

HELP ON THE HOMEFRONT THE WOMEN OF THE USO

Carmen Bolt

“The people at home occupy a strategic place in a nation at war...This cooperative, voluntary undertaking has been in line with our democratic way of life, and contributed greatly to victory.”

-General Dwight D. Eisenhower¹

When General Eisenhower described the “cooperative, voluntary undertaking” on the home front, he was referring specifically to the role and actions of the United Service Organization(s) (USO) during World War II. Established in 1941, the USO—a voluntary organization made up of an original six independent agencies—provided aid, both on the home front and overseas. Eisenhower put special emphasis on “the people at home” because of the constant aid and support generated by women remaining on the home front.¹ Over the course of the Second World War, women experienced a shift in their gender roles as they stepped forward to maintain the American “War Machine” while many men were overseas. Women

provided the necessary labor in mechanical jobs and volunteer organizations, such as the USO.

This paper will examine one important form of labor that women workers and volunteers of the United Service Organization(s) provided during World War II. I am particularly interested in explaining how women’s roles in the USO during World War II advance their position in society following the war. I contend that the participation of women in the USO during World War II advanced women’s position in American society by creating a permanent change that lasted long after the war because women demonstrated by succeeding in professional jobs that they were just as capable as men.

My research examines the improvement of social status for women during the American

1. Carson, viii.



experience of the Second World War, 1941-1945. During this time, women exited their homes and entered the war effort both on a voluntary or employment basis. By focusing on these efforts through the establishment and operations of the USO, this research provides a case study of a much larger women's movement, which sought to achieve social equality. The war years were crucial in establishing a professional place for women outside of the household. Historian William Chafe, in *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic and Political Roles, 1920-1970*, suggests that, "within five years, World War II had radically transformed the economic outlook of women," and he argues that the 1940s were a pivotal period in American history for issues of social equality.² However, these conclusions are not unanimously held. Lois R. Helmbold and Ann Schofield argue in *Women's Labor History, 1790-1945* that, "wars as well as other historical watersheds [have been] superimposed on an underlying dynamic of women's increasing involvement in wage labor and their persistently marginal relationship to the labor market"³ Similarly, economist Claudia Goldin's *The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women's Employment* cites several key surveys, including the Palmer Survey, as she comes to pessimistic conclusions about the

impact of the Second World War on women's employment. Goldin suggests that an increase in women's employment following the war was not so much a result of the war itself, but rather of the simultaneous rise in women's education and clerical work. Goldin concludes that, "the Palmer Survey data have reinforced the conclusions of a growing literature that wartime work did not by itself greatly increase women's employment."⁴ Though the importance of World War II to women's social equality and employment remains a matter of debate, the consensus is that an undercurrent of discontent existed among women. Along with other scholars in the field, such as William Chafe, I argue that events of World War II served as significant stepping-stones toward gender equality.

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, sparking the Second World War. Two years later, provoked by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States finally entered the war. Acting swiftly, the United States assembled all of its army and naval military personnel and prepared for their deployment overseas. Husbands, fathers, and brothers departed from their homes for the war. Yet women, as described by Susan B. Anthony in 1943, remained in their traditional setting: "When Mars turned his Red Glare on the United States of America in December of 1941, woman was at her historic post—

2. William Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 135.

3. Lois Rita Helmbold and Ann Schofield, "Women's Labor History, 1790-1945," *Reviews in American History* 17 (1989): 501-518.

4. Goldin Claudia, "The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women's Employment," *The American Economic Review*, 81, no. 4. (1991): 741-756.

the same post at which she stood during the First World War and the Civil War and all the other wars. The Kitchen.”⁵ However, the typical environment that the female presided over was about to expand into traditionally male territory. The “call of duty” required men to travel overseas, but it required women to travel out of the household and into the workplace.

