

# WOMANPOWER!

by Susan Levine



- 1 President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew that all Americans would have to make sacrifices during World War II (1939–1945). For the nation’s men, this meant military service and fighting in distant places like Europe, Asia, and Africa. For the nation’s women, it meant filling the void men left at home.
- 2 Before the war, most women did not work or pursue careers outside the home. Women who had to work to support families had limited options. Most working women were hired as low-paid maids or cooks. Others took jobs in low-skilled industries, such as textile and clothing factories. Single working women who got married were expected to quit their jobs to take care of their families.
- 3 After the United States entered the war, millions of men signed up to fight. Large numbers of men were also drafted for military service. At the same time, the demand for workers on the home front increased. The nation needed to build ships, airplanes, trucks, tanks, and engines. Employers had to make sure factory lines were staffed by workers. Farmers had to grow and harvest crops to feed soldiers as well as citizens. The government had also expanded to manage the war and now needed office workers, telephone operators, and drivers.
- 4 Women filled many of those jobs on the home front. During the war years, about six million women worked outside the home. For the first time, women made up more than half the nation’s workforce. They learned new skills and earned higher pay. They also felt a sense of pride in the ways their contributions added to the public good. In the process, they changed the way Americans thought of women’s roles in the home and in the workplace.
- 5 “Rosie the Riveter” was a nickname used to describe a woman who took a job in heavy industry. Before the war, automobile plants, shipyards, and other industries hired only men. Skilled workers in those fields used heavy machines. They had to understand

- how to handle dangerous materials. Women had been considered too weak and unskilled to fill those jobs.
- 6 As the nation mobilized for war, however, jobs in construction and assembly lines opened up. With fewer men available, employers put out a call for “womanpower.” Initially, they recruited white women. Eventually, they also hired black women. Women worked as riveters and welders on the sides of ships. They worked in ammunition factories. They made engines and tires. “Rosies” kept the US defense industry going while the men were away.
  - 7 World War II also opened opportunities for women to serve in the armed forces. Military leaders realized that they needed to recruit women for support roles. Women filled noncombatant jobs. By the end of the war, 350,000 women had served in the military in a variety of ways.
  - 8 The Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps was established in 1942. The name was shortened to the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) a year later. Its members drove trucks and brought supplies to soldiers. The Women’s US Naval Reserve, or Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), also was established in 1942. Those women worked on shore to free sailors to serve on ships. In 1943, the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) began training. More than 1,000 female pilots flew new airplanes from factories to military bases. Once the planes were delivered, men flew them into combat. Women also served as nurses, drivers, and office workers throughout the armed forces.
  - 9 Wartime opportunities were particularly important for African American women. In the early 1940s, most black Americans lived in the South. African American women had fewer employment options than white women. Some worked as servants in the homes of white families. Others worked in the fields or on small farms. But as skilled industrial jobs opened up in defense factories and shipyards, African American women moved away from the South to fill them.
  - 10 Although they found better opportunities, black women often were paid less than white women. Black women also were segregated in certain war industry jobs. As a result, they began to fight for an end to discrimination. They pushed for equal rights. Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune was a leader in the movement. She started the National Council of Negro Women in 1935 to bring women together to end segregation and discrimination. During the war, she became an unofficial adviser to the president. She also worked with first lady Eleanor Roosevelt to promote new jobs for African American women.
  - 11 Food and other supplies were rationed, so women learned how to be creative when planning family meals. They were careful not to waste anything. Housewives also gave up personal luxuries, such as silk and nylon stockings, since silk and nylon were used to make parachutes.
  - 12 Womanpower freed up soldiers to fight in the long and costly war. In homes and communities, in factories and on farms and in the military, women also demonstrated that they could do the same work as men.
  - 13 Women also supported the war in other essential ways. They raised money. They organized blood drives. They recycled metal and rubber. They planted gardens and grew their own food in what were called victory gardens.
  - 14 By the time fighting ended in 1945, women had learned valuable new skills. They had found success in jobs formerly reserved for men. Society also had changed to accommodate women’s contributions to the war. With so many mothers working outside the home, childcare and development centers were created for the first time.
  - 15 Wartime involvement changed men’s and women’s expectations. Lawmakers—who were also husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons—were encouraged to support women as full citizens in the nation’s democratic society. Womanpower during World War II set the stage for more equal treatment in the years that followed.

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## Test Questions

*Circle the correct answer.*

**1. Select the two sentences from the text that that best represent main ideas of the article “Womanpower!”**

- a. At the same time, the demand for workers on the home front increased.
- b. Before the war, automobile plants, shipyards, and other industries hired only men.
- c. In the process, they changed the way Americans thought of women’s roles in the home and in the workplace.
- d. “Rosies” kept the US defense industry going while the men were away.
- e. Women had been considered too weak and unskilled to fill those jobs.

**2. Select the character trait that best describes Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune.**

- a. influential
- b. controversial
- c. narrow-minded
- d. unskilled

**3. Which effect did World War II have on women in future generations?**

- a. It caused women to earn the same wages as men.
- b. It caused women to pursue careers outside the home.
- c. It caused employers to seek out men instead of women.
- d. It caused men to see women as weak and unskilled.

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## Test Questions (*continued*)

**4. Which key detail below best supports the idea that World War II opened opportunities for women to serve in the armed forces?**

- a. In homes and communities, in factories and on farms and in the military, women also demonstrated that they could do the same work as men.
- b. Womanpower freed up soldiers to fight in the long and costly war.
- c. By the end of the war, 350,000 women had served in the military in a variety of ways.
- d. Military leaders realized that they needed to recruit women for support roles.

**5. Underline the word in the paragraph below that means an empty space or abandoned.**

President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew that all Americans would have to make sacrifices during World War II (1939–1945). For the nation’s men, this meant military service and fighting in distant places like Europe, Asia, and Africa. For the nation’s women, it meant filling the void men left at home.