civilian woman worker at Boston's Navy Yard, highlighting the opportunities that opened up for women, even

from diverse backgrounds, during the war. By March 1944, manufacturing jobs accounted for 34% of female employment, a significant increase from 21% in 1940. However, this shift in gender roles was temporary, driven by the immediacy of war (U.S. Department, 2024). Once the war ended, federal and civilian policies aimed to replace women workers with returning male veterans. These were not formal legislative acts but rather a combination of expectations on women. The prevailing social norm was that returning men should have priority in the job market as heads of households, as well as prioritization of veterans in hiring practices and the discontinuation of wartime recruitment campaigns that had once encouraged women to join the workforce.

The Limited Long-Term Impact of WWII on Female Employment

Because of the expectation for men to take back their jobs once run by women, the impacts on 1950 female labor supply were small. While there are positive effects on white women's employment in long-lasting product manufacturing, these effects are negligible and short-lived (Rose, 2018).

WWII played a limited direct role in the future course of American women's employment rates. The temporary surge in wartime employment was not a “watershed” moment for female workers, as historians and economists in the 1980s and 1990s argued that the war had little direct impact on female employment in 1950 or after. Even with the attempt to bend societal expectations for women in order to show patriotism for their country, once the men returned from the war traditional gender roles were expected to be put back in place. The next section explains more about what exactly kept women from keeping their jobs and set back feminist movements 20 years.

Post-War Era: The Reinforcement of Traditional Gender Roles

Following WWII, there was a large effort to push women back into traditional domestic roles, intensifying stress and contributing to what has been termed “mommy madness” (Warner, 2005). Despite the sharp increase in female employment during the war, areas with more female employment did not see much of an increase in female hiring once veterans returned to the workforce. During the war, the economic necessity of women in the workforce led to a temporary downplaying of housewives’ stress to encourage participation. However, in the post-war era, with the priority shifting to male employment and a return to traditional family structures, the stress of women being forced out of the workforce and into often idealized domestic roles was seemingly ignored (Kamp, 2018).

The media also played a significant role in perpetuating stress-related norms and reinforcing traditional gender roles. Popular magazines, advertisements, and films showcased the “ideal” way for women to cope with stress and return home after the war, often picturing the perfect housewife. Suggestions for stress management included embracing domesticity, buying consumer goods like vacuums and beauty products to keep an ideal appearance, and making their children happy for personal satisfaction. This media portrayal of domestic ease and effortless homemaking contributed to unrealistic expectations placed on women, inciting stress and feelings of inadequacy (PBS, 2025).

Figure 2

Ladies' Home Journal Advertisement

Note: An excerpt from the Ladies' Home Journal in February of 1945, depicting a woman as the head of the household. From the Ladies' Home Journal, February 1945, 003, Box: 007, Folder: 001, Item: 003. Walter Baumhofer Collection, DIRA-00035. Dowd Illustration Research Archive.

The marketing of the temp industry to housewives further reinforced gender roles in the workforce. This industry presented women's work as secondary to their housewife duties, thus maintaining gendered labor inequalities. By offering jobs that were framed as temporary and supplementary, the temp industry ensured that women would not challenge the existing male-dominated labor structure. In this context, the temp industry strategically marketed itself to

housewives, positioning their work as supplementary to their primary responsibilities within the home. This framing helped maintain existing gender inequalities in the labor force by suggesting that women's participation in paid work was secondary and should not interfere with their domestic duties (Rutherford, 2017). The article titled *"The Making of the Kelly Girl: Gender and the Origins of the Temp Industry in Postwar America"*, provides further detail on the establishment and marketing strategies of the temp industry targeting women in the post-WWII period, reinforcing prevailing gender roles (Hatton, 2008). By offering jobs described as temporary and supplementary, like typists and receptionists to men, the temp industry effectively discouraged women from challenging the prevalent male dominance in the workforce and aligned with the broader societal push to re-establish traditional gender roles after the war.

Conclusion

One of the main challenges in researching this topic has been differentiating between cultural representations and lived experiences. Many sources provide narratives on women's stress, lacking firsthand accounts to reflect a range of lived experiences. Future research should focus on incorporating more primary sources that include housewives' perspectives in their own words. Given how long ago WWII was, finding direct interviews from this period may be rare, making a search for alternative sources such as diaries, letters, and oral histories more necessary.

The experiences of housewives before and after WWII highlight the complex interplay between societal expectations, economic conditions, and individual well-being and their impact on female mental health. Stress was not just a personal or medical issue but a product of shifting cultural norms and economic needs. The war provided a temporary rest from house arrest, but

the post-war era saw a resurgence of traditional gender roles that intensified stress and limited women's opportunities.

By understanding these historical dynamics, we can gain insights into the ongoing challenges women face in balancing work and family responsibilities. Recognizing the systemic factors that contribute to stress in housewives is crucial for developing effective strategies to support women's well-being and promote gender equality. With the reinforcement of placing domestic shackles on womens' wrists setting back feminist movements 20 years, it is important to not repeat history and acknowledge the interplay of stress and its environment.

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