Final Research Paper

Female Sexuality during World War II: Prostitution and Patriotism

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**Introduction**

World War II ushered in a multitude of changes for the United States’ home front; production lifted America out of the Great Depression, wartime drafted thousands of men into the armed forces, and the need for workers drew more women into the work force, earning higher paychecks. This recruitment of women forever changed the American workforce, integrating females into jobs nationwide and toppling gender barriers erected prior to Pearl Harbor. Donning khaki pants and tying up their hair, American women embraced their newfound role as wartime workers! With this social revamp, a similar transformation ignited in regards to female sexuality.

During the Second World War, female sexuality was enlisted, conscripted, and drafted, playing on patriotism to enforce American ideals. However, the malleable role of the female body and its behaviors posed a problem. Women were often sex symbols, pin-up girls, and entertainers, all used for boosting soldier morale. Simultaneously, Americans were warned of “good time girls”, “pick-ups”, and “victory girls”, condemned as riddled with venereal diseases and posing a threat to society. If a woman was overtly sexy or engaged in promiscuous behavior, she was labeled a prostitute and a threatening moral force. At the same time, society prompted women to be feminine, alluring, and enticing to males, boosting morale with their physicality during wartime. The sexuality of women placed them on one side or the other of this two-faced America. Loose sexual morals were discouraged, and yet the implementation of American morale was considered a woman’s duty. This juxtaposition is represented in Marilyn E. Hegarty’s term “patriotute”, a term embodying the fine line that female sexuality walked during World War II.
Both on the level of “patriotic duty” or the extreme of prostitution, female sexuality was heavily exploited during World War II, allowing the term “patriotute” to be an accurate representation. American women simultaneously received conflicting messages in regards to their sexuality, one of nationalism and the other of deviance. This exploitation advanced the acceptability of females as sex symbols, and offers further evidence on the adjustment of moral values during wartime.

American “Rosies”

With the draft and deployment of America’s male workforce, women assumed greater roles in the job market, particularly in wartime production and services. Historian D’Ann Campbell asserts in Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era that “World War II was fought with typewriters and telephones as much as bombers and bazookas”, highlighting the indispensable nature of female dedication to defeating the Axis.1 Both manual and clerical work provided women wartime laborers with “a sense of accomplishment that extended beyond patriotism and paycheck.”2 The war opened new areas of employment for women, as well as expanded occupations already in place. Women on a large scale, of all classes, and ethnicities, felt empowered, a feeling that the government promoted through wartime media.

Seen as fulfilling a patriotic duty, women of all economic and social classes were encouraged to find industry jobs supporting the war effort. John Costello writes in Virtue Under Fire: How World War II Changed Our Social and Sexual Attitudes that media lured women into the workforce by glamorizing wartime jobs. The government encouraged women to “tie up their

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2 Ibid., 121.
hair, put on dungarees, and march into the war plants.” In her history *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, Maureen Honey paints female workers as necessary “soldiers of industry”, connecting working women with patriots fulfilling a specific duty towards one’s country. “The primary aim of the media…was to persuade…unemployed woman that taking any kind of job was patriotic and necessary.” By motivating women to fill the leaving men’s shoes, the American government assured itself of workers dedicated to home front industries. Initially, the government saw this influx of women as merely a “substitution” for their male counterparts; however, at the war’s end, women did not stand aside. During the 1940s, the emergence of “American Rosies” created dedicated laborers out of American women.

As one of the most iconic images of the twentieth century, J. Howard Miller’s *We Can Do It!* poster exemplifies the ideal female worker during World War II. Produced by the United States’ Defense Contractor, the image depicts a strong, yet still attractive American woman serving her country. Dressed in red, white, and blue, her “pert face and feminine grooming balance her assertively flexed bicep”, creating a woman in control of her sexuality and maintaining professionalism on behalf of the war effort. Nicknamed “Rosie the Riveter” in conjunction with the Norman Rockwell painting, society drew the nomenclature from a popular wartime song of the same name. Written in 1942 by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb, “Rosie the Riveter” details the industrial work, particularly riveting, of an American woman. Rosie

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5 Ibid., 75-6.
6 J. Howard Miller, *We Can Do It!* (“‘Rosie the Riveter’”), poster, 1942, War Production Coordinating Committee, Washington, D.C.
“[works] for victory”, purchases war bonds, and dotes on her “Marine boyfriend, Charlie”. The song also contains references to wartime epicenters, including Berlin and Moscow.\(^7\)

