



TIME

Tradition *to* Triumph

Change & Continuity
*in the experiences of
Australian women
from WW1 to WW2*

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THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN WW1

Before World War 1, women remained confined under patriarchal societies that reinforced legal, social and cultural norms relegating them towards familial and caregiving duties within domestic spheres. Conversely, with its emergence, despite half a million men abandoning the workforce to pursue militaristic duties at the front line, the Australian government initially restricted women from entering male-dominated fields in fear of dramatically lowering wages. Regardless, women's contribution to the workforce gradually increased, from 24% in 1914 to 37% in 1918, primarily in traditionally feminine fields: clothing, cooking, teaching, retail and clerical industries.

However, women became profoundly determined to actively contribute to the war effort—exemplifying the growing patriotism at the homefront—investing emotional labour into organisations like the Red Cross and the Australian Comforts Fund (ACF), fundraising and producing the necessary comfort aids for soldiers.



Exhibit A: Women from the Red Cross at the Federal Government House, packing comfort funds for soldiers, Melbourne (1916). *Source:* Australian War Memorial



Exhibit B: A group of friends gathering together to knit socks for soldiers, Cudgewa, Victoria (1916). *Source:* State Library of New South Wales



Exhibit C: Three women spinning wool to knit socks for soldiers at war, New South Wales (c. 1915) *Source:* State Library of New South Wales

These consisted of care packages supplied with knitted goods, such as socks, vests, mufflers and mittens; food such as cakes and biscuits; and affectionate letters to soldiers—an endeavour that was ultimately “central to the war effort,” according to historian Rae Frances.

Some women went further beyond in empowering Australia to succeed; a result of the emerging volunteerism within the nation. Despite the Australian Imperial Force's objection to women at the frontline, perceiving them as a mere “liability,” nursing was the exception—served by 3,000 Australian women, primarily in the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS), and the Red Cross. Along with additional medical roles such as doctors, ambulance drivers, and voluntary aid detachments (VADs), women



Exhibit D: A poster by David Henry Souter encouraging women to become nurses for the Red Cross. *Source:* Library of Congress

had to administer medicine and dress wounds to treat injured soldiers in hospitals and casualty clearing stations; on the Western Front, they endured the paranoia of imminent gunfire, inducing severe psychological fatigue.



Exhibit E: Nurses comforting injured soldiers at the 3rd Australian General Hospital, Egypt (1916). *Source:* Australian War Memorial



Exhibit F: Nurses recovering at the tent lines of the no.3 Australian General Hospital, West Mudros (1915). *Source:* Australian War Memorial

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Things here are just too awful for words...wounded men in pain, still in filthy, bloodstained clothes, lying amid stones and thistles. As we lacked tents, beds or medicines, we could do little for most of our patients.

Diary of Matron Grace Wilson

Ultimately, in World War 1, women's extraordinary contribution to the war effort greatly strengthened the suffrage movement; the fight for political recognition and independence. Their unequivocal value supported their campaign for enfranchisement; the increase of domestic voting rights. Their utmost significance to the war laid the groundwork for future, meaningful change.

THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN WW2

CHANGE

Unlike the severe restrictions placed upon women in WW1, the emergence of World War 2—a global conflict between the Allies and the Axis powers—induced a



Exhibit G: A poster encouraging women to be recruited for national service. **Source:** Australian War Memorial

significant rise in the roles of women—a 31% increase in employment from 1939 to 1943—fulfilling the increasing demand for a vast range of jobs in agriculture and manufacturing, in a workforce abandoned by men at the frontline.

Notably, women contributed to the war production of munitions and armaments in factories; unsanitary environments with poor ventilation, containing dangerous chemicals and involving long, tedious labour.



Exhibit H: Women working at a large press in a munitions factory, Adelaide (c. 1914-1918). **Source:** State Library of South Australia

In May, 1942, in Australia's response to the demand for essential resources like food and clothing, rationing was administered by the Rationing Commission and announced publicly by Prime Minister John Curtin.



Despite such austerity, housewives sacrificed; limiting the consumption of tea, meat, sugar, butter and clothing for the war effort—proving, in Curtin's words, even a “darning needle [was] a weapon of war.”

Exhibit I: A wartime poster encouraging food rationing (c. 1942-1945). **Source:** Australian War Memorial

Moreover, the establishment of services like the Women's Royal Australian Navy Service (WRANS), Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) and Women's Australian Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) among others granted women increased opportunities in office, clerical and non-combat roles: mechanics, laboratory technicians, radio operators and military aircraft testers.



