

**Women of the 1940s**  
**We May Never See the Likes of Them Again**  
**By Sue Mayfield Geiger**



**The strength of women during the 1940s was perhaps more noticeable than any other time during the 20th century. Still recovering from the Depression and deep in the throes of war, women were confronted with sacrifices beyond their control.** Husbands, fathers, brothers and sons were pulling military duty thousands of miles from home; women were working in factories and running households; their children were doing without; but these women did not falter. They carried on with determination and valor, and then, when it was all over, went forward with proud hearts.

Imagine if you went to the local grocery store today to buy sugar but could not. How about coffee, tea, butter; even meat? Canned goods? Clothes? Not available. What would you do? Could you cope? Make do? Think quick, now. You cannot panic. A lot of people are depending on you, specifically your family. This was a common occurrence during the decade of the 1940s. The sugar supply was non-existent because it was being used for making molasses, which made ethyl alcohol, and alcohol made the powder to fire guns and serve as torpedo fuel, dynamite, nitro cotton, and other chemicals desperately needed by the American military. The availability of products such as sugar was very limited, and as a result it was considered a "rationed" item. This meant that a housewife could only purchase so much of it at a time, assuming of course that she could find it at the store to begin with.

As a result, housewives had to drive around to several different places to find the products needed to create a well-balanced meal. This too created a problem given the fact that gasoline was rationed as well. Other items that women needed to ration were silk, nylon, rayon, cotton and wool. All of these materials were in high demand because they made parachutes, aircraft and military clothing, tents, and even gunpowder bags.

Another obstacle that the early 1940s housewife ran into was the shortage of steel. In 1943 civilians were only allotted 15% of the nation's steel production. This caused the rationing of bottled, canned, dried and frozen vegetables, as well as canned fruits, juices and soups. Women who lived in major cities felt the impact the hardest, while women who lived on farms and in small towns were able to garden and preserve their own supply of fresh produce. So, in order to help the war effort, the government promoted "Victory Gardens." These were small gardens that families were encouraged to have in their backyards to grow the produce that would normally be found at the grocery store.

Women of this decade were still expected to keep house, dress, and cook as they had before the war started, but with very limited resources. More and more items were being rationed and women had to learn how to make do. Basically, the rationing system was successful because of the great strides made by American women. In order for women to fulfill both their function as wife and mother and their duty to country, some women took night jobs, leaving them with a limited number of hours of sleep. By the end of 1943, one-third of women war workers were mothers of children living at home. The balancing act between one's home and one's job was more difficult than today; housework in the 1940s was far more laborious, because it was the era of cooking from scratch, washing dishes by hand, washing clothes in a wringer washing machine, hanging them on an outdoor clothesline, then manually starching and pressing clothes by themselves (laundry alone usually took an entire day).

Banks were only open in the midday hours, so women who worked during the day had a difficult time getting there. Few grocery stores stayed open at night to accommodate women who worked. Wartime working women often devoted their Sundays off to cleaning and catching up. Mothers who joined the workforce while their husbands were in the military or mothers who had pre-school children faced even bigger challenges—the lack of childcare facilities available to them. Section B of article IV of Paul McNutt's 1942 War Manpower Commission directive stated: "If any such women are unable to arrange for satisfactory care of their children...adequate facilities should be provided...Such facilities should be developed as community projects and not under the auspices of individual employers or employer groups." However, cities did not know how to handle such a dilemma, so instead of forcing industry to deal with the problem, the burden was shifted to state and local governments. Though the Lanham Act, a federally subsidized childcare system, attempted to deal with these problems, it fell short. At the program's peak it only had about 3,000 childcare facilities, which cared for about 130,000 children. The government simply could not develop a comprehensive system for dealing with the large number of mothers going to work. With so much else to do, childcare facilities were not regarded as high priority, and as a result, some women had to quit their jobs to take care of their families.

In August of 1945, the war was finally over and millions of men returned home. However, when the fighting stopped, the war machine, which had mobilized millions of women to work, ceased. They could once again stay at home and take care of their families, but for some women, this just wasn't enough anymore. The development of wartime economy had given women more freedom than they had ever seen before. Though they did face some discrimination in the workforce it was minimal compared to that which they were subjected to before WWII. For the first time, women were able to experience social and economic mobility. They were able to make choices, and by exercising these choices, explore their own individuality and independence. With the war over, women who were once urged to go to work to support their country, were now in jeopardy of losing their jobs.

But the future of women's place in the workforce did not depend solely on the state of the postwar economy. Much of it depended on the women themselves. For the three years preceding the end of WWII, women were subjected to long hours, little benefits, low-cost and low-quality childcare facilities, not to mention almost unprecedented physical demands. For many women, losing their job was a blessing. The fact was that only time would tell how women would react to the postwar period. Many people assumed that American women would just return to their homes voluntarily. Yet there were some women who elected to stay at work. They enjoyed their newfound independence, and the income they brought in was important to either their own livelihood or

that of their family. According to a survey conducted by the Women's Bureau in 1945, 75% of the working women said that they planned to continue working.

The effects of WWII would be felt for years to come. Women had experienced new opportunities, a sense of independence, and were enjoying their own individuality. Though some of the women that continued to work after the war received wage cuts and some even demotions, they had made progress. The war allowed women to make decisions, and it gave them a chance to fight for their rights. And there is no doubt that the consequences of world War II (the discrimination, job cuts, and wage inequalities) led to the development of many of the civil rights movements of the 1950s.