Rosie’s success hinges on her looks; the illustration is attractive, in line with much of the advertisements produced during World War II depicting female laborers.\(^8\) Not only were women able to roll up their sleeves and complete the job, but also able to do so while preserving their femininity. Her hair is styled, her eyebrows nicely shaped, and she has dark, thick eyelashes, perhaps enhanced with makeup; her painted fingernails and puckered lips compliment her womanly qualities, while her semi-fitted work shirt still emphasizes her shapely assets. Her expression is stern, yet confident and beautiful; she is demure in the face of hard work, representing an ideal woman during wartime. This image was very attractive to workers, both in motivating entering women and for men exempt from military service.

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\(^8\) Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 77.
As women entered male dominated industries, the government and company executives attempted to reduce contact between the sexes as much as possible. Genders were to enter and exit facilities through specified doors, and were not to take breaks at the same time. This was a time when the shape of women’s legs in pants ignited whispers, and many women were subject to sexual harassment. Catcalls, whistles, and even affairs or assault were common. Many Americans worried that female workers would threaten established relationships, seducing male coworkers. Upon the discovery of an affair or pregnancy, the woman alone was blamed, never the male in question.\(^9\) This perfectly demonstrates the two bladed sword applied to female workers during World War II.

On one hand, the government encouraged women to enter the workforce out of patriotic duty, promoting the compatibility of attractiveness and labor. At the same time, women were blamed for sexuality in the workplace and placed subordinate to men. Female sexuality, particularly during wartime, became a force to repress women, rather than one of liberation and expression.

**Women as Prostitutes and Moral Corruption**

During World War II, the American government touted the contributions of female workers to the war effort through dedicated labor and clerical service, but other services, particularly those of a sexual nature, condemned women as corruptors of moral values. Opposite “Rosie” was “The Vamp”, a dangerously alluring sexual predator, lurking to entice and infect American men and neighborhoods. Campbell explains that wartime prompts “looser” sexual

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\(^9\) Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 126-33.
morals and the rise in prostitution and venereal disease during the 1940s was a sexual explosion that did not contain itself within established red-light districts.¹⁰

In her detailed study Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II, Marilyn E. Hegarty examines the sociocultural connections between women, race, disease, deviance, sin, and prostitution. In many of its Health Department advertisements during WWII, American leadership painted women as “reservoirs of infection”. These posters portray women and their sexuality as dirty and infected, but in a way not easily recognized. Hegarty explains the societal view that female bodies were dangerous medically and morally, to the point that women and disease were synonymous.¹¹ “Popular magazines…reinforced [the] notion of dangerous and deviant women as saboteurs, traitors on the home front”, as seen through posters, advertisements, and printed short stories.¹²

The United States Public Health Service could not ignore the rise of venereal disease and infection across the US, particularly in coastal ports loaded with service men. This outbreak of sexually transmitted diseases led to exhaustive campaigns to shut down prostitution districts, to provide soldiers and sailors with condoms, and to arrest women suspected of “infecting” American men.¹³ One of the most successful ways to warn such men of the dangers lurking behind each “pick-up” was through poster advertising. Many such posters highlighted the commonly held perceptions that “a girl or woman might not be as virtuous as she appeared, [obscuring] the line between the so-called good girls and bad girls.”¹⁴

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¹⁰ Ibid., 208.
¹² Ibid., 118.
¹³ Campbell, Women at War with America, 208.
Entitled *She May Look Clean, But…*, the US Health Service poster warns, “You can’t beat the Axis if you get VD.” The image depicts an innocent looking woman with dark hair smiling into the camera; her hair is styled, her shirt white, symbolizing purity, wearing natural makeup. Her slight smile and dimples suggest youth and naivety. Below this image, three men, a sailor, a soldier, and a civilian, stand side-by-side and gaze at the woman. The text reads “She May Look Clean, But…Pick-ups, ‘Good Time Girls’, Prostitutes Spread Syphilis and Gonorrhea.” With this warning, and the reference to fighting the Axis powers, the poster appeals directly to service-men with the pronoun “you”, highlighting the deceptive nature of women; “she may look clean, but…” This supports the idea that society was suspicious of women, suspicious of their sexual motivations and activities.\(^\text{15}\)

In the same way that posters and advertisements warned of female sexual deviance, short stories and reports on female prostitution were common reading in American magazines. In