As the United States found its footing in Europe during World War II, the women at home were finding their place in areas outside of the household. This included both white women and African American women, the latter on a “last hired, first fired” basis. For the purpose of the paper, I focus on the former, as the USO served a predominantly white audience, and the organization did not promote the racial integration of its clubs or efforts.⁶

Many women were called into the mechanical line of duty, literally taking over the industrial blue-collar positions that soldiers had left behind. “Simple necessity propelled more than six million women into America’s workforce during the war years, opening job opportunities for women in many previously male bastions such as factories, shipyards, and steel mills.”⁷ This shift in societal

and professional roles of women was radically different than anything that had occurred before in history.⁸ Never before in the history of the United States had women been relatively equal to men in the workforce. Due to the desperate need for industrial, as well as voluntary labor on the home front, World War II provided one of the first legitimate opportunities for women to breach the confines of the “women’s sphere” and enter the male dominated world of “breadwinning.” Prior to the Second World War, women’s participation in the labor force was marginal compared to men, constituting only 21 percent of occupied persons in 1920, according to records from the Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor.⁹ However, given this new opportunity, larger percentages rushed to pick up the slack of the deploying male labor force. Modeled after the character “Rosie the Riveter,” these women were expected to be the ideal woman worker: loyal, pretty, efficient, and ready to serve their country and men overseas.¹⁰ The opportunities were both challenging and exciting for women, and most stepped up with a smile and a newfound pride in the application of their abilities.¹¹

War II (New York: Free Press, 2004), 39.

8. Yellin, 39.

9. Data gathered from the Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau, *Women Workers in Ten War Production Areas and Their Postwar Employment Plans*, Bulletin 209 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), in *America’s Working Women*, ed. Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon, and Susan Reverby (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 310–12.

10. Yellin, *Our Mother’s War*, 167.

11. Nancy Baker Wise and Christy Wise, *A*

5. Susan B. Anthony II, *Out of the Kitchen-Into the War* (New York: Stephen Daye Inc., 1943), 1.

6. Meghan K. Winchell discussing the inclusion of African American women in the USO, in an interview with The University of North Carolina Press, discussing her dissertation, “Good Food, Good Fun, and Good Girls: USO Hostesses and World War Two” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2008).

7. Emily Yellin, *Our Mother’s War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World*

Though women were needed primarily as a source of labor in the industrial field during World War II, other options were available too. Many women chose the less evident, but equally vital path of volunteering. Through organizations such as the Red Cross, the USO, and the Office of Civilian Defense, women aided the war effort and developed the means of raising support and funds at home for the war effort.¹² One specific form of aid that became especially important was raising morale. Women were particularly good at improving the morale and outlook of soldiers, especially in the most dire of situations, providing empathy and a willingness to listen and comfort. One specific voluntary group recognized the effects and significance of this effort, and adopted the idea as its primary purpose—the USO.

The United Service Organization(s) utilized social culture as a means of relief during World War II. The Departments of War and Navy noted in 1946 that the USO “brought to a focus the resources of the amusement industry for the maintenance of the moral of American men and women on every fighting front.”¹³ The USO had a specific “fundamental basis,”¹⁴ a belief structure that they built upon,

laying the foundation for the purpose of the aid it provided; the USO believed “in a supernatural power that exists beyond any that is upon this earth; faith in the brotherhood of man; belief in the individual dignity of man; belief in the existence of positive ethical standards of right and wrong that exist apart from the will of any man.”¹⁵ This strong affinity and compassion for humankind was translated through the aid the USO provided, which combined social events and funding.¹⁶

The USO hosted various social events, including concerts and dances, primarily at the clubs that the organization maintained. There were approximately 3,000 of these clubs in the United States alone. Women volunteered by serving as “hostesses, dancing partners, played cards and Ping-Pong, or just socializ[ing] with soldiers.”¹⁷ One-on-one time between the women volunteers and servicemen proved to be especially effective as it often lifted the spirits of the soldiers. Nancy Potter, a young volunteer at a “Buddie Club,” recalled that, “servicemen were very lonely, very homesick, and they simply liked to sit and talk with someone.”¹⁸ The USO stood for the idea that good morale amongst servicemen was imperative to the outcome of the war, and they continued to host social events throughout the remainder of the war.

