

Creating Wartime Community



The Work of Chicago Clubwomen during World War II

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The Chicago Ratzkrieg

A full proclamation
Reveals to the nation
Chicago has entered the fray:
Last week of October
The city all-over
Will struggle the “varmint” to slay:
We all have the notion
The strong red squill potion
Can strangle a million a day.

Celinda B. Abbot

*Woman's City Club of Chicago Member, October 1941*¹

1. Celinda B. Abbot, “The Chicago Ratzkrieg,” *Woman's City Club of Chicago Bulletin*, October 1941, 22, Woman's City Club of Chicago Records, Richard J. Daley Library Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois, Chicago [hereafter *WCCC Bulletin*].

I. Chicago Clubwomen Go to War

During World War II the new demands of a home-front society provided women with increased opportunities to engage in social and political activism.² In this context, women's organizations both responded to national needs and capitalized on expanded opportunities for social leadership within their community. For Chicago clubwomen, however, such opportunities were nothing new, for a tradition of activism preceded the war. These clubwomen had long seen themselves as "watchdogs" of the city, who protected its social fabric and elevated its quality of life.

Before mobilizing for the national war effort, the Woman's City Club of Chicago was already engaged in a war of their own—a "War on Rats." Their many and varied efforts included participating in a mayor-designated "Rat Control Week," holding joint-club meetings to address the problem of "Mr. Rat," and poeticizing their desire "to strangle a million a day."³ The club was committed to the issue and its members were persistent. While not a glamorous campaign, the issue of rat infestation was a significant one, for its solution would prevent the spread of disease and improve public health. To meet their goals, the clubwomen were prepared to invest substantial time and resources.

2. Among other changes to women's public and private lives, the American female labor force increased by 32 percent (approximately 6.5 million workers) between 1941 and 1945. Elaine Tyler May, "Rosie the Riveter Gets Married," in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness during World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch, 129 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 77; Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War, German and American Propaganda, 1939–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 75–87.

3. *WCCC Bulletin*, October 1941, 22; *ibid.*, November 1941, 30–31.

The language of the "War on Rats" provides important insight into the ways that these clubwomen viewed their work in the years before the American entry into World War II. This is a needed addition to the historiography of women's clubs, which has focused previously on the Progressive Era. Disenfranchised before 1920, women nevertheless found ample opportunities to organize, exert civic pressure, and engage in public life through club work. Yet, in order to defend their involvement in a public sphere where men reserved exclusive civic privileges, women cited traditional family values.⁴ They invoked the rhetoric of "municipal housekeeping," asserting that just as they oversaw the individual members of the home, they were responsible for the safety and morals of each member of their neighborhood community and the greater city.⁵ "The Chicago Ratzkrieg," however, shows that clubwomen also frequently used aggressive and forceful language to describe their work in the prewar years, challenging traditional gender roles and exercising an independent voice in articulating their civic platform. The Woman's City Club upheld and furthered this tradition throughout the war.

Current scholarship on women's participation in the war effort focuses on the national campaigns that sought to mobilize women, particularly in regard to war-industry work and enlistment in the newly formed women's

4. Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 5.

5. Maureen A. Flanagan, "Gender and Urban Political Reform: The City Club and the Woman's City Club of Chicago in the Progressive Era," *American Historical Review* 95, no. 4 (October 1990): 1044–48, doi: 10.2307/2163477.

branches of the armed services.⁶ Although important, these two aspects of women's wartime experiences and roles do not offer comprehensive insight into the variety of ways in which women experienced or responded to the creation of a national wartime ideology of womanhood, nor do they fully capture women's diverse experiences of home-front life. Studying the Woman's City Club of Chicago and the Chicago Woman's Aid Society reveals some of the other avenues through which women contributed to the war effort and attended to the needs of an urban society during wartime. Chicago is an important place to examine these processes because of its well-documented and rich history of social activism and its intensive mobilization for the war effort as a leading urban-industrial center and central site for wartime manufacturing.⁷ The Woman's City Club of Chicago and the Chicago Woman's Aid Society were just two of many reform and welfare organizations active in Chicago

6. For studies of national propaganda and wartime advertising, see Melissa A. McEuen, *Making War, Making Women: Femininity and Duty on the American Home Front, 1941–1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Donna B. Knaff, *Beyond Rosie the Riveter: Women of World War II in American Popular Graphic Art* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012); and Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985). Studies of women's local experiences often focus on their role in the armed services or as war industry workers. See for example, Jean Hascall Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992) and Mark P. Parillo, ed., *We Were in the Big One: Experiences of the World War II Generation* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002).

