

An Analysis of the Impact of World War II on the Depiction of Women in Magazines

Jiwen Liu

*Pacific Academy, Surrey, Canada
sky.liujw@gmail.com*

Abstract: World War II conducted significant shifts to the world, including its influence on the depiction of women. This work examines the change of women's portrayal in media before and after World War II. By analyzing selected women's magazines from *Good Housekeeping* from 1936 and 1946, this paper highlights the shifts in societal expectations and the representation of women during this period. The findings reveal that while the post-war era showed some progress in recognizing women's contributions and social status, these magazines continued to emphasize traditional gender roles. Despite women's increased participation in the workforce during the war, the media continued to portray women as homemakers, who are putting their effort most in marriage and family life. This study concludes that although there were improvements in women's societal image, the expectation remained in family roles.

Keywords: World War II, female roles, magazines, depiction of women

1. Introduction

Magazines, acting as a role of a medium to represent specific social expectations and state of society, can give insights to how "women are viewed and the ways in which they are expected to act" [1]. However, even though it did reflect certain aspects of the social situation, it is still a limited view, and the change through the figure can be slow. Despite these flows, people can still consider magazines as an important resource to demonstrate women's status and the social expectations for them. Magazines remain a reliable source for analyzing how women's status was reflected and changed during World War II. Through a close reading of randomly selected 1936 and 1946 magazines, it is clear that although women's status in 1946 has improved compared to 1936, the change reflected in magazines is not significant, indicating that progress has been limited, even lagging behind.

Women's status changed through decades during pre-war and post-war periods. World War II, undoubtedly changed many aspects of the world, had a significant impact on women's social status. It happened only 20 years after World War I, which strengthened women's voice in political, vocational and sexual activities, bringing them struggling to balance their previous role in the family [2]. After a war of such great impact on the world ended, women began to work in industries and jumped out of the restriction of families; whereas they were facing "Economic discrimination": different salaries due to sexes with the same amount of work [2]. After World War I, the economy collapsed, bringing multiple opportunities for women to raise their sexual autonomy; however,

because no one had ever faced such a situation before, this was the first time women had so many chances, which also led to them not being able to fully utilize them to make progress.

Moreover, during World War II, women began to have more opportunities to enter industries that helped to support front soldiers and opportunities to be educated. Since males were mainly either forced or volunteered to be in military service, females were considered to be able to carry the responsibility of raising their families and rebuilding the economy. Further, the increasing demand for work force caused an increase in women's wage, but compared to males' wage, "in over half of the industries the women's average wages were lower than the men's lowest wage" [3], meaning that females were having limited wages. Wages were not the only factor that is showing the inequality, but also limited opportunities: the difficulty for females to step in "male fields" is still impossible to overcome. Nevertheless, with the limitations, the jobs in industries still appeal to women as a great chance (at least better than working in restaurants): "In 1944 a woman who could earn only \$20 a week in a New York beauty parlor or \$13.95 as a waitress in Mobile could enter a machine shop, airplane factory, or drydock where the average weekly wages for women were \$36, \$39, and \$44 respectively" [4]. This situation brought a reduction in females willing to work in other "unpleasing" places; nonetheless, after the end of World War II, servicemen returned from the front line, and they took back their positions, after the servicemen returned from the front line, the female labor force declined to the number similar in 1940 [3].

The increasing trend did not last for a long time, but it did exist: "eighty percent of the women in the labor force in 1945 were still working, an increase of 18 percent over the number of women working in 1940" [3]. However, this rise of the improvement is related to mostly traditional women-employing fields, the social situation was aligned with the magazines saying that the change is not significant [3].

2. Secondary source discussion

Previous scholars had also explored the similar topic. For instance, in 1983, Maureen Honey published an analysis of women's status during World War II. The author focused on two magazines, "Saturday Morning Post" and "True Story", she found that both of them showed that "the impression given by writers as a war drew to a close was that the role of women in post-world war would be that of a family caretaker" [4]. Specifically, the author mentioned that the government was hoping the magazines created the imagery of how women "did not have to earn a living and that their real role was at home" [4]. The author strengthened the role of women in World War II for different classes: "professional women" and "working class women", they both play a big role in "participation in the war time economy" [4].

Also, Bob Agnew published an analysis that focused on the magazine "Life". The author demonstrated that "the examination reveals that Life's depiction of women did not change appreciably because of their participation in the wartime". In the article, the author finds that "glamorization of females" is overemphasized, and the magazine involved an abundant "sexist attitude" that "[reinforces] female stereotypes" [5].

3. Methodology

The previous scholars had explored the topic but not compared two from different time periods. My study had focused on the comparison to analyze the change. I used the articles from the same magazine-from 1936 and another from 1946-to specifically see the change caused by World War II. The time period is longer than how the previous scholars have chosen, which highlights the effect. Moreover, Good Housekeeping is an important women magazine that includes news, stories, even recipes and product recommendations. It was a significant bond between women and the society, it

delivered the expectation from the society to women in the articles, and it had been a major magazine for women through the 1930s and the 1940s. The pieces in it reflect how female's voices are placed in society and how women are expected to act.

I will focus on several articles in Good Housekeeping: the first I picked is a piece named "These I will", which was published in 1936, and the other is "Light and Fantastic", which was published in 1946.