Though the USO was composed and run by men as well

Mouthful of Rivets: Women at Work in World War II (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994), 3.

12. Yellin, *Our Mother's War*, 167

13. Carson, *Home Away From Home*, ii; Letter from the War and Navy Departments expressing their appreciation to the efforts of the USO.

14. Carson, *Home Away From Home*, xii.

15. Carson, *Home Away From Home*, xii.

16. Carson, *Home Away From Home*, ii.

17. Yellin, *Our Mother's War*, 169.

18. Yellin, *Our Mother's War*, 170.

as women, women's labor served as the pivotal tool that kept the clubs running over the course of the war.¹⁹ The motherly or compassionate attributes commonly associated with women manifested themselves in the volunteers of the USO. Women workers, most of whom came from traditional households, were used to the everyday "women's work" that they provided during their volunteer hours. Cooking, cleaning, nurturing – customary, culturally acceptable female duties – were utilized within the USO, whether at specific functions or during everyday activities. Thus, this provided servicemen with a soothing atmosphere, similar to that of the homes and families they were missing. Also, the USO made available a key missing aspect of the soldier's usual life when at war: the presence of strong females. In her dissertation, *Good Food, Good Fun, and Good Girls*, Meghan Kate Winchell quotes former USO president Harper Sibley on the role and benefits of women volunteers within the USO: "The men of the United States believe in the USO, but it is the women of the USO that are the heart and soul of the USO...the people who make these clubs so attractive to the men are the women."²⁰ Not only did the activism of women in the USO prove useful in attracting a male crowd, but it also presented the opportunity for men to see women, though performing their

historically traditional tasks, in a new light. No longer were these women working from inside a household, benefiting only their own families. Now, on a much larger scale, they were impacting the lives of thousands and influencing the outcome of a war.

From within the USO, women fought against the restraints of social conformity and the caste within which they had always resided. The establishment of organizations, such as the USO, served as catalysts to the growing undercurrent of female discontent concerning traditional gender roles. Though sexuality was an essential weapon of choice, it was the actual occupational shift that stood out most prominently. Prior to the Second World War, women presided over the household, but were rarely equal to the paternal figure. Though the Nineteenth Amendment had been ratified in 1920 and the women's suffrage movement had been in existence for decades, social equality remained a seemingly unattainable dream. However, once the need for women's labor overruled the "importance" of social constraint and control, women were in a vital position to affect change. Between 1940 and 1945, the employment of women increased from a little over 14 million to 19 million, approximately 36 percent, much of which was on a voluntary basis.²¹ Organizations such as the USO rarely discriminated against women when assigning jobs. This

19. Meghan Kate Winchell, "Good Food, Good Fun, and Good Girls: USO Hostesses and World War Two" (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2003), 13.

20. Winchell, "Good Food, Good Fun, Good Girls," 13.

21. Women's Bureau, *Women Workers in Ten War Production Areas and Their Postwar Employment Plans*, Bulletin 209; Baxandall, Gordon, and Reverby, *America's Working Women*, 310–12.

opportunity placed women in the USO in a position of power: their talents and abilities were necessary to maintain morale among servicemen, and the aid they provided was necessary to assist with war needs. Women, for once, were at the apex of the sociological pyramid. Servicemen, as well at the United States itself, were now partially reliant on women to sustain the country and war effort.

