

Women's Mobilization for War (France)

By [Peggy Bette](#)

Summary

In France, the mobilisation of women followed two parallel movements. One of them was volunteer-based and was widely approved, since it called upon qualities of the feminine ideal. The other mobilisation was remunerated and much more suspect, since it entailed an upheaval in traditional sexual roles. Starting in 1916-1917, female mobilisation, subject to suspicion and fatigue, ran out of steam but it never disappeared. However, this almost unflinching engagement by French women did not procure them legal recognition or the anticipated cultural and social changes. In the end the war did more to fix sexual identities than to improve equality between the sexes.

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Introduction

The First World War was played out on two very gendered fronts: the battle front was almost exclusively masculine and the home front was largely feminine. The mobilisation of women followed two parallel movements. One was voluntary and spontaneous, emanating from the women themselves, and won the approval of the authorities and French society, since it called upon qualities of the feminine ideal. The other was paid and necessary, a consequence of the men going into the armed forces, and was dreaded by employers and public opinion, since it brought about an upheaval in the traditional representations of the sexual division of labour. These feminine mobilisations were increasingly subject to moral suspicions and war-weariness; and starting in 1916, and especially in 1917, they ran out of steam, but they were never rejected. However, the almost unflinching commitment of women did not procure then the anticipated recognition from society, which, once peace had returned, quickly sent them back to their homes and tried to erase the changes that had begun during the conflict.

Women's charitable fervour

In August 1914, while men were being mobilised to defend the country, women were obliged to remain in the rear to wait and hope. Many of them started wondering about how they, too, might be useful to the nation. About 120,000 French women chose to serve as [nurses](#), most of them as volunteers, often as members of the [Red Cross](#). Only 30,000 did so as salaried workers. The mobilisation of women to assume this role was immediate and massive. French women were caught up in a “veritable [hospital](#) passion.” In Paris in August 1914, there were “twenty aspirants for the humblest job.” This fascination responded as much to a patriotic zeal, sometimes related to snobbery (every society lady wanted to have nursed and consoled someone during the war) as it answered an economic need (some women of humbler backgrounds hoped to be fed in exchange for the care they gave to the wounded).¹ Some women also experienced a desire to be in the front lines, although they could not serve as combatants. The Ministry of War accepted volunteers from the Red Cross in the war zone starting in the spring of 1917.² Almost 10 percent of nurses involved in the traveling operating rooms at the front lost their lives.³

Farther from the front, a veritable “charity army” was established (usually in cities and in better-off neighbourhoods). In the framework of contributions to the war effort, charity workshops numbering hundreds in Paris and dozens in the major provincial cities received thousands of women and girls who took action by knitting, sewing, making up care packages, offering welcome stations – in order to improve the living conditions of the combatants (at the front, in captivity, on leave, mutilated, sick or injured), but also the civilian population in need (unemployed men and women, [refugees](#) from the occupied territories in northeast France, war victims). Charity workshops, helping the war effort through labour, were also one of the most widespread forms of aid to unemployed women (there were 516 of them in Paris). A very heterogeneous group occupied themselves with such tasks as sewing and were paid with a meal or a token sum of money. In this charitable world, women mainly played the role of small hands. Rare were those who occupied posts with any responsibility, and the honorific titles and financial management were usually reserved to men. And such activities were even more controlled after the adoption in May 1916 of a law guaranteeing the wise use of gifts. The creation of any new service now had to be submitted for authorization and their accounts were frequently checked.⁴

Less visible (because very ordinary) was the devotion of wives, mothers, sisters and other family members of those mobilised, which constituted the most widespread feminine support to combatants, even within the least available and poorest sections of the population. The engagement of these women dates from the first days, when they prepared what was

necessary for their men traveling to enlistment stations. It continued at a distance by the regular sending (sometimes at the cost of great material sacrifice) of many [letters](#) as well as parcels full of food, warm clothing, and affectionate words. The postal traffic, with more than seven million letters per day, was much higher than in peacetime. This epistolary mobilisation facilitated by the establishment of postage exemption in August 1914 and considered as a true patriotic act, was the principal pillar of troop morale and one of the rare links between the home front and battle front.⁵ Starting in 1915, thousands of women nicknamed “war godmothers” offered to play this role for combatants with whom they had no actual kinship. Originally it was a matter of offering a substitute family to soldiers who were orphans or deprived of ties to their own families residing in the northeast. Rapidly the institution of “war godmothers” was adopted by a much greater number of combatants, whether or not they were isolated. The first and foremost of these societies, *Famille du Soldat* (The Soldier’s Family) was founded by Mademoiselle de Lens in January 1915 and had 25,000 girls affiliated by 1917.⁶

