

The Redefining of Women's Role in Parisian Society: 1914 to 1918

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The German declaration of war in August 1914 forced France to join World War I. Germany wasted no time invading neutral Belgium to secure a more advantageous route to Paris, which led France to assume a defensive position and mobilize nearly 3.8 million soldiers.¹ This mass mobilization impacted the French home front by removing much of the male population from their typical places in the workforce. The French government looked to women as early as August 1914 to fill open jobs.² Parisian women of all social and economic classes answered the call to duty and assumed new roles in factories, trades, and society. The efforts of women on the Parisian home front bolstered the French war effort by increasing the country's ability to supply troops on the front lines. Taking inspiration from those who joined the workforce early, more women entered war industries as the war went on. They gained widespread recognition. Women's involvement in the war effort helped to challenge Parisian society's pre-existing views of gender roles in society.

Violence and heroism on the frontlines dominate modern conceptions of warfare. But industrialized warfare involves and demands sacrifices from a broad cross-section of civil society. Furthermore, these costs of warfare are dynamic and can affect individuals differently from losing loved ones, jobs, financial opportunities, and access to goods. The lack of consideration for the effects of war on the home front has resulted in the contributions of many working women being overlooked. Scholars have argued that women's

¹"The Army of 1914 in Seine-et-Marne," Archives Départementales de Seine-et-Marne, accessed October 22, 2024, <https://archives.seine-et-marne.fr/fr/army-1914-seine-et-marne#:~:text=Organization%20of%20the%20French%20army,divisions%20and%2010%20cavalry%20divisions>.

² Peggy Bette, "Women's Mobilization for War (France)," International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 3, updated October 8, 2014, <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/womens-mobilization-for-war-france/#easy-footnote-11-1089353>.

contributions to Parisian metalworking industries reinforced traditional Parisian gender roles during World War I.³ Other scholars have focused on the accommodations made for Parisian women in factories that served to protect their traditional roles as mothers.⁴ Lastly, some scholars have argued that the role of Parisian women in nursing has gained the most recognition because of their relevance on the frontlines.⁵ I argue that between 1914 and 1918, women contributed greatly to the war effort in Paris by serving in various occupational roles which were determined by their social class. This is evident in Parisian women's roles, such as serving as military nurses and working in factories to create goods that supported the French military.

Women in Nursing

The emergence of women in important industries and the mobilization of female nurses to reach the frontlines of war changed women's traditional roles in Parisian society. Before the war, Parisian women were often confined to the boundaries of their social classes. For upper-class women and members of the bourgeoisie, their primary role in society revolved around serving their husbands and caring for children. In some cases, these wealthy families even hired caretakers for their children and removed this responsibility from the role of upper-class women altogether. However, historian Gary Girod notes that inflation resulted in many wealthy

³ Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914-1939* (Cornell University Press, 1995), 39-40; Mathilde Dubeset, Françoise Thébaud, and Catherine Vincent, "Female Munition Workers of the Seine," 1991, in *The French Home Front 1914-1918: The Legacy of the Great War*, edited by Patrick Fridenson, translated by Bruce Little (Berg Publishers, 1992), 190.

⁴ Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality*, 39-40; Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 103.

⁵ Peggy Bette, "Women's Mobilization for War (France)," ; Margaret H. Darrow, "French Women and the First World War: War Stories of the Home Front (The Legacy of the Great War)" (Berg Publishers, 2000), 134.

families dismissing domestic servants as they “reduced expenses” in response to financial struggles.⁶ This led upper-class women to embrace a more active role in their households and Parisian society by entering the workforce and caring more directly for their families. In sharp contrast, working-class women in Paris often worked as domestic servants or in labor roles to provide a source of income. Women who had previously worked as domestic servants, having experience in caretaking, adjusted to different nurturing roles throughout society once the war began.

