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World War Two Lead to Changes in Gender Roles and Relations in Canada

As centuries have passed, many things about our world has changed. Religion, art, and countries altogether. But something universally has changed; women and their roles.

Women back then would most likely not be able to imagine maintaining a job and a house at the same time. Well, in 1939; that is exactly what they were tasked with; and how World War Two (WWII) lead to changes in gender roles and relations in Canada.

Women in the workplace were highly mistreated during 1940-1970. During the 1940s, when women had just began to get jobs outside of the home; sexual harassment was common. They worked shoulder-to-shoulder with men, which was much different than 10 years earlier when women would only be working if they were minorities. Men working in factories, airfields and farms took this to their advantage and often would act inappropriately towards these women. Women were often below men, In every possible way. Pay was lower, and status was lower. Women with the same proficiency as men were often labeled at less-skilled, just because of the fact that they were a woman. Despite all the inequality, up to 120,000 woman joined the workforce in Canada to provide for their families. “With men off to fight a worldwide war across the Atlantic and the Pacific, women were called to take their place on the production line.” (Walker).

Not only did women work in factories, but they also worked overseas for the military. Women took many jobs, but the most well known is nursing. Gender roles shifted slightly at this time, as women would be addressed by an officer role; such as “Sister” or “Ma’am”, and at the time this was a huge change as women were beginning to gain respect from men; which was a big deal. Overall, there were 4,500 nurses on the Canadian force. Even though it was commonly thought that this was all women did in support of the military, the amount of women that worked in the airforce, navy and military was 11 times the amount of women that worked as nurses. The RCAF (Royal Canadian Air Force) had a women’s division. Here, women worked mostly as “support roles”, but as the war went on women would also work as parachute riggers and laboratory assistants, alongside the job that was mainly male dominated; electrical and mechanical trades. 17,000 women took up roles at the RCAF, and most of them were sent over to Britain to serve Canadian squadrons and headquarters. Many women also worked in the Navy. The WRCNS, aka the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service, was one of the main ones in Canada. WRCNS was started in 1942; and 7000 women worked for them. The women did clerical and administrative tasks, so more men could be made available as soldiers overseas. In fact, the Navy was the last to create a women’s auxiliary, being based of the British counterpart. “By 31 August 1945, 6,783 women had enlisted overall in the WRCNS. At its peak, the organization had 5,893 members, more than 1,000 of whom served outside Canada.” (Gimblett).

A lot of things tended to change after the war, and women working was one of them. No one expected women to keep working, but due to them already having jobs, or having now-disabled husbands, they were required to in order to keep the lights on. Despite this, the men of the workplace hated that women kept on working; even within harsh workplaces.

Women were often treated unfairly in multiple different ways. One of the main ones was unfair/unbalanced pay. Typically, women only made 80-50% of what their male coworkers would make, due to employers either giving them semi-skilled/unskilled jobs (even if they qualified for skilled ones) or just straight up paying them less for the same work men did, under the mindset of “the women’s pay being secondary to the men’s”. Another advantage men had over women was the fact that they could do and or say whatever they pleased to them, without getting in trouble. Whether that be racist, sexual, or harassment; typically employers would not make an effort to solve these problems, which made working as a women that much more harder.

Luckily, after a long time of fighting and protesting; The Equal Pay Act of 1970 granted employers with a law that if they paid women less than men for the same job, there would be legal trouble. Keep in mind that this is 40 years after women working became a more common occurrence. “As for the Ford machinists and other women workers at Ford, it took a few more strikes over subsequent years to achieve equal pay.” (Anitha).

The world as we know it today was shaped by war, and the one to be most influential to women was WWII. Women are now able to work jobs and have equal pay, without having to worry if someone is going to harass them at work that day or not. While women still experience many of the same problems they faced almost 90 years ago, we have built so much progress in how we run our countries and how we treat our women.

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