These three forms of spontaneous mobilisation were viewed as benevolent by the authorities, because they were deployed in a strictly feminine register, that of *care/caritas*, caring for the other, which was an extension of the supposedly natural propensity of women to mothering. Other volunteer initiatives did not meet the same approval, however, like the proposal that aviatrixes put their skills at the service of the army. It was considered that women’s involvement should not be confused with that of men, especially if that would expose them to violence and to combat.⁷ There was pronounced ambivalence toward spies, who were rarely raised to the rank of heroine, since their use of femininity was not perceived as the most honourable with respect to morality, and hence [espionage](#) was not the best way to serve the nation.⁸ But [Louise de Bettignies \(1880-1918\)](#) was the exception. The heroism of this native of Lille, who started a vast information network in the occupied zone, was never contested – unlike that of [Mata Hari \(1876-1917\)](#) or [Marthe Richard \(1889-1982\)](#) – and nor was Louise suspected of immorality.⁹

Appealing to women to replace men

The war settled in to stay, and the nation could no longer be content with its industrial reserves and armaments and had to resort to women to replace men sent to the front. Indeed, between 1914 and 1918, [France](#) mobilised 8 million men, including 3.7 million right at the start in August 1914. These represented 60 percent of the active male population, of which almost half were assigned to combat units at the front. The needs of the nation coincided with the needs of women. A portion of the 7 million active women in France in 1914

found themselves without jobs due to the disorganisation of labour caused by entry into the war. The allowances given to soldiers' wives, supposed to compensate for the loss of revenue linked to the departure of heads of family for the front, proved insufficient for housewives. The mobilisation of working women in France was never completely organised, as was the case in England, and it was much slower and less systematic than in Germany. Mobilisation was carried out in an empirical way, gradually extending to all sectors of activity, as the war by its length overcame all hesitations about appealing to women.¹⁰

The first working women mobilised were the peasants whom [René Viviani \(1863-1925\)](#), the president of the Council, addressed on 7 August 1914, asking them to finish the harvest and ensure the gathering of crops in the autumn and preparing those for the following year. With the help of [children](#), young girls and adolescents aged under twenty, as well as aged parents, 3,200,000 female agricultural workers and farmers' wives took over from the three million farmers who were called into combat between 1914 and 1918. Their work was all the more difficult because they were deprived of a good share of their draught animals, requisitioned by the army, and because the palliatives offered by the state for the shortage of manpower were very insufficient.¹¹ On top of that, without an official appeal, the wives of shopkeepers had to a lesser extent followed the example of the farmers' wives, standing in at a moment's notice, from the month of August, for mobilised husbands to keep the shops open.¹²

The replacement of men by women was later extended, at the start of 1915, to salaried service jobs. Commercial firms, banks, companies in transport and in some kinds of administration, after some hesitation, but when they saw the war getting bogged down, to hire women - as a temporary measure - to keep the businesses. The post offices recruited 11,000 (to replace their 18,000 mobilised men), the education sector hired 12,000, amounting to half the mobilised teachers (30,000) and the Parisian tramways hired 5,000. Wives, daughters, and sisters now commonly filled in for employees who had been mobilised.¹³ In recruitment a privilege given to female kin was gradually rivalled by the priority granted to war victims.¹⁴

In [weapons](#) factories mobilisation was still slower. Manufacturers did not turn to recruiting women except as a last resort, after hiring civilian men, *affectés spéciaux* ("special soldiers", those called to the rear due to their qualifications), foreign or colonial manpower, as well as prisoners of war. It was only in November 1915 that the first ministerial circulars appeared that invited managers to hire women wherever this was possible. From then on, the 50,000 "munitionnettes" - as they were nicknamed at the time - swelled to 430,000 by 1918.¹⁵

Military institutions, attached to a strict separation of men and women, were the last to widen recruitment to women. It was only in 1916 that the status of temporary military nurse was created to supplement the permanent nursing service and especially the Red Cross volunteers. It was also in 1916 that the army undertook to recruit (temporary) women into administrative departments (with the title of "civilian employee") to perform jobs like answering phones, taking dictation, working as carpenters and running canteens. In 1917, they numbered 120,000, out of a total during the conflict of 686,000. The military hierarchy, fiercely hostile to the militarisation of women, gave none of them military status, not even the 300 women employed in the Automobile Service, although they wore uniforms and appeared in war zones.¹⁶