7. During World War II, 320 new factories were built in Chicago and thousands of workers moved to the city. In addition to the industrial boom, Chicagoans had to adapt to rationing, extended working hours, scrap drives, civil-defense exercises, Victory Gardens, and countless other demands. See Perry Duis, "No Time for Privacy: World War II and Chicago's Families," in *The War in American Culture*, 17–45.

during the time. Similar in mission and agenda, they represent a local experience of home-front life.

The Woman's City Club of Chicago (active 1910–1954) sought to address issues of civic welfare, including political reform, public health, housing, and education. Its original board of presidents and directors featured leading members of Chicago's settlement-house movement, including Jane Addams, Mrs. Joseph Bowen, and Julia Lathrop. With this socially active leadership, the club sought to unite women who were already providing services to the city's working-class and immigrant populations. The club also aspired to build a reputation that would attract new members to join the fight for urban reform.

The club was open to all women regardless of race or class, but the majority of its members were white upper-middle-class women from Chicago and the surrounding suburbs, many of whom were the wives of businessmen and professionals.⁸ During the 1940s the club reported approximately 390 members and administered a budget of over \$5,000.⁹ Its offices and tearoom were located at 410 S. Michigan Avenue, across the street from Grant Park in Chicago's downtown district. At this location, they held committee meetings and hosted guest speakers who lectured on civic issues.¹⁰ The clubrooms became a place where clubwomen could consult with university professors, labor organizations, community leaders, and public officials to develop an informed approach to combatting urban challenges and meeting community needs.

Yet club activities were not confined to downtown clubrooms. In their outreach and advocacy work, club members worked with and served on the boards of other city organizations. The club sent representatives to attend meetings of the City Council, the Cook County Board, and the

8. Flanagan, "Gender and Urban Political Reform," 1033.

9. "Report of the Financial Secretary," *WCCC Bulletin*, April 1942; "Membership Chairman Report," *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1942, 5.

10. "Club Calendar," *WCCC Bulletin*, November 1940.

Board of Health and campaigned to have one of its own members appointed to the Chicago School Board.¹¹ By joining outside committees and attending public meetings and hearings throughout the city, the clubwomen gained a position to advance policy recommendations and reform.¹² The club also served Chicago by organizing into six ward branches. These branches met in field houses, YMCA buildings, and hospitals throughout the city to provide services that would address local needs.¹³

The Chicago Woman's Aid Society (active 1882–1988) was an organization for Jewish women, which, like the Woman's City Club, focused on issues of civic and social welfare. Throughout World War II it held a membership base of approximately nine hundred members and ran over seventy committees devoted to various urban issues and social causes.¹⁴ Similar to the Woman's City Club of Chicago, members of the Chicago Woman's Aid Society had the resources to volunteer their time and pay their membership dues. Many of these club members came with personal and family ties to Chicago businesses and universities, as well as to influential leaders within Chicago's Jewish community. Club members often used these connections to raise funds and build support for their civic work.

The Chicago Woman's Aid Society located its clubrooms in the downtown area at 185 N. Wabash Avenue, but it volunteered its services throughout the city. Like the Woman's City Club of Chicago, members worked with a diverse coalition of organizations such as the Association for Family Living, Planned Parenthood, and the Anti-Defamation League

11. *WCCC Bulletin*, April 1941; *ibid.*, May 1941.

12. *Ibid.*, January 1941, 48–49.

13. Ward branches included Gage Park, Irving Park, Northwest Chicago, Lincoln Center, and the 34th Ward. See *WCCC Bulletin*, November 1940.

14. Mrs. Magnus Rosenberg to Mr. Frederick H. Scott, 23 December 1943. Chicago Woman's Aid Society Race Relations Committee Records, Richard J. Daley Library Special Collections and University of Archives. University of Illinois at Chicago.

to organize for reform. By collaborating with other organizations and various community centers, they engaged in advocacy work and helped to provide direct services to local neighborhoods.