Exhibit J: The Australian Women's Army Service marching in the city, Melbourne (1942). **Source:** Australian War Memorial



Exhibit K: Two flight mechanics (WAAF) working on the engine of an aircraft, Victoria (c.1943). **Source:** Australian War Memorial

Ultimately, women's contribution to the war led to increased political representation, as Enid Lyons and Dorothy Tangney successfully became the first women elected into Federal Parliament.



Exhibit L: Dorothy Tangney and Enid Lyons entering Parliament House (1943). **Source:** Sydney Morning Herald



Exhibit M: Dorothy Tangney and Enid Lyons 1943). **Source:** The Canberra Times

Thus, World War 2 was fundamental in the suffrage movement; fuelling the inexorable feminist ethos that sought to challenge patriarchal perceptions.

CONTINUITY

Similar to World War 1, there remained underlying social conventions reinforced by patriarchy perceiving women as inherently “inferior.” Despite this, women once more rose beyond their roles as stereotypical 'housewives' by actively working in fundraising and patriotic groups, distributing packages with knitted goods, edibles and letters of support. Thus, empowering women in “*carrying on a proud tradition*,” according to the State Library of Queensland.



Exhibit N: Women collecting funds for the Freedom Fund, Brisbane (c. 1943). **Source:** State Library of Queensland

Furthermore, women persevered in the field of hospitality through nursing for organisations like the Red Cross, and as part of Voluntary Aid Detachment—physically and emotionally healing those injured and vulnerable; a psychologically exhausting endeavour.



Exhibit O: A sister of the ANNS doing night duty at a hospital, Queensland (c. 1944). **Source:** Australian War Memorial



Exhibit P: A nurse of the RAAF tending to a native man, Lauraburi, at a Medical Receiving Station, New Guinea (1942). **Source:** Australian War Memorial

Cumulatively, a sense of continuity is abundantly prevalent between the two world wars; the patriarchal values of the time, accompanied by their inexplicable significance in patriotic and hospital fields.

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This ABC article, a secondary source written by Jennifer King in 2014, prolifically examines diaries and letters of women who willingly volunteered to fulfil the critical role of nursing in WWI—dissecting primary sources depicting the personal recounts and sacrifices of nurses endeavouring to resourcefully treat soldiers in abysmal conditions. The extracts and their corresponding clarification were valuable in enlightening her universal audience and me in my research into their physical and psychological wellbeing, which contrasted with the experiences of other contexts, enabled a valuable extraction of change and continuity. Collectively, while the source imposed limitations in failing to provide their experiences in the more notable Gallipoli, it was the foundation of my research on women’s nursing during WWI.

(2) Bramley, M. (1943). *Join us in a victory job*. [Lithograph in colour on paper] Australian War Memorial. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C95908>

The wartime propaganda poster, composed with colour lithograph, ‘*Join us in a victory job*’, is a primary source created by Maurice Bramley in 1943, depicting women in the armed services, nursing and industry—encouraging women to join the workforce or a national service to contribute to the war effort. This source was valuable in demonstrating how recruitment posters harness elements of popular visual culture over time, with attractive, radiant women maintaining their desirable femininity, accompanied with how the depth of roles they fulfilled at the time, demonstrates meaningful change and continuity. Ultimately, the source was limited in its nature as propaganda manipulated/exaggerated for persuasion; nonetheless, in that regard, it greatly assisted me in uncovering wartime propaganda material of the time.

(3) Weightman, E. (2022). *Australian Women at Work in WWII: Keep Cool and Carry On*. State Library of Queensland. <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/blog/australian-women-work-wwii-keep-cool-and-carry>

This blog from the State Library of Queensland is a secondary source written by Elise Weightman in 2022, articulately discussing how women transcended beyond their traditional roles in an effort to contribute to the war effort, challenging the dilemma of the time—whether or not they could “*handle the physical or mental exertion*” to “*maintain their femininity*.” It conveyed how women worked among a multitude of defence forces, fundraising and patriotic groups, nurses, and paid civilian work—a point of valuable comparison with other contexts for vital change and continuity, for myself and her universal audience. Cumulatively, while the source is limited in providing propaganda and other experiences, like rationing, the remaining information formed my crucial base of knowledge during research.