Contrary to the engagement of women in the caring domain, their mobilisation in posts habitually devolved onto men was not unanimously welcomed. Numerous commentators continuously praised these women who by work often performed in difficult conditions were ensuring France's salvation. Peasant women especially (formerly mocked as "oafish") now had their virtues sung in the press; some elected officials demanded they be decorated for agricultural merit or given medals of honour.¹⁷ But the great reservation towards women labourers went unremarked, perceptible in their systematically being hired as temporary. Women should only be present on an interim basis, only until the men returned, and in no case should they compete with them. Similarly, their salaries were always considered as extra income, although they performed identical work as men and were in fact sometimes the only breadwinner in their households.¹⁸

Moreover, very few of these substitute workers were thought of as being capable of assuming posts of responsibility. In the country, women farmers continued to receive instructions from their husbands by mail; sometimes the supervision of the property was entrusted to a young son or a grandfather rather than to a wife.¹⁹ The wife of a pharmacist might lose customers who had no confidence in her; the wife of a notary might be refused the right to exercise that function even if she had made the effort to get trained.²⁰ In addition, in the offices and auxiliary services of the army for example, women were confined to subaltern posts, and no woman doctor was admitted into the front line military hospitals; they could only work there as nurses.²¹

Finally, people were afraid of the "masculinisation of women," especially of women working in metallurgy who, by dint of cooperating with the needs of men, might adopt their attitudes and provoke "moral anarchy".²² There was also fear about their health. While France was worried about its low birth-rate, there would be no question of the working-woman killing off

the mother, or the producer killing the reproducer. In 1917, the Ministry of Armaments advocated that war factories should have nursing rooms and *crèches*, and a law required companies to grant paid rest time to mothers and staff of factory superintendents was created to watch over the training and protection of working mothers.²³

The turning point 1916-1917

After 1916, when the spirit of the sacred union was beginning to crumble and exhaustion in public opinion was perceived, the state set up arrangements to anticipate the eventual demobilisation of women. Wives and [godmothers](#), until then “vaunted as good patriotic souls”, began to seem suspect. Control or [censorship](#) of the post, initiated in 1915, was systematised in 1916 and the military information department tried to stop the godmothers, since it considered them as potential circle of espionage. Their sexual behaviour was increasingly observed. [Propaganda](#) and caricatures in the press denounced adulterous wives and godmothers, judged as light and insouciant women who were “forgetting the war and its horrors.” Inversely, [prostitutes](#), once banned and hounded, began to be better considered by the military authorities, who becoming aware that they could not repress the [sexuality of combatants](#), were envisaging setting up official military brothels in order to arm their troops against [venereal diseases](#).²⁴ It was also in 1916 that the [government](#) tried to respond to the suffering of the bereaved by, among other things, during solemn ceremonies, awarding national diplomas aiming to honour and exalt men who had died on the battlefield. It was helped in this respect by a Catholic Church that in consoling sermons tried to prevent widows from descending into despair, and invited them, by means of prayers and supplications, to play the role of redeemers of the nation.²⁵

This supervision of women’s intimate lives did not prevent opposition in the ranks of working women. Strikes among them – non-existent at the beginning of the war – reappeared starting in 1915-1916 and developed strength in 1917. One of the biggest burst out in May 1917 on the initiative of *midinettes* (Parisian workers in fashion) and soon extended to all sectors of activity. Strictly oriented to working conditions at the beginning (the workers were demanding salary improvements), these strikes took a more political turn when the *munitionnettes* joined the movement in June. Echoing the mutinies on the front, in the context of the [Russian Revolution](#) then taking place, women workers demonstrated not only for an improvement in their living conditions, but also against the war. They wanted their soldiers back and decried the shirkers in the name of “equal suffering”. They thought that all men should bear the burden of war in an equal way.²⁶