Despite differences in membership owing to ethnic and religious identification, these two clubs present us with an opportunity to understand how Chicago clubwomen generally responded to a national wartime ideology of womanhood. This study will focus on the years from 1939 through 1945, from the outbreak of war in Europe to American involvement to the end of the war. Both clubs lend themselves to such investigation because of the extensive ways in which they chronicled their own volunteerism. An analysis of the clubwomen's writing and work—with a focus on the interrelated and pervasive themes of sacrifice, unity, and morale—reveals a shared response to a national, unifying rhetoric that asked women to make personal sacrifices and prioritize the war cause.¹⁵

These clubs printed weekly and monthly bulletins that gave their leadership and members routine opportunities to comment on the war effort and to publicize and frame their own agenda. At the center of this study are the routine columns that were penned by club presidents, Mildred Rosenberg of the Chicago Woman's Aid Society (president from 1939 to 1943) and Myrtle Perrigo Fox of the Woman's City Club of Chicago (president from 1942 to 1944).¹⁶ Their two voices cannot represent every view within their memberships, but they were both nominated

15. Mark H. Leff, "The Politics of Sacrifice on the American Home Front in World War II," *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 4 (March 1991): 1296–318, doi: 10.2307/2078263.

16. Myrtle Perrigo Fox graduated with an AB in history from the University of Michigan in 1905. Fox worked as an assistant to at the *Ladies Home Journal* and served as president to the Parent Teacher Association. She lived in the Hyde Park neighborhood with her husband John Sharpless Fox, a college professor, and their four children. For a short biographical sketch, see *WCCC Bulletin*, March 1942. Mildred Rosenberg was a member of the Chicago Public Library's board of directors and lived at 5000 East End Avenue with her husband Magnus Rosenberg, an attorney, and their two children.

and elected to club leadership, and they were praised and celebrated within their clubs. Both women served as guiding influences as they attended club meetings, arranged programming, coordinated guest speakers, and reported on club activities. In their roles as presidents they were responsible for creating and upholding club bylaws, running club-room staff, and approving annual club budgets. They each maintained networks of contacts and correspondence with influential politicians and businessmen, oversaw financial and business partnerships, and communicated club positions and activities to the press. These presidential reports are illuminating sources because they give a sense of the scope of club work and shed light upon the inner workings of their clubs.

As the “War on Rats” shows, clubwomen aimed to use their local work to “reveal to the nation” that Chicago was doing its part to address broader, national issues. Even before the war, the clubwomen were conscious of the relationship between the local community and the nation and asserted that the nation’s well-being was ultimately rooted in the health of its local communities. Thus, while both the Woman’s City Club of Chicago and the Chicago Woman’s Aid Society participated in larger national efforts and pledged their support to the war effort, they did not allow this engagement to detract from their local work. Clubwomen were prepared to make personal sacrifices, but not at the cost of the well-being of local communities. They did not believe this would serve the nation.

As they mobilized for war, Chicago clubwomen modified national messages about women on the home front and forged an independent vision for their participation. Chicago clubwomen responded strategically to the dominant wartime discourse about sacrifice, unity, and morale—both adopting and challenging it as necessary—in order to promote and defend their established political and social causes. In the midst of wartime, Chicago clubwomen seized many of the new and expanded opportunities for women’s social leadership in order to push for the reform and civic change that they had long desired. They labored for the health of their local community, which they believed depended

on the values of inclusiveness, equal access to services and opportunities, and the protection of individual rights, acknowledging the importance of the community’s many and diverse members.

II. Sacrifice

National Discourse

A Call for Sacrifice

During World War II the U.S. government employed an extensive range of media to engage female audiences and win their support for the war. Nationally sponsored messages asked women to reorganize their lives around the war effort and “do their part for victory” by making personal sacrifices for the sake of the nation.¹⁷ Photograph captions and the many posters commissioned by the U.S. Office of War Information (OWI), one of several national bodies in charge of coordinating the war effort, urged women to respond to the call of duty and take on new, nontraditional roles to advance the war effort. Women were instructed to see their U.S. Employment Service War Manpower Commission and find a war job as part of “answering the nation’s need for womanpower” and “doing a good job for Uncle Sam.”¹⁸ In order to free the nation’s manpower for service, women were encouraged to leave their homes and give up their “pleasanter occupations” to take on new jobs in various war

17. Hollem Howard, *Women from All Fields Have Joined the Production Army*, 1942, “Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives,” *Library of Congress* [hereafter FSA], accessed April 5, 2014, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1992000915/PP.