\(^\text{15} \text{She May Look Clean, But...Pick-ups, ‘Good Time Girls’, Prostitutes Spread Syphilis and Gonorrhea, photomechanical color print, c. 1940, U.S. Public Health Service, Washington, D.C.}\)
“Norfolk- Our Worst War Town”, published in *American Mercury*, author J. Blan van Urk details the extensive state of prostitution in Norfolk, Virginia, commenting on the unsuccessful police attempts to reign in prostitutes. Labeling Norfolk as the country’s “Number One War Zone”, Blan van Urk repeatedly refers to women suspected of prostitution as “rotten apples”, “sluts”, and belonging to the “service man’s stockade”, narrating the arrests of such women. The story suggests measures of such extremity as creating camps for prostitutes to reduce the taxicab services and back alley hook-ups plaguing the city. In the story’s diction, the author places no fault on the male soldiers and sailors drinking, gambling, and soliciting these women within the city; instead, the entirety of blame is heaped upon the women of the streets, burlesque dancers, and entertainers. In this work, women are cast as dirty, unsanitary, and a key contributor to the plights of not only American cities, but America during wartime. Even with the crackdown on prostitution districts such as Norfolk, prostitution and venereal disease did not diminish, due to the rise of the “Victory Girl”.

*Patriot of Prostitute?*

Karen Anderson acknowledges in *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II* that “American women received conflicting signals during the war.” Government and society simultaneously encouraged women to employ their bodies in patriotic endeavors, both wartime work and morale boosting activities, while condemning females who were dangerously sexual. Anderson believes the “appearance of sexuality” was

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best.\textsuperscript{18} During World War II, female sexuality began to scare government officials, particularly the rise of the “Victory Girl.”

Hegarty summarizes the governmental dilemma; “Prostitution was illegal, promiscuity was immoral, female sexuality was dangerous, but sexual labor was essential to the war effort- a veritable catch-22.”\textsuperscript{19} “Patriotutes” blurred the fine line between the “patriotic good girl” and the “promiscuous bad girl”. Known by many names, a “patriotute”, “victory girl”, “khakis-whackie”, or “pick-up” was a woman who offered sexual services and entertainment to men, particularly service-men, not for money, but out of patriotism. Motivated by an increase in social freedoms during wartime, Anderson describes “victory girls” as young women flouting conventional sexual morality with a misplaced patriotism and craving for excitement.\textsuperscript{20} In her 1998 article coining the term “patriotute”, Hegarty describes their mentality as believing “her body would repay him for risking his life.”\textsuperscript{21} These morale-boosting activities included dancing, stripping, or posing for pin-up photography spreads, many of which were read by service-men. Women and the government both hovered on a tightrope; on one side, was a woman who employed her body for patriotic purposes, using her sexuality in a clean, harmless way, and the other cast her as a prostitute. “…WWII was the construction of the sexual female patriot who was simultaneously a potential sexual deviant.” Hegarty further explains the “tension between repression and

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 111.
\textsuperscript{19} Hegarty, \textit{Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes}, 85.
\textsuperscript{20} Anderson, \textit{Wartime Women}, 103.
exploitation” faced by the government.\textsuperscript{22} In most cases, exploitation of women for governmental use was encouraged.

Even with the ban on prostitution, the rise in venereal disease in service-men did not decline. With this, fingers pointed towards the casual “pickups” lurking around naval and army bases, often in railroad stations or bus terminals. Today, these women could be labeled as cheap dates; patriotutes did not take money, but would accept a drink from a friendly man in uniform, and in return offer “sexual consolation from the mechanical inhumanity of war.”\textsuperscript{23} Though the government supported the “innocent” forms of male entertainment, the reputation of victory girls declined as VD rates rose and the army could no longer ignore the casual hookups. The government treated these women as prostitutes, receiving the entirety of the blame for disease outbreak. The U.S. Health Department began inspecting women in brothels and handing out thousands of condoms to soldiers. It was as if the government recognized the realities of soldiers soliciting sex, and the number one concern was not the health of the women offering their bodies, but for the males willingly partaking of them. Prophylactic stations were installed near coastal bases to cleanse male bodies after intercourse, all with no punishment or judgment cast.\textsuperscript{24} The result of this was the cast typing of all women, whether pure in appearance or sweet in disposition, as potential patriotutes and sexual vamps.

