

# World War II, an Underestimated Time for the Growth of British Female Economical Rights

Langrui Cao\*

Mingde High school, Changsha, Hunan, China 410004

\*Corresponding Author. Email: lrcao0612@163.com

## ABSTRACT

The Second World War had a profound and lasting impact on the life and survival mode of British women. In Britain before World War II, gender was the boundary between the roles of combatants and noncombatants and between family and work. However, in the Second World War, the threat of air raid and invasion made a difference between combatants and noncombatants, resulting in a conflict in the fixed areas of life between men and women, making it difficult to maintain the old gender roles. The war modified women's role in economic life and promote them to be economic independent. This paper will discuss the dramatic changes of the society after World War II in England and talk about the changes in women's mindset about their role in the economy life. The work will reveal a rising enthusiasms for British women to join economic activities that were usually lack in women in the past and prove that we often underestimate the role of World War II in changing British women's gender identity.

**Keywords:** World War II, British, Female, Economy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The war in the 20th century is regarded not only as a period of social change for women, but also as a period of progress for women's liberation. Everyone knows about the impact of World War I on British women, and on British feminism. The war led to British women's right to vote, an enormous victory. But what about World War II? Many scholars have argued that World War II, even though it was a more destructive and transformative war, did not have much impact on British feminism. In this essay, I will show that this is mistaken. Throughout the Second World War, British women were welcomed to engage in paid work, their opportunities to participate in social affairs greatly increased, and they volunteered to join the labor force. They learned important skills, received specialized training, and their economic income became more and more independent. **World War II had a sizable impact on British women's thoughts about themselves and their economical role in British society.**

The effect of World War II on British women's economical role is a debatable topic. Some scholars claim that World War II indeed brought significant change in the participant of economic life for women. This conclusion was based on data of increasing number of

female employees in various industries from military to production. Female MPs and feminists wrote in their work describing the increase interests for a job among women in the labor force; they also encourage women to realize their social responsibilities not just as a normal housewife, but a crowd of people that could make changes to the society. On the other side, some scholars cast doubt on this theory, in Harold Smith's journal, he concluded that, "A study of the wartime movement for equal pay for equal work in Great Britain also concluded that the lasting effects of war on this issue were very limited." [1]

Many historians believe that World War I was the era when women's social status greatly improved. However, World War II is considered as less effective in changing females' role in the society. The research on British women is mostly found in general history works. The writing of monographs and papers is also concentrated in the Victorian period. The research on British women in the 20th century is mostly concentrated in the first World War, or focuses on a specific field. From the perspective of war, there is little overall research on the changes of British women.

Therefore, taking the world war two as the background, this paper explores the changes of British women's status through the war and the reasons for the

changes of British women's status. This article will dig into the women's angle of view of their life during and after world war II. We will see how the feminists at that time interpreted female's roles

## **2. ECONOMIC CHANGES AMONG WOMEN**

World War II brought significant damages to the British economy and society. Different from the war of 1914-1918, in addition to a large number of military casualties, the second world war also caused a large number of civilian casualties in Britain. More than 250,000 homes were either completely or partially destroyed[2]. From the war preparation stage, British men have the responsibility to accept the command of the government. In 1916, the British government recruited men in response to the war, and did not hesitate to recruit men again in 1939. According to the National Service, all men between the ages of 18 and 41 could be drafted[3]. During the war, more than one third of men were killed in the army and merchant ships, and the male labor force fell sharply. The labor shortage soon became a huge problem and family lost their economic support. These changes forced a change in the labor structure. People also expect them to act freely in response to the changing labor demand (or labor shortage) without government intervention, as in the first World War. In fact, this supply is insufficient to meet wartime needs.

In order to reverse such a intense labor shortage problem, the government began to recruit housewives to labor for the war effort[4]. Since 1941, women of all ages, regardless of their marital status and family responsibilities, have been encouraged to volunteer. The government had approved several increases in military personnel before the 1942 manpower survey[5]. The action of the British society and government turned out to be positive in that period of time and British society was witnessing a dramatic increase in women in different industry and women were able to join a variety of careers without barriers. According to the census data from New York Times in 1942, 7,500,000 of the 15,800,000 female in Britain between 18 and 64 joined the full time job of part of the military product production and they were playing a role in army, navy and air force[6]. British women's access to economic activity started to make a remarkable progress as many of work places were new to women. Female were able to step out their home and slowly broke the gender roles that tied them to the family. Women managed to appear in careers that previously lack in women or even refuse women to join. This effect is definitely not short term, it contributes today as women are active in governmental affairs, social affairs and even military affairs in Britain.

The experience of labor began to change how women thought about themselves. To see how, we can explore a 1942 article by a female named Edith Summerskill.

Summerskill, who was a British politician and physician and one of the longest serving female MP [7]. Her article entitled "Women After the War," the article was an attempt to show how much the war was changing women, and how lasting those effects would be. Women, Summerskill argued, "have proved themselves capable of undertaking most of the jobs"[8] In Summerskill's argument it is not difficult to find out the women at this stage obtained skills that proved themselves to be in the position that previously lack in women. Women proved that their strength was not weaker than men but could reach the same level as man do.