4. Discussion

Through the analysis, the found is that women in 1936 did have limited autonomy, possibly brought by World War I. In the first source, the author is Mrs. Geograge B. Simmons, a female philosopher; she suggests the readers what to bring to the New Year. Indeed, the fact that Simmons is a female suggests how women had a voice in the media. The statistics reveal that the number of female authors, editors and reporters increased from 6239 in 1910 to 17371 in 1930 and 18536 in 1940, which showcases a significant increase when men still make up the majority of the workforce in this type of job. Besides, similar growth had occurred in other jobs as well. From this data, we can conclude that the status of women is indeed increasing, but men still dominate technical jobs that require higher education [2].

<i>Numbers of women in certain other selected professions</i>				
	1910	1920	1930	1940
Authors, editors, reporters	6239	8736	17371	18536†‡
Musicians and teachers of music	84486	72679	79661	59546†‡
Teachers (below college level)	478027	599237	761776	776440†‡
‡ Authors were 73.5% male in 1940.				
‡ Musicians were 54.4% male in 1940.				
‡ Teachers were 24.6% male in 1940.				

Figure 1: Numbers of women in certain other selected professions

4.1. 1936 magazines articles analysis

Moreover, in the article "These I will", Simmons describes that "none of us knows what the year ahead might bring" [6]. The article was published in January, 1936, and then 8 months later, World War II began. Even though Simmons did not predict how things happened, the turbulent 1930s (with depression in economics) gives her the confidence to say that. In the article, she said that people should "have the courage to make their own choices", indicating that she encourages herself and other people to consider carefully whatever they are facing to avoid regret in the changing period. Additionally, Simmons said that "for out what we are, come to our choices, and they hold our hope for the future, as individuals and as a nation" [6].

This sentence suggests that individuals' choice, including both males and females', will affect the whole nation. Also, from the images accompanying this article, it is evident that while women's status had made progress in some areas at that time, they were still imaged in a sexualized manner in newspapers, which reflects that their status had not significantly improved.

In other pieces in this magazine, women's dresses were either conventional or sexualized-which happened especially in commercial advertisements. Specifically, in the article "Don't be overweight", the image and the title suggest that women may find certain body shape standards in magazines. The article also has a part of "how to be charming", conveys the thought that women's priority is still relying on men. In contrast with 1946's magazine, those from 1936 undoubtedly showcased more advertisements for women's sexy fashion products, which indeed represents a progression. Nevertheless, in 1946's version, some of the explicit indications have changed to implicit indications, which did not show a significant improvement in women's status.

4.2. 1946 magazine articles analysis

In 1946's magazine, "Light and Fantastic", denoted that women's status reflected in magazines had a trend of remaining unchanged. True, in some areas, there were changings, the dress females wear, for example. From the magazine, the dress became shorter than in 1936, indicating that to some extent, fashion shifted. However, believing that it is aligned with males' expectation can be a possible explanation. After World War I, the depression had brought "confusion" in society which "[postponed] marriages" [2], it is reasonable that the demand for women to return to home increased in society. From the words "turn your made-up face away, where it makes his shoulder grey" [7], it demonstrates how women should be dependent on men and giving up themselves to make men satisfied.

At the same time, the number of women workers in industries and even careers that requires skills was increasing, indicating that they are receiving better educations: "in 1945, 4.5 million women serving as factory operatives, an increase of 112 percent, and the number of women employed as production workers in durables manufacturing had more than quadrupled" [3]. Reflected in the magazine, the piece of advertisement about "Book-of-the-month club" implies that women began to gain more knowledge. In fact, there are several book advertisements in the 1946's version of Good Housekeeping, signifying the developing education level. Nonetheless, the books that were advertised or recommended are fiction stories, for example, "She wrecked the life of two husbands-would she now ruin her son's?" is an article about a dramatic story. Besides, there are pieces that show how women were participating in musical institutes. "What women clubs can do for music", for instance: in the article, the author states that chorus and orchestra can easily come from groups of people in a community or neighbor, encouraging people to establish their own club or join in the community [8]. Indeed, such music education has provided women with more opportunities to enter this field. The progress in education is commendable, but the education women received remained basic, with limited access to higher education. This inequality in education compared to men further reveals that women's status had not improved significantly.

5. Results

Despite various encouragement for women, the depiction of women in 1946 magazines still reflected society's expectation for them to return to the home. How women's participation in the labor force is related to their picture in magazines oppositely. Society might be afraid of females' desire to break away from their families; in fact, this is "evidenced by the divorce rate" [2]. Servicemen returned, bringing the labor market more competitive. Actually, the magazine had plenty of images about returning "fathers", which likely responds to the return of front-line soldiers in World War II. The society's concern was represented in the magazine. Specifically, the writer drew the image of dancing couples, and states that "honeymoon is really o'er when he will not dance no more" [6], which reveals how men were controlling the situation in a marriage and the inequality in a relationship. The imagery of women being submissive to men is indicating the social expectation of women returning to marriage.

6. Conclusion

To summarize, women's social status was changing between 1936 and 1946 because various big issues took place between one decade. However, magazines did not fully represent how these changes occurred on females. As they somehow reflect what the social expectation was, females were likely being expected to return home and be good wives rather than good workers after World War II. Similar to the how magazine in 1936 imaged women, the magazine in 1946 still kept the appealing appearance of women, maintaining that women's looks were continued being considered as their most important aspect. Therefore, it is evident to conclude women's status reflected in magazines are not improving but staying steady or even decreased while they are playing a more important role in society.

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