Despite the spread of [pacifist](#) ideals among the workingwomen, very few of them rallied to

the cause. In a general way, pacifists among French women were few and found little support in public opinion. The women's committee of the Rue Fondary, an almost clandestine pacifist group launched on the initiative of [Gabrielle Duchêne \(1870-1954\)](#) in 1915, could gather only a "few isolated women," among whom were [Marcelle Cappy \(1881-1962\)](#), [Jeanne Halbwachs \(1890-1980\)](#), [Marguerite Thévenet \(1879-1962\)](#), [Marthe Bigot \(1878-1962\)](#) and [Louise Bodin \(1877-1929\)](#). Most of the women who asserted their pacifism in public were strongly repressed, like the syndicalist and pacifist teacher [Hélène Brion \(1882-1962\)](#), whose trial that opened in 1916-1917, was featured in the chronicles.²⁷ While we may detect here and there some women's desire to revolt, they remained individual and confined to private correspondence.²⁸

The very great majority of French women "stuck it out" to the end – those of western France more than those of eastern France, those of the country more than those of the cities, where the authorities detected the greatest discontent. But not even in 1917, when the popular morale was at its lowest, did defeatism dominate. French women, like all civilians, were more resigned than desperate.²⁹

Did the war emancipate women?

[Historiography](#) has long given nuance to the idea that the war emancipated women. Studies of gender and war have shown that conflicts, and even in later years, are generally not contexts favourable to [improving the condition of women](#). Rather than contributing to the equality of the sexes, wars tend to freeze masculine and feminine identities.³⁰ In fact, the massive and almost infallible mobilisation of French women for the war effort did not entail the enlargement of their civic and civil rights, as the feminists had hoped. Unlike their European neighbours (women in [Britain](#), [Germany](#), [Austria](#), [Holland](#)), they did not obtain the right to vote; the Civil Code granting wider capacities to married women has only reformed in 1938 – and only in a limited way.

On the level of work, the situation was hardly better – at least in the immediate post-war period. Even before the peace treaties were signed in the spring of 1919, the demobilisation of women was underway. It was rapid and abrupt. The workers in the war factories were enjoined in November 1918 by the Minister of Armament, Louis Loucheur (1872-1931), to quit their jobs to resume "their former occupations" since there was no longer any need to "make explosives".³¹ They were fired en masse in the following months, in exchange for meagre compensation. We observe the same process in public services like the post, where the demobilisation of auxiliary personnel began in January 1919. Even [war widows](#), who were

protected in the name of their status as war victims and heads of families, were involved.³² The rationale for these massive dismissals was as much economic (there was no longer any need to produce [armaments](#)) as psychological: it was a matter of “reassuring masculine identity harmed by four years of anonymous combat” by trying to restore the social order that pre-existed the war. In exchange for their service to the homeland, the former soldiers, animated by a deep need for recognition, wanted to have lost none of their authority in their households. They wanted to find their women “as they had left them, where they had left them.”³³

This wish to re-establish the pre-war sexual division of labour was accompanied by a valorisation of the model of a housewife. Maternity was especially exalted. Novels, magazines, parliamentary speeches, and textbooks all presented the mother, an immutable and eternal figure, as the best agent for reviving the pre-war past and ensuring, through her vocation as a reproducer and educator, both the demographic and moral reconstruction of France. Inversely, the figure of the *garçonne* (tomboy) – a modern woman enamoured of her freedom that refuses maternity and confinement to the domestic sphere – incarnated the decline of the nation.³⁴ These sexual norms were embodied in the penal and social policies instituted during and after the war. Laws passed in 1920 and 1923 cracked down on contraception and abortion. Benefit and war pension regimes favoured women with families as compared to wives or widows without children.³⁵

However, despite this attempt to return to normal, the war had entailed irreversible changes in the medium and long term. Breeches had been opened up at the level of labour.³⁶ The durable and quantitative drop in women’s activity that lasted from 1920 to 1960 cannot mask the scope of the qualitative transformations initiated by the professional experience of women in the course of the conflict.³⁷ One of these transformations was the result of the professionalisation of occupations linked to caregiving. The job of the nurse, once performed by volunteers since considered as “natural” and “innate” for a woman, was now assimilated to expertise. Nursing as an occupation was recognized in 1921 and 1922 by state diplomas.³⁸ Another transformation was the irreversible entry of women into jobs in metallurgy. Formerly reluctant, manufacturers found the need to employ women as they were instituting Taylorism or assembly lines in their factories. Industrial technologies, the organisation of work and its requirements were lastingly affected and thus were adapted to the employment of female labour, unskilled and less expensive than men.³⁹

Permanent changes also took place on the level of manners and morals. The revolution in

clothing begun under the Belle Epoque had accelerated during the war and now gave women a greater freedom in their bearing and movement.⁴⁰ More generally, many women became aware of their individuality, their autonomy, and their capacity to assume responsibilities.

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