The Health Department was not alone in its regulation of female sexuality, as the Social Protection Division expanded their traditional health program into a wartime “purity campaign”. This mandated VD testing for all women known to be prostitutes or arrested for sexual activity. The word “prostitute” was thrown around loosely during World War II because the “patriotute”

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{23} Costello, \textit{Virtue Under Fire}, 207.
\textsuperscript{24} Hegarty, \textit{Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes}, 101.
expanded its definition. Not only the name for a woman hired for sex, a prostitute came to be any woman who was promiscuous or “endangering morals, safety, or health.” During the war, “moral violations” by women saw a 95% increase.\(^\text{25}\)

Through the documented rise in venereal diseases, it is obvious that the voluntary services performed by these women, were damaging the United States’ armed forces. However, little attention is paid in research to the actual transfer of disease, the male role in its continuation, or to the effects on the women serving in these “morale-maintaining” roles. The black and white, good or bad, and prostitute or pure terminology does not present the whole story during World War II. John Costello reveals the commonly held view in Virtue Under Fire that “While mothers are winning the war in the factories, their daughters are losing it in the streets.”\(^\text{26}\)

This polarity exemplifies the contradiction of female sexuality throughout American history, but particularly during World War II. The government wished to use sexuality to motivate troops, but not at the risk of allowing women to gain too much sexual power or morally corrupt freedoms.

**Sexy, but Not Sexual**

Nestled amongst these sexual extremes, amid the prostitution, pick-ups, and Rosies, what sexual role did Americans want women to play during World War II? It is impossible to escape the sexualized view of American women during the 1940s, both in terms of attractive depictions of hearty laborers or deviant tramps. Hegarty explains that there exists a “paradox inherent in women’s wartime service that [was] based on the centrality of their sexualized bodies to their wartime roles.”\(^\text{27}\)

Drafted in large numbers, female curves “suggested a patriotic home front

\(^{25}\)Anderson, Wartime Women, 104-06.

\(^{26}\)Costello, Virtue Under Fire, 207.

\(^{27}\)Hegarty, Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes, 156.
exchange of female sexuality for military defense.” In this way, female sexuality was recruited in what the government deemed acceptable ways. This included entertainment, dancing, and pinup photography, all of which were continuously described in sexualized language. At the same time, society encouraged women to exhibit themselves. American women were responsible for “[attracting] a man, preferably a service man.” Were men going to take the women dancing in clubs and bars across the nation home to their mothers? Most likely not, creating another contradiction in itself for what was “acceptable” sexual behavior. The ideal American woman during World War II was sexy, but not sexual.

Aimed at service-men overseas, the Bourjois Evening in Paris Cosmetics advertisement entitled “To Ellen with Love” illustrates the ideal American woman in terms of sexuality during the 1940s. Printed in Good Housekeeping in December of 1943, the ad shows a woman and service-man passionately embracing; the man kisses the woman’s neck and her eyes are closed. The man is in uniform, adorned with badges and medals and the woman is extremely beautiful, heavily made-up, and wearing an off the shoulder gown. The text reads, “One girl loves a soldier…one loves a sailor…one loves a lad in the Marines. But, they all adore the gift which says, ‘You’re first in my heart.’” Though speaking directly to soldiers mailing presents to their sweethearts in the States, Good Housekeeping published the ad, a magazine with a primarily female demographic. This is noteworthy because it exposes the women reading the magazine to an example of approved sexuality: to find a man, preferably a man fighting for the United States, capture his heart, and then use her sexuality within the constraints of moral acceptability.

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28 Ibid., 126.
29 Ibid., 123.
Conclusion

World War II drafted female sexuality to advance American patriotism. Conflicting within this conscription, however, is the flexible role of women, both as morale boosting sex symbols and as “patriotutes” infected with venereal disease, attacking American morals. Promiscuous behavior ignited government labels of “prostitute”, while the same entity also encouraged women to be alluring in their new wartime service jobs. Patriotic duty was used by the government to justify both the harassment of women engaging in sexual activities, as well as the promotion of sexual entertainment for service-men. Because “victory girls” did not accept money for their services, they cannot be labeled as prostitutes, but American society treated them much the same. The government of the 1940s suppressed and feared female sexuality, while promoting the exploitation of the feminine body by outside sources. This practice was not new to World War II, but heavily advanced during wartime. Continuing into the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the bodies of American women continue to receive
conflicting messages from media, government, and societal sources, proving that there is no firm stance on female sexuality. The lines of acceptability and morals constantly shift, representing the exploitation tactics of the time, the repression deemed necessary, and the objectification of sexual identity.
Bibliography


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