18. George Rapp, *I’ve Found the Job Where I Fit Best*, 1943, FSA, accessed April 5, 2014, www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b45153; John Newton Howitt, *I’m Proud...*, 1944, FSA, accessed May 3, 2013, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/95504753; Vernon Grant, *Women, There’s Work To Be Done*, 1944, FSA, accessed April 5, 2014, www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3g05604.



Figure 1. Ann Rosener, “Manpower. Handicapped Workers,” August 1942

Source: Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/oem2002004336/PP



Figure 2. Bob Barnes, “And then in my spare time...,” circa 1943

Source: Library of Congress, loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b43729

industries, from working for the U.S. railroad or steel plants to enlisting in the Women’s Army Service Corps (WAC).¹⁹

In service to the Allied cause, the OWI frequently featured women who made significant personal sacrifices to the war effort. One OWI photograph captured two women working on airplane-engine parts, and the caption explained that Henriette Furley must stand while she works because she is “badly crippled by arthritis.”²⁰ With Henriette’s story, the image acknowledged the sacrifice of a woman who contributed to the war effort despite personal cost and physical discomfort (fig. 1). By implication, it appealed to others to do the same. From depicting housewives and grandmothers who took up war work while maintaining ongoing duties at home (fig. 2) to photographing Pearl Harbor widows who were motivated to contribute to the war effort by their great loss (fig. 3), the OWI presented and exalted countless examples of female sacrifice.

Women were expected to make sacrifices in many aspects of their lives, including luxuries and comforts (fig. 4), for the duration of the war. In addition to conforming to a stricter system of food rationing, women were asked to wear simplified fashions that featured narrower skirts, shorter hemlines, and fewer extra pockets, zippers, pleats, or frills in order to conserve much-needed fabric for the war. To encourage resourcefulness, the OWI featured innovative clothing designs that met national conservation rules, including home-made dresses fashioned from old sugar sacks (fig. 5). As the national “Consumer Pledge for Total Defense” shows, women were instructed to manage household

19. *Two American Women, Employed as War Workers by a Big American Railroad*, between 1941 and 1944, FSA, accessed April 5, 2014, loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3c05158.

20. Ann Rosener, *Manpower. Handicapped Workers*, August 1942, FSA, accessed April 5, 2014, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/oem2002004336/PP.



Figure 3. Howard Hollem, “Pearl Harbor Widows Have Gone into War Work,” August 1942

Source: Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1992000913/PP



Figure 5. John Collier, “Washington, D.C. Modeling Dress Made from Sugar Sack,” 1943

Source: Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998024218/PP



Figure 4. “Wartime Conservation through Home Sewing,” 1943

Source: Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/owi2002050909/PP

consumption and to sacrifice personal comforts in order to protect their community and ensure a strong American democracy.²¹

The Need for Sacrifice

In *Warfare State*, historian James Sparrow argues that the national government considered citizen support and morale to be equally as important to the war effort as the production of airplanes and supplies.²² Propaganda employed the “home-front analogy,” a rhetorical device that linked the efforts of civilians and soldiers to communicate the message that victory strongly depended on both men and women’s contributions.²³ In the OWI photographic series about Mrs. Smuda, a woman war worker, for example, the captions aligned her efforts with those of her enlisted son by stating, “another mother and son combination that means death to the Axis.”²⁴ Such rhetoric served two essential purposes. First, it united women’s contributions on the home front with the efforts of soldiers and loved ones fighting on the frontlines, fostering a collective spirit. Second, and even more importantly, it communicated the crucial need for women to participate in the war effort, for national defense was only as strong as its supply lines.

By comparing women’s contributions to those of soldiers, U.S. propaganda emphasized women’s vital contributions to wartime society. However, this rhetorical strategy often valued women’s sacrifices not as important in their own right, but because they ultimately benefitted

21. McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 138–39; See, *Left to right: Mrs. Henrietta Nesbitt, White House Housekeeper*, 1941, FSA, accessed April 5, 2014, www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/oem2002010328/PP.