In one of its most effective efforts both overseas and on the home front, the USO incorporated popular culture into the relief effort. In order to attract large numbers of servicemen to the USO, stimulating entertainment had to be offered, which often included exploiting women's sexuality. Certain implied criteria began to be placed on volunteers in order to determine model hostesses. These hostesses not only served food, but also provided companionship on and off the dance floor. Though the USO offered numerous activities at their many different locations, none proved quite as appealing as the shows and dances. The hostesses served as partners as they joined servicemen in both formal and square dancing.²² Through dancing, women and servicemen could join in fellowship in a more intimate atmosphere; this allowed volunteers to get to know men on a more personal basis. One volunteer recalled, "When I volunteered to be a dance partner at the USO, I found that the boy who's going there really wants companionship, a feeling that he's

being accepted as a human being."²³ Companionship was provided at these social events along with entertainment, such as live performers and speakers, intended as rewards to commend soldiers on their services. The shows hosted bands, entertainers, and speakers, including Bob Hope, comedian Joe E. Brown, Roy Rogers, and more.²⁴ Female entertainers, such as Marilyn Monroe, also wielded their sexuality to engage servicemen, unintentionally challenging social norms and emphasizing the female capability to support a country at war. However, female sexuality was viewed more often less as a form of exploitation, but rather as a tool to provide for emotional needs, such as "love, attention and excitement rather than for sexual gratification, and as a manifestation of emotional maladjustment."²⁵

The clubs, dances, and concerts provided by the USO were immensely popular. A survey conducted by the Research Branch of The Special Services Division of The War Department showed that a combined 81% of those who attended the USO clubs during wartimes deemed the programs of great importance or absolutely necessary.²⁶ Perhaps one of the

23. Yellin, *Our Mother's War*, 169.

24. "Timeline", last modified, 2011, <http://www.uso.org/uso-entertainment-history.aspx>. The Official Website of the USO, "Timeline" noting important shows and entertainers that the USO hosted in chronological order.

25. Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), 110.

26. *Operation USO: Report of the President* (New York, NY: United Service Organizations Inc., 1948), 31

22. Carson, *Home Away From Home*, photograph insert.

most obvious reasons for the extreme popularity of the clubs was the availability of warm, friendly hostesses. The junior hostesses spent the most intimate time with the servicemen, engaging in personal discussions and accompanying them on the dance floor. These younger hostesses possessed a sexuality that the men in action had been separated from. Oftentimes this intimacy led to actual relationships, even marriage. Ruth Vogler Fritz, a senior in high school during 1942, recalls the USO social scene: "... at night we'd go to the USO and dance. The servicemen all used to come there. That's how I met my husband."²⁷ The proximity and availability of young women to the servicemen often sparked such a connection, leading to a long-term relationship. There were, however, instances where the relations between the younger hostesses and the men were slightly more explicit, primarily sexual. It was in these instances that the older, more mature, senior hostesses would step in as chaperones.²⁸ Still, this sexuality proved powerful, not only in alluring men, but also from a social standpoint.

The roots of female empowerment were shallow and young, barely given enough time to latch onto American culture by the end of World War II. The war ended abruptly with the United States dropping two atomic

bombs on the Japanese towns of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Along with the end to the war came the end of the need for women within the workplace as well as the necessity for volunteer support. The USO ceased its operations on December 31, 1947, having "fulfilled its commitment and discharged its wartime responsibility completely and with signal distinction."²⁹ Although its active role was no longer necessary, the USO still existed to assist in times of need. Likewise, though the necessity for women in the workplace vanished following the war, their newfound talents and abilities remained, awaiting the next "call to duty." As men returned home to previous occupations, many women grudgingly returned back to the household. Yet when responding to a survey held by the U.S. Department of Labor, on average about 75 percent of the wartime-employed women expected to be part of the post-World War II labor force.³⁰ Therefore, the transition back to "women's work" was a negative change for many women that withdrew the responsibilities and respect that they had fought so diligently to earn. Dr. Susan B. Anthony II argued that, "the conditions of war are definitely pulling women out of the house into the world. The peace must not push them back into the

27. Nancy Baker Wise and Christy Wise, *A Mouthful of Rivets: Women at Work in World War II* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 15.