Throughout the First World War, the most observed contribution of upper to middle-class women to the war effort in Paris was service in the medical field. Female workers dominated the medical field, except for on the front lines, where military medics supported the health of the soldiers. This field offered the greatest opportunity for women in Paris to directly witness the effects of war. Nurses in Paris came from various backgrounds, primarily falling into the middle-class, but these women were united by the sacrifices they were willing to make for their country. In his journal recording his journey through France, Joseph G. Butler Jr., an American businessman, recalls meeting a woman named “Mrs. Benet” in Paris, who he refers to as “a society woman, but in nurse's garb and actively at work.”⁷ Butler's observations highlight that the women serving in the Parisian workforce were not all doing so out of necessity for pay, but also out of patriotism for France. Mrs. Benet was a woman of high society who chose to serve as a nurse to fulfill her duty to her country.⁸ This exemplifies the sacrifices

⁶ Gary Girod, “The Women Who Make the Guns: The Munitionettes in Glasgow and Paris and Their Lack of Interaction with the Far-Left Agitators,” *Labor History* 61, no. 2 (2019): 203–12, accessed November 2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/citedby/10.1080/0023656X.2019.1667493?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

⁷ Joseph G. Butler Jr., *A Journey Through France in War Time* (The Penton Press Cleveland, 1917; Project Gutenberg, 2007), 24, accessed November 2024, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/20464/20464-h/20464-h.htm#l>.

⁸ Joseph G. Butler Jr., *A Journey Through France in War Time*, 24-26.

women from higher social classes in Paris were willing to make to contribute to the war effort. Many middle-class women volunteered to serve as nurses during World War I and, in doing so, treated wounded soldiers.⁹ This provided women with insight into the conditions of the frontlines and exposed them directly to the harsh impacts of the war.

In addition, nurses in Paris during World War I served as unpaid volunteers. This led to upper-class and middle-class women dominating the occupation. Margaret Darrow, an expert on French social history, wrote that “while elite women founded hospitals and middle-class women volunteered to staff them, working-class women were excluded.”¹⁰ Darrow’s statement highlights the limiting effect that the lack of paid nursing positions had on working-class women in Paris. Oftentimes, these working-class women could not work without pay, so the societal precedent that nurses worked unpaid hindered their ability to perform these duties for their country. This contributed to a class as nursing in wartime Paris became dominated by middle-class women.

Nursing in Paris proved to be most accessible for upper-class women. The American Red Cross gained prominence throughout World War I and enlisted women from across the United States to serve overseas in Europe. However, the job opportunities to serve as a nurse overseas were primarily limited to upper-class women because of specific requirements. Nancy O’Brien Wagner, a Red Cross historian, lists requirements for Red Cross volunteers, including youth, acceptance of a “nominal salary,” and some previous knowledge of French or Italian languages.¹¹ At this time, women

⁹ Joseph G. Butler Jr., *A Journey Through France in War Time*, 24-26.

¹⁰ Margaret H. Darrow, *French Women and the First World War*, 134.

¹¹ Red Cross Foreign Service, "Qualifications necessary for women stenographers, bookkeepers and clerical help," Dee Smith Papers, MHS. As of August 1918, the sisters of soldiers were allowed to enroll if they promised not to visit their brothers; Northern Division Bulletin (Minneapolis), Aug. 15, 1918, p.1. of the 5,860 who worked in France, 802 received no pay; American Red Cross During the War, 45-47, quoted in Nancy O'Brien Wagner, "Awfully Busy These Days: Red Cross Women in France During World

from upper-class families were most educated and had the ability to serve a cause with very little pay in return. This resulted in the mass of upper-class women who flocked to join the American Red Cross.

The French war effort attracted support from the American Red Cross and received nursing units from the organization. Elizabeth Ashe, a nurse with the American Red Cross, wrote in a letter to a loved one that a French nurse that she worked under in Paris helped to manage “two hundred trained nurses in the field” who were “the wives of officers and people of intelligence.”¹² This is significant because it shows the abundance of women in Paris who desperately wanted to support the French war effort. It is also noteworthy that Ashe describes the women as “wives of officers and people of intelligence.”¹³ Her statement further separates the women from the working-class by highlighting their husbands’ positions of power within the French military. This supports the idea that the nursing field in Paris during wartime was largely composed of upper- and middle-class women.