22. James T. Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 48.

23. *Ibid.*, 72.

24. Howard R. Hollem, *Mrs. Smuda’s Son*, FSA, accessed May 3, 2013, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/oem2002002437/PP.

and supported men. Women had a duty to servicemen who were bravely risking their lives, as demonstrated by posters that read, “we soldiers of supply pledge that our fighting men will not want,” or those that instructed women to “back your man at the front.”²⁵ Historian Leila Rupp captures some of the most explicit and graphic examples of this rhetorical device, such as war-work posters that threatened, “this soldier may die unless you man this machine,” or articles in the *Ladies Home Journal* that warned that if women failed in their patriotic duties, “her menfolk fighting on distant atolls are likely to get slaughtered in the hot sun for lack of ammunition.”²⁶ Thus, many OWI posters and photographic captions praised women’s contributions by presenting them exclusively in terms of the male lives they would save.

Appeals for Sacrifice

The government urged women to participate in war industries or the women’s branches of the armed services, but with the expectation that women would do so to protect their families. Women were supposed to press on as productive citizens, always keeping the image of their loved ones at the front before them (fig. 6). The captions that accompanied depictions of women war workers proclaimed that women were creating planes for “their men,” replacing a general concept of national victory with a very personal stake in the war.²⁷ Women would participate in the war effort, not only as an expression of patriotic zeal, but because they were concerned about men at the front and their children’s futures. This

25. *Back Your Man at the Front*, 1943, in Barbara Orbach Natanson, “Rosie Pictures: Select Images Relating to American Women Workers during World War II,” *Prints & Photography Reading Room, Library of Congress*, March 2004, www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/126_rosi.html

26. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War*, 156

27. Alfred T. Palmer, *American Mothers and Sisters*, October 1942, FSA, accessed May 28, 2013, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1992001575/PP; Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 126.



Figure 6. Adolph Treidler, “The Girl He Left Behind,” 1943

Source: Library of Congress,
www.loc.gov/pictures/item/95501843

theme emerged in one of Norman Rockwell’s paintings for the *Saturday Evening Post*, later dispersed by the OWI as a poster (fig. 7). The woman leans over to tuck two children in for the night, and the caption reads, “OURS... to fight for.” Here, the capitalized phrase “OURS” implied that parents would “fight” and contribute to the war effort out of a desire to protect their children. Standing alone, the poster captures a domestic scene of everyday life untouched by war, but for the newspaper held by the man, which announces a bombing. The caption ties children’s futures to victory and casts the war as an unwelcome threat to the comfort and safety of the private, domestic world of the home.



Figure 7. Norman Rockwell, “OURS... to fight for”
 circa 1943–1946

Source: Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/owi2002048907/PP



Figure 8. John Newton Howitt, “I’m Proud...,” 1944

Source: Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/95504753

U.S. propaganda repeatedly promised women that their contributions to the war effort would earn them recognition, esteem, and male praise. Historians such as Maureen Honey and Leila Rupp have argued that wartime advertisements, recruitment campaigns, and films worked to link wartime jobs to the alluring promise of adventure, glamour, and romance; the popular media attempted to show that women war workers and servicewomen earned more dates and received more male attention.²⁸ Posters showed men praising and admiring women who participated in the war effort, such as the soldier who tells the female riveter, “atta girl,” or the war worker who earns her husband’s support and approval (fig. 8).²⁹ The American woman who contributed to the war effort was presented as beautiful and attractive, the soldiers’ “Real Pin-Up Girl” (fig. 9). Such propaganda reflected the belief that regardless of whether they were assuming new roles or continuing to fulfill their primary duties as wives and mothers in a time of war, women would be, or at least should be, motivated by the promise of male praise, affirmation, and interest.



Figure 9. Cyrus Hungerford, “Their Real Pin-Up Girl,” circa 1944

Source: Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97515660

28. Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 57; Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War*, 55.