How long this feeling lasted after the war and how long it affected British women must be very different, but the ideological struggle to get rid of the shackles of the family is becoming more and more intense. "Summerfield interviewed twenty-two women who had served in the forces during the war, most of whom said that their wartime experiences had changed them and made them more independent and confident of their abilities." [9] For some women, the War provides them with the opportunity to work outside the "women's work" before they expect to get married, and may combine work and family in the future. For others, it is likely to delay the establishment of marriage and family for them to create their self value. Interestingly, the later life experiences of these two groups show that most married women combine work and family life outstandingly.

During the World War II, women actively joined different careers including farming, military and so on to show their enthusiastic in social responsibilities and expressed their willingness for the development of the society. Although women still owned the social responsibilities like being a good wife or taking care of their children, however, these gender roles could not prevent them from joining the society. According to Virginia Nicholson, writing in *The Guardian* in 2018, "Britain's wartime women gained a new sense of power. There were women who could talk down aircrews, break codes, track battleships, drive 10-tonne trucks and save lives." [10] Many women had decided to recreate their social appearance and believed that everything a man could do was also suitable for women. Women also wanted to reinforce the fact that being a housewife did not mean no contributions towards the society, in fact, only with the existence of women managing many things left behind the men can the whole society function well in war time. MP Summerskill, argued that,

*"What is needed is recognition by the State and the community that a wife and mother in the home is making an important contribution to society. The whole war effort would be paralysed if the housewives of the country went on strike. They feed the workers, care for their homes and bear and rear another generation. And by workers, I mean those who work in any capacity."* [11]

In this document, it has presented that women thinks

about family was more mature and independent, their requirements are constantly improved, and they pursue equality in marriage. This more independent status makes all family affairs become a part that couples need to share, and men can no longer escape participating in the management of family affairs. Women’s awareness of their social status started to improve, believing that they were not only housewives taking care of the family. Women wanted to emphasize that female played a huge role in helping Britain survive during war time. After playing a huge role in the wartime, female were used to take responsibilities in the society and would be reluctant to return to household.

British women in social affairs and relationship between husband and wife in the family also changed. Whether starting from personal needs, such as the purchase of necessities and luxury accessories, or from social needs at work, they were constantly looking for ways to combine paid and unpaid work. After the war, the role of British women is no longer defined only by a good wife or mother. As more and more women return to work after their children grow up, especially when their husbands do not support the concept of "housewife", the view that marriage means full-time housework is also

becoming unpopular. Klein reported about the change in attitudes in 1960: “It is no longer thought virtuous but, on the contrary, to be a sign of lack of organizing ability to spend your whole day doing housework. . . I think this is a change of attitude – they [married women] feel it is “lazy” to stay at home. I have heard it said in so many words that if she has no small children a woman is wasting her time if she does not do a job.”[12] The change in female’s attitude as well as the society’s altitude towards women led to the shift in social recognition of women and women’s self recognition, which allowed women to consider themselves as important components of the community.

“As far as age was concerned, before the war the age profile of women workers had been heavily weighted towards the youngest age groups, 41 per cent being under 25, higher proportions of women over 35 were represented.”[13] During the war, married and elderly women poured into paid work, which changed the traditional image and was no longer limited to families. Many families had the experience of older married women going out to work for the first time, including mothers with children under the age of 14. According to Table 1[14],

**Table 1:** Women in the labor force:1951-81

	1951	1961	1971	1981
Women in the labor force (Percentage of total labor force)	31	33	37	40
Women in the labor force (Percentage of women aged 20-64 )	36	42	52	61
Women employed part-time (Percentage of total labor force)	12	26	35	42
Married Women in the labor force (Percentage of all married women aged 15-59)	26	35	49	62

there was a dramatic changes in the the labor participant among women, women from different age groups were active in the labor market. More and more women within the labor force showed great enthusiasm in joining different kinds of work. Many married women cast off the boundary of marriage and family while their participant in industry increase starting from 1951.

The mobilization of women during the war led to a large number of women entering industries previously dominated by men and witnessed a significant increase in trade union membership. Women increased from more than 900000 in 1938 to more than 1.6 million in 1945. The female density of trade unions doubled between 1938 and 1943, from less than 15 per cent of all women to just under 30 per cent[15]. There is no doubt that after

the war, the increase of the working proportion of married women and the change of the age structure of female workers make women feel the change of their lifestyle, and the married women who participate in work have obtained a certain economic income. With the increasing cost of living, more and more women are willing to engage in paid work and are no longer willing to be full-time housewives.

### 3.CONCLUSION

It is safe to conclude that the impact of the Second World War on British women was latent, and it released new energy for the development and change of new women. It is undeniable that the Second World War was

an important stage to promote the progress of British women. They volunteered to join the wartime work and became a solid auxiliary force. At the same time, they also reaped unexpected surprises from their wartime experience. While the society continues to define women with traditional ideas, it also shows great inclusiveness to women's progress. The effect of women's economic status during and after World War II is a long term effect which continues until today that encourage British female to speak for themselves and work for themselves. Of course World War II didn't just bring the change on economy, but also various fields including political participation, women's thoughts as women and so on and these are all worth discussing. In the future, we are expected to explore into how the World War II changed people's viewpoints on women and how these changes last till today to make significant impact on women.

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