28. Winchell, "Good Food, Good Fun, and Good Girls," 58.

29. *Operation USO*, 43-44; Quoted in a letter the President of the USO, Lindsley F. Kinball, from United States President Harry S. Truman, 1947.

30. Sylvia Rosenberg Weisbrott, *Women Workers in Ten War Production Areas and Their Postwar Employment Plans* (U.S Govt. Printing Office, 1946), 4.

house...”³¹ And yet, this was exactly the case. The gender roles slowly but surely shifted back to the accepted norm, though now, more than ever before, there was a resistance – and it was growing.

The social changes of World War II stirred the sense of oppression that long had been dormant in the minds of women. World War II provided an opportunity to experience life outside of the kitchen, a life with different responsibilities and co-reliance within society and the workplace. The respect that women gained through their excellent and surprisingly sufficient performance in mechanical and voluntary fields was now suppressed once again. However, these women did not and could not forget. While the following two decades saw the return of women to their traditional household positions, the discontent in the hearts of women soon reignite a fight as never before for social equilibrium, respect, and gender integration within the workplace, like the generation of World War II experienced.³² Betty Crocker, noted homemaker, commented on the capabilities of women, saying,

Hail to the women of America! You have taken up the heritage from the brave women of the past. Just as did the women of other wars, you have taken your positions as soldiers of the Home Front... the efforts and accomplishments of women today are boundless!³³

These “soldiers of the

Home Front” engaged in a new battle following World War II and the return to the homes, a battle that continues, even to the present day, against gender inequality and for women’s rights.

Voluntary organizations are vital component to success in war; however, they are often not recognized for their efforts – the USO offers a prime example. Though widely appreciated during and following World War II, the USO’s successes have been forgotten by subsequent generations. For those who were not around to witness the aid provided, the USO is practically unheard of, much less shown in its grandeur of the 1940s. But there was perhaps a greater importance of the USO and its role during World War II. The role of women in the USO did in fact lead to their elevated social status, though it was a slow process and not an immediate metamorphosis.

The decades following World War II saw a notable increase in women’s participation in the labor force. Based on studies by Howard N Fullerton, Jr., senior demographic statistician in the Office of Employment Projections at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the increasing percentages of women entering the work force reflected “the significant change in women’s role in the world of work”³⁴ Similarly, in a study published by the University of Akron regarding the impact of World War II on the women’s labor market, researchers

31. Anthony, *Out of the Kitchen*, 244.

32. Wise and Wise, *A Mouthful of Rivets*, 4.

33. Yellin, *Our Mother’s War*, 3.

34. Fullerton, Howard N Jr., “Labor force participation: 75 years of change, 1950-98 and 1998-2025,” *Monthly Labor Review*, December 1999, 3-12.

maintained that, "Between 1948 and 1985, women's share of the labor force grew from 29 to 45 percent as women's labor force participation rate jumped from 33 to 55 percent."³⁵ Both studies conclude that the efforts of women during World War II were part of a trend towards greater gender equality. The roles that women occupied during the war proved that they were capable of maintaining a profession. Further, their actions commanded men's respect, as women stepped departed from the status quo in the hopes of aiding and eventually reforming societal roles. Dr. Susan B. Anthony, particularly taken by the idea of female equality in society, argued during the war that, "Women today are *earning* the right to rule, as well as the right to work. Why should they not be given that right?"³⁶

Women were never simply be "given" the right to work, or vote, or stand side-by-side with men socially. It would be a long, hard-fought war, a war where they once more would have to break the norm, step out of the households, and confront their typical reality with the hope and determination to achieve something more for themselves. Organizations, such as the USO, provided a vital stepping-stone to propel women toward greater gender equality. By allowing women to labor alongside men within the workplace, the USO got women out of the household, out of the kitchens, and into a more equal society.

35. David E. Bloom, "Women and work." *American Demography* 15 (1986): 25-30.

36. Susan B. Anthony II, *Out of the Kitchen*, 243.