Nurses in Paris held multifaceted roles focused on serving communities throughout the city rather than reserving assistance solely for soldiers. In addition to supporting the war effort, Ashe records her experiences working in children’s hospitals.¹⁴ This proved to be a very important task because, oftentimes, children did not receive the care they needed if their fathers were at war and their mothers were working. Ashe recalls, in a letter to a loved one, that these children also lacked basic clothing to keep them warm.¹⁵ Nurses like Elizabeth Ashe served a vital role on the

War I,” *Minnesota History* 63, no. 1 (2012): 26, accessed November 2024, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41704981>.

¹² Elizabeth H. Ashe, *Intimate Letters from France: During America's First Year of War* (Big Byte Books, 2014), August 12, 1917, letter, Nook edition.

¹³ Elizabeth H. Ashe, *Intimate Letters from France*, August 12, 1917.

¹⁴ Elizabeth H. Ashe, *Intimate Letters from France*, November 13, 1917.

¹⁵ Elizabeth H. Ashe, *Intimate Letters from France*, November 4, 1917.

French home front by caring for those who were impacted by the sacrifices demanded by the war. One such example of the care they provided was the distribution of clothing to Parisian children in need. These women were not merely bystanders who stayed at home while men fought for their protection; these women actively contributed to the war effort by tending to soldiers and caring for the general population.

From the beginning of the war, paid military medics commissioned by the French military provided medical services on the frontlines. However, the challenges presented by World War I contributed to the Ministry of War to order “the admission of Red Cross volunteers to the war zone” in the spring of 1917.¹⁶ The decision to allow volunteer nurses to enter the war zone was influenced by the lack of distinction between the home front and the frontlines during World War I. The effects of this order further exposed nurses previously trained and serving in Paris to the brutality of the frontlines. Consequently, the exposure of nurses to the frontlines resulted in nearly “10 percent of nurses involved in the traveling operating rooms” losing their lives.¹⁷ This loss displays the sacrifices made by female nurses during World War I. In areas along the frontlines, female volunteers serving the Red Cross were the first to medically address wounded soldiers, endangering their lives through their proximity to battle. This impacted previously existing beliefs on gender and warfare by challenging the perception that war was a masculine affair. These Parisian women bravely risked their lives to tend to the needs of wounded French soldiers along the frontlines.

Even though the majority did not serve on the frontlines, women serving as nurses in Paris during World War I experienced the harsh realities of warfare and were individually affected by their circumstances. It is important to consider the effects World War I had on all women contributing to the war effort. Nancy O’Brien Wagner notes that nurses in Paris dealt with many challenges, such as “flies, lice, fleas, hives . . . food shortages, food

¹⁶ Margaret H. Darrow, *French Women and the First World War*, 139.

¹⁷ Peggy Bette, “Women’s Mobilization for War (France), 134.

and coal rationing, and high prices.”¹⁸ Women serving as nurses in Paris experienced challenges unique to the home front that their contemporaries often did not consider a part of warfare. However, the challenges faced by these women at home characterized their wartime experiences in Paris. Women made sacrifices in support of the war effort that ultimately contributed to France’s success.

Nearly one thousand French nurses gained recognition as recipients of the prestigious Croix de Guerre, the French medal presented in honor of bravery during times of war.¹⁹ However, this praise was short-lived and overshadowed by the tales of valor on the frontlines that were deemed more notable under the masculine ideals of warfare. The service of Parisian nurses during World War I did not fit into French society’s lens of warfare, and thus, their experiences were greatly diminished by their contemporaries.

Women in Industry

Throughout World War I, factory employers often hired working-class Parisian women to work jobs that involved the repetitive completion of tasks requiring little to no thought. In addition, they hired an overwhelming number of women for factory that they considered appealing to feminine qualities. The roles that women took on in the industrial workplace during World War I reinforced gender-based prejudice in Paris. Historical records of job assignments often illuminate gender biases towards women in the workplace.