29. Packer, *Atta Girl: You’re Doing a Swell Job!* 1944, in Natanson, “Rosie Pictures.”

Wartime propaganda expected women to act out of motherly and wifely devotion and urged women to make decisions only after considering the interests of loved ones fighting the war. Although women were invited into the workforce and encouraged to adopt new kinds of roles, national bodies in charge of coordinating the war effort reinforced traditional expectations about gender roles and women's motivations.³⁰ Surveys showed that most women took on war jobs primarily for financial reasons, but this reality was rarely acknowledged in the national media. War work was presented as glamorous, exciting, and an opportunity to earn good wages, but it was above all patriotic—an opportunity for women to fulfill their duty as citizens to their family and community.³¹

Maureen Honey argues that the OWI linked a woman's wartime employment to support for the men fighting abroad and necessarily presented this employment as temporary—the OWI had no intention to support a permanent change in women's roles.³² In this sense, wartime propaganda was far from progressive in its representation of roles for women. The state promoted female sacrifice for the good of family and country and left the image of woman as homemaker unchanged, given that women were encouraged to experience achievement and fulfillment vicariously through their husbands and children. Melissa McEuen argues that Norman Rockwell's depiction of the “muscular and cheerful” Rosie the Riveter, despite its status as a national icon in American culture and memory, was not a dominant image during the war era.³³ Rather, national propaganda and advertising campaigns emphasized hyper-feminized portrayals of the wartime woman.

30. Knaff, *Beyond Rosie the Riveter*, 20–22; Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 126.

31. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 55–56; Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War*, 55.

32. Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 54.

33. McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 1–2.

It is thus unsurprising that, when American soldiers returned from the war, women were expected to return to the domestic sphere and allow men to resume their former jobs.³⁴ During the war women were asked to embody new roles, but U.S. propaganda presented this as a way for women to support their men at the front. Industrial and factory jobs were labeled as “war work” and presented as ways for women to fulfill temporarily a wartime (but not a peacetime) patriotic duty.

The Local Context

A Commitment to Sacrifice and Response to National Appeals

How did Chicago clubwomen respond to the nation's call for sacrifice? The Chicago Woman's Aid Society and the Woman's City Club of Chicago engaged in the national war effort through specific initiatives in their communities. In her February 1942 address to the Woman's City Club, President Fox captured the anticipated effects of World War II on American life: “soon every citizen will be fitted into [the national defense program].”³⁵ Throughout the war, these two clubs devoted great energy to new wartime needs. While there is limited mention of clubwomen enlisting in the WAC or the industrial war work so heavily advertised by the OWI, both the Woman's City Club and the Woman's Aid Society sought to contribute to the war effort through their respective organizations. This may be due in part to the class composition of these groups, given that the majority of members would not have needed to enter the workforce out of financial necessity. But these clubwomen also believed that they could best serve the war effort in other capacities. The vice president of the Woman's City Club of Chicago, Mrs. Bradley Carr, explained, “we reached the decision that we could serve our country best by continuing with the civic work we are doing, and at the same time, by keeping

34. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War*, 55.

35. Myrtle Perrigo Fox, “President's Message,” *WCCC Bulletin*, February 1942, 54.

ourselves available for any emergency job which might arise.”³⁶ The clubwomen believed that their groups’ ongoing civic work and ready responsiveness to wartime needs was a vital contribution to the national cause.

Both groups participated in a wide range of activities in the hopes of advancing the war effort. In each monthly address to the Woman’s City Club of Chicago, President Fox called upon members to fill new social roles and meet the needs of the home front, from doing their own housework and thereby releasing their maids for war work, to guarding the polls on election days as “watchers” in place of the men who were now overseas. Throughout the war, the Woman’s City Club was a part of larger national efforts and wartime drives; it planted Victory Gardens, volunteered for the Red Cross and donated blood, and hosted parties and held book drives for servicemen in order to attend to their social well-being.

Similarly, the Chicago Woman’s Aid Society made extensive efforts, including the establishment of a War Bonds Committee that encouraged members to purchase and sell war bonds and war saving stamps to the best of their financial ability. The society’s weekly bulletins repeatedly encouraged readers to “Buy War Bonds,” and the society gave frequent updates on their fund-raising efforts. By April of 1943 they had sold \$400,503.15 of war bonds.³⁷ This successful initiative proved the society’s ability to organize, and it demonstrated its desire to contribute to the national defense in a practical way by making a substantial financial commitment to the cause.

