The Role of Women
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Aim

- I can find out about women's wartime jobs and describe what they entailed in detail.

Success Criteria

- I can compare the roles of women and men before World War II.
- I can say what type of jobs women did during World War II.
- I can describe key details of a woman's wartime job.
- I can explain how the role of women differed before, during and after the war.

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The Role of Women

Pre-World War II

What do you think life was like before the war broke out in 1939?

What do you think the role of women was like?

What do you think the role of men was like?

How much do you think life in the 1930s differed from life today?

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The Role of Women

Pre-World War II

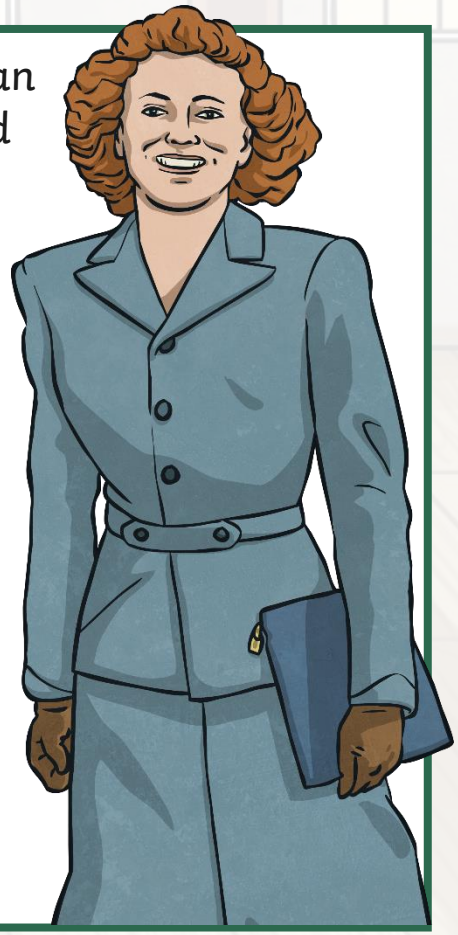
Life for most women before the war was quite different than it is today. Typically, most women stayed at home and did not go out to work.

Some younger women did go out to work but if they married, they had to give up their job. Women were paid less than men and they were generally only employed to do 'women's jobs', such as nursing or working as a shop assistant.

Men and women's roles were very stereotypical and even from a young age, boys and girls were brought up quite differently.

Lessons in school taught girls how to cook, sew and look after the home while boys were taught woodwork and other practical skills to equip them for the workplace.

How do you think men and women felt about their roles?



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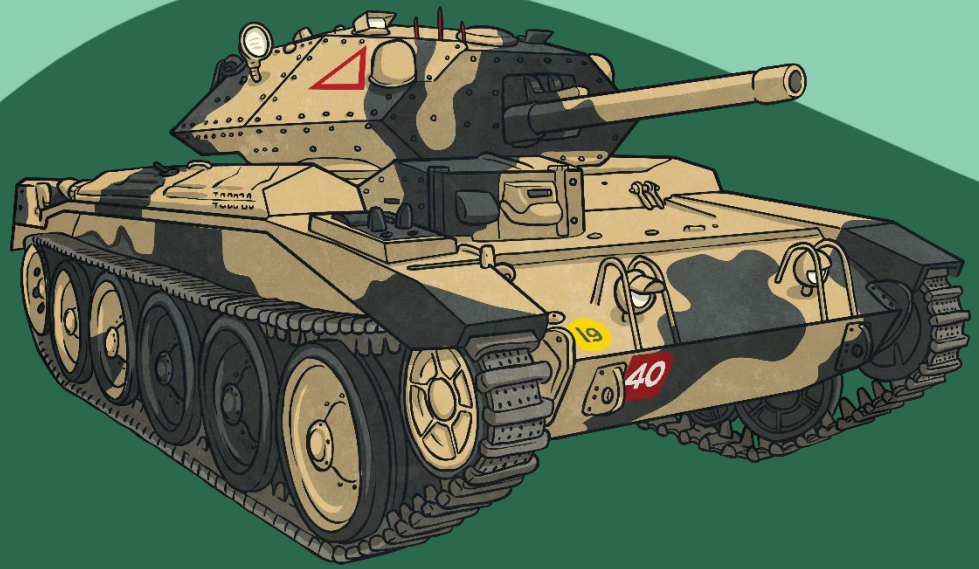
Changing Roles

When the war started in September 1939, the role of women was set to change.

Why do you think this was the case?

What do you think would be different and why?

What might women be required to do?



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Changing Roles

With men called up for active service, there was a great need for women to undertake the jobs that the men had previously done. Suddenly, women became more than just homemakers and were given the opportunity to become patriotic heroines. They would contribute significantly to the war effort in a variety of ways.

Land Girls working on a farm

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Changing Roles

During the war, women were employed in a wide range of jobs. Some became munition factory workers (making weapons); others joined the armed forces (army, navy and air force); many worked as Land Girls; some drove buses or trains; some worked on the canals; they worked as nurses or ambulance drivers; they built ships and worked in other engineering industries; they worked as searchlight operators and some became air raid wardens.

The Women's Voluntary Service also employed women, who assisted with a wide range of duties.

A WVS volunteer running a mobile canteen

Changing Roles

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At the start of the war, the government relied on women to volunteer for work.

However, by late 1941, it became necessary to introduce conscription (making working compulsory).

Initially this only applied to single women between the ages of 20 and 30, but later in the war this was extended to women between the ages of 18 and 50.

In 1943, almost 90% of single women and 80% of married women were in employment.

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After the War

When the war finished, many women lost their jobs when the men returned to the positions they had left. Other jobs, which were specific to the war effort, were simply not necessary any longer.

For lots of women, going back to the way they were before the war was quite difficult. They had got used to working and leading more independent lives and they were keen for the liberation of women to continue.

Do you think it was difficult for women who lost their jobs after the war? Why/why not?

What might women miss about their lives during the war?

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After the War

In the 1940s and 1950s, Britain's economy was on the up and more employment opportunities were opened up to women.

However, jobs done by women were viewed as secondary to jobs done by men. It was common for women to be sacked if they got pregnant and women were still paid less than men even if they were doing exactly the same job!

Advertisements in the 1950s actually tried to encourage women to go back to being housewives!

How would you feel if this was the case today?

Why do you think it was considered acceptable to pay women less than men?

Why do you think society tried to exclude women from the workplace?

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After the War

Times were changing and women no longer accepted their inequality to men. They had proved during and after the war that they were as capable as men and they wanted this to be acknowledged.

In the 1950s and 1960s, women campaigned for equal working rights and pay. However, it was not until 1961 that the very first occupation (teaching) paid its male and female workers the same rate.

How would you feel if this was the case today?

Why do you think it was considered acceptable to pay women less than men?

Complete the Role of Women Pre and Post World War II Activity Sheet.

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Success Criteria

- I can compare the roles of women and men before World War II.
- I can say what type of jobs women did during World War II.
- I can describe key details of a woman's wartime job.
- I can design my own propaganda poster.
- I can explain how the role of women differed before, during and after the war.

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