Factory managers often assigned jobs to women based on prejudiced perceptions of gender roles. This is evident in war industries organized around assembly lines. Laura Lee Downs, an expert on the role of French women in the workplace, wrote that “women usually started on simple machine work” that “turned out a long series of standardized parts.” These

¹⁸ Nancy O’Brien Wagner, “Awfully Busy These Days: RED CROSS WOMEN IN FRANCE DURING WORLD WAR I,” *Minnesota History* 63, no. 1 (2012): 28, accessed October 2024, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41704981>.

¹⁹ Margaret H. Darrow, *French Women and the First World War*, 142.

women were also placed into groups that were “under the supervision of a single skilled man.”²⁰ Following the rapid mobilization of women into the Parisian workforce, these women were not immediately granted the opportunity to learn skilled trades or even manage themselves.

Instead, factory owners and managers placed female workers under the command of a man and made them do mindless tasks. This negatively affected women’s role in the workplace by setting the precedent that women were under the management of a male supervisor while they were left to complete insignificant tasks. Perceptions of gender held by Parisian factory owners influenced work assignments given to Parisian women in the workplace. However, women in the workforce gained power by having strength in numbers. In her book, historian Laura Lee Downs records that “between January 1916 and January 1917, the number of women in private munitions plants rose 3.5 times; the numbers in state factories rose nearly 2.5 times.”²¹ The large growth of women in munitions factories between January 1916 and January 1917 illustrates the changing economic scene of Paris during World War I. Unskilled women were being used to replace skilled male workers, so the men could join the French military. The conscription of working-age French men to the military provided opportunities for women to assume industrial careers and become less of a minority in the workforce.

Women’s role in Parisian workplaces during World War I reinforced gender-based divisions. As the number of women in factories increased, factory managers were able to separate men and women into separate departments. According to the authors of “Female Munitions Workers of the Seine,” “there were rarely any women on supervisory staffs,” demonstrating the lack of power granted to the growing number of female workers in factories.²² Oftentimes, workers of the opposite sex did not interact with

²⁰ Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality*, 39-40.

²¹ Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality*, 41.

²² Mathilde Dubesset, Françoise Thébaud, and Catherine Vincent, “Female Munition Workers of the Seine,” 190.

each other, and only male supervisors interacted with the women subordinate to them. In this way, men were able to continue to control women in the workplace without presenting other working men as their equals.

Jobs in industry were widely available to women of all social classes. According to the authors of “Female Munitions Workers of the Seine,” factories employed “housewives” from the bourgeoisie, “white-collar workers, and laborers.”²³ Factories appealed to women from various classes by offering paid positions in industry that directly supported the war effort. The opportunities presented to women were determined by their social class. Gary Girod, a French historian and author, records that middle-class women were allowed to become “factory inspectors, supervisors, and police,” often earning much more than their “pre-war salaries.”²⁴ In contrast, working-class women fulfilled roles as unskilled laborers on “assembly-lines.”²⁵ The roles of women in Parisian industries demonstrate the various opportunities available to women during this period and how social class determined the opportunities available to different women.

In addition to having greater employment opportunities, better-educated, upper-class women had the opportunity to become business owners. In his diary, Joseph G. Butler records his experience with two female entrepreneurs, the Callot sisters, in the dress-making industry. Butler notes that the women had “three thousand employees, principally women.”²⁶ During his time in the factory, Butler and his colleagues marveled at the women’s expertise in dressmaking and fashion. Butler’s observations demonstrate the opportunities that were available to women from different social classes in Paris between the years 1914 and 1918 and the rise of prominence by women in Parisian industries. Educated women who had

²³ Mathilde Dubesset, Françoise Thébaud, and Catherine Vincent, “Female Munition Workers of the Seine,” 187.

²⁴ Gary Girod, “The Women Who Make the Guns,” 203–12.

²⁵ Gary Girod, “The Women Who Make the Guns,” 203–12.

²⁶ Joseph G. Butler Jr., *A Journey Through France in War Time*, 24.

sufficient funds had the opportunity to embark on their journeys as entrepreneurs. These women primarily hired working-class women, as it was easier for them to manage other women, displaying that the rise of upper-class women in industries consequently helped working-class women. The opportunities granted to women by other women throughout World War I demonstrates the success of female-owned businesses in Paris at this time. The success of female-owned businesses served as a valuable example of Parisian women's ability to not only contribute to industries but also serve as industrial leaders.

The accessibility of factories provided job opportunities accommodating to women from all social classes, creating a diverse collective of women. Working-class women worked on assembly lines to support their families while their husbands fought on the frontlines, whereas upper-class women worked in supervisor roles to garner an additional source of household income. Social class diversity among women within factories resulted in the blending of cultures that gave rise to the collective title of the *munitionettes*. Although used to praise the Parisian women working in factories, the term displays the effects of gender roles in Paris at this time. The incorporation of the suffix “-ette” is employed by journalists to feminize the factory workers and reaffirm popular Parisian beliefs on gender in society.²⁷ The diversity among women in factories contributed to the formation of a label to represent the spirited Parisian women who responded to the call of duty to contribute to their country's war effort.

During World War I, Parisians debated traditional values and expectations placed upon women because of the controversial discussion of women's roles in war. Societal standards expected women to produce children who would one day support the nation, yet the growing demands of the Parisian economy required women to fill in the roles of men who were serving in the war. When birthrates in Paris decreased as Parisian women funneled into various occupations, the French government, in the words of historian Susan Grayzel “launch[ed] intensified campaigns about the necessity of women performing the vital service of replenishing -

²⁷ Gary Girod, “The Women Who Make the Guns,” 203–12.

reproducing - the nation as [a] race.”²⁸ These public campaigns led by the French government highlight the social changes that took place in Paris. The efforts taken to support the traditionally perceived roles of Parisian women in society as mothers and caretakers illustrate the stubborn consistency of gender roles in society that contributed to the role of women in the economy and society. Nonetheless, women in Paris contributed to the French war effort by continuing to reproduce and replenish the country’s population.

One of the first measures taken by the French government to promote birth rates throughout the country was to improve healthcare for pregnant and nursing mothers. By providing support for mothers, the French government encouraged women to bear children and mediated the country’s decreasing birth rate. In the early days of the war, the military government of Paris served a vital role in the administration of healthcare to mothers after “the Ligue Contre la Mortalité Infantile” came under the government’s authority.²⁹ This action made certain that “no pregnant woman would lack aid despite the crisis of war,” illustrating the government’s objective to provide support for all pregnant women in their husbands’ absence while they were on the frontlines.³⁰ Therefore, by providing women with proper healthcare, the government gave all Parisian women accessible medical assistance regardless of their societal role.

The French government promoted pregnancy and motherhood through direct legal actions to protect the lives and welfare of Parisian women, specifically Parisian women in industry. This is evident in the “1917 law that permitted new mothers to breast-feed their children while at the workplace,” exhibiting the priority that the French government placed on protecting the rights and welfare of mothers.³¹ The significance of this law lies in its consideration of a mother’s role in the economy, specifically in the

²⁸ Susan R. Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War*, 103.

²⁹ Susan R. Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War*, 107.

³⁰ Susan R. Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War*, 107.

³¹ Susan R. Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War*, 108.

workplace. By allowing women to breastfeed in the workplace, the French government prevented discrimination and supported a woman's ability to raise her family. This reflects the changes occurring in the Parisian economy throughout World War I that supported the growing recognition of women in society. Laws protecting women's roles in the workplace echo the challenged perception of traditional gender roles in Paris and the growing prominence of women in Parisian society.

In addition to government-led actions, certain French companies employed women in industry and supported their female workers by instituting pronatalist policies that served to protect a woman's ability to support her family. One prominent example of such policies is those instituted by the explosives firm La Feuillette. The company's upper management sought to support their female workers while enticing them to return to work following a period of maternity leave. La Feuillette's female workers received 50 Francs at the start of their maternity leave and, following the child's birth, received 200 Francs for a son and 100 Francs for a daughter. In addition, the company awarded birthday presents of 100 Francs for a female worker's child's first birthday, demonstrating the shared sentiment that increasing the country's declining birth rate was of the utmost importance.³² Although some may argue that La Feuillette's pronatalist policies were used to keep workers positive and loyal to increase production, the policies still represent significant progress in the French economy. Regardless of the motives of upper management, these tactics spread throughout the Parisian metal-working industries to protect their female workers. In Paris, at this time, there were no legal obligations for a company to provide maternity leave. These policies display significant changes in the role of Parisian women in the economy. Throughout the war, Parisian women's role in the economy had grown so much that employers and elites began to consider their significance and protect their well-being.

The emerging group of Parisian women working in industry, given the title the *munitionettes* for their contributions to the munitions industry in

³² Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality*, 172-173.

support of the war effort, supported the French military by consistently producing metal products and munitions. Media sources around the world applauded these women for their achievements throughout the war and helped them gain international recognition for their prowess in production. One such example is displayed in an American newspaper article discussing the experiences of two American Y.W.C.A secretaries working in France during wartime. The article praised the massive workforce of nearly “eight thousand females” working in support of the war effort, and one of the secretaries even states that the *munitionettes* bear “the burden of the war.”³³ Similar to the American newspaper’s lavish praise for the Parisian women, an article reporting on a British commission sent to study the French methods of production applauded “the self-sacrificing patriotism with which the women of France are wearing out their lives.”³⁴ The praise for the *munitionettes* highlights the recognition French women received for their valuable contributions to the war effort. Throughout the war, the production of Parisian women in industry challenged prior social beliefs and norms on gender roles. This demonstrates the value placed upon the productivity of women working in factories and how it affected their role in Parisian society.

The rapid mobilization of women into the workforce resulted in sex-based divisions and discrimination in the workplace. Parisian gender norms carried over into the workplace as large numbers of unskilled Parisian women joined the workforce at entry-level jobs. Women’s career roles typically fell within society’s perception of gender roles. In many ways, this pattern supported society’s pre-existing beliefs and further limited women

³³ “The Work of Two Y.W.C.A. Secretaries in France,” *Evening Star*, October 20, 1918, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress, accessed November 2024, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1918-10-20/ed-1/seq-48/#date1=1915&index=8&rows=20&words=munitionettes&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1918&proxtext=munitionettes&y=15&x=17&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

³⁴ “French Women as Munition Makers: A Story of Patriotism,” *Current History (1916-1940)* 4, No. 2 (May 1916): pp. 321-322, accessed November 2024, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45323282>.

by creating a set of expectations that undervalued the abilities of female workers in comparison to men.

Conclusion

For France to be victorious, World War I demanded sacrifices from Parisian women that changed the social dynamics of the city. Parisian women's role in contributing to the effort challenged traditional beliefs of gender roles in society. These contributions came from patriotic women with different social backgrounds and standings in society who had a desire to support their country. Women from the upper and middle classes flocked to volunteer organizations to serve as nurses and caretakers who provided for soldiers as well as the general population of Paris. These Parisian women left their impact on the war by directly interacting with the victims of the brutal frontlines and the orphans resulting from the cruelties of warfare. Working-class women in Paris gained a significant role in industries throughout the war and contributed to France's military success. Regardless of opportunities granted to them by their social class, Parisian women challenged traditional societal beliefs regarding a woman's role in the economy and society by contributing to the war effort in their various occupations. At the same time, women maintained their traditional roles in Parisian society as mothers and caretakers. Parisian women's role as both mothers and contributors to the economy resulted in greater social consideration for women and enhanced support for both children and mothers. The contributions of Parisian women to the French war effort in World War I led to women gaining recognition for serving significant roles in Parisian society.