Prioritizing the Local

The U.S. government issued a call to sacrifice, and Chicago clubwomen answered it. Yet for all their engagement with the national war effort through the sacrifice of time, personal comforts, and financial resources,

36. Mrs. Bradley Carr, “Report of the Officers,” *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1942, 4.

37. *Chicago Woman’s Aid Weekly Bulletin*, April 16, 1943, Chicago Woman’s Aid Society Records, Richard J. Daley Library Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois, Chicago [hereafter *CWAW Bulletin*].

they never shifted their focus away from the pressing local issues of housing, health care, or public education. Clubwomen forged a policy of adding the war effort to their previous local engagements instead of abandoning their former agendas. They rejected the view that American society would be best served by a total, indiscriminate sacrifice of their time and resources to the national war effort. Instead, they believed that the strength and future of the nation depended on the well-being of its local communities.

As early as May 1939 then president of the Woman’s City Club of Chicago, Mrs. Paul Steinbrecher, asserted that women should attend to local affairs before turning to affairs abroad:

When one compares the great throngs that attend weekly and often semi-weekly meetings on foreign affairs to the scattering few who deem it worth their while to acquaint themselves with vital problems pertaining to their *own* communities, one cannot help but wonder why? Is it not perhaps that foreign affairs do not demand any immediate action by the individual while the opposite is true when we are forced to hear about municipal waste, or about bad housing conditions, and underprivileged and delinquent children at our very door.³⁸

Steinbrecher criticized interest in foreign affairs as artificial and fleeting and suggested that individuals should begin meaningful civic work by focusing attention on the most immediate concerns. The club’s model for citizenship meant that women should first become intimately “acquainted” with their own community, educating themselves in order to understand and then meet local needs.

The independent vision of Chicago clubwomen’s participation in the war effort appears in club bulletins and press coverage, which reveal how they used the conditions of war to defend and publicize their

38. Mrs. Paul Steinbrecher, “President’s Message,” *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1939, 3.

longstanding reform projects. Myrtle Perrigo Fox, the subsequent president of the Woman's City Club, emphasized the importance of maintaining democracy at home while fighting the war abroad. In a May 1942 bulletin Fox argued: "The work of our civic committees is more important in war than in peace. Too many people have their eyes set for distant vision, overlooking what is close at hand."³⁹ Mildred Rosenberg, president of the Chicago Woman's Aid Society, expressed a similar sentiment when she asserted the increased importance of local civic issues in time of war:

If we are going to permit people to live in quarters that are not fit for animals, if we are going to provide inadequate education facilities for our coming generation, if recreational needs of our community are not met, if public health measures are overlooked in a time of turmoil and confusion, if there is to be discrimination based on race, color and creed, then it is in vain that we are fighting a global war to see that the Four Freedoms may endure.⁴⁰

In his 1941 State of the Union address, Franklin Delano Roosevelt attacked Nazi policies, provided a defense for his own New Deal programs, and named Four Freedoms "essential to humans everywhere": "freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear."⁴¹ Roosevelt's Four Freedoms quickly became a pervasive part of the national rhetoric that presented the war abroad as a fight for democracy and freedom. The leadership of the Woman's City Club of Chicago and the Chicago Woman's Aid Society asserted that the home-

39. Myrtle Perrigo Fox, "President's Message," *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1942, 2.

40. Mildred Rosenberg, "Annual Report of the President, *CWAW Bulletin*, April 16, 1943.

41. Elizabeth Borgwardt, "FDR's Freedoms as a Human Rights Instrument," *OAH Journal of History* 22, no. 2 (April 2008): 8–13, doi.org/10.1093/maghis/22.2.8.

front battle for these freedoms was vital for preserving democracy and American society.⁴²

U.S. propaganda encouraged women to support the war effort by appealing to their concerns as wives and mothers, and members of both clubs were clearly motivated by concern for the well-being of their families and others in Chicago. In fact, these clubwomen maintained a sharp focus on the current needs of local children and youth as a way of addressing the national emergency. The Woman's City Club of Chicago worried about the fate of children at a time in which parents were fully occupied with the war effort and mothers were called out of the home and into the workforce for defense industries.⁴³ In response to this problem, the club called for increased supervision of and guidance for youth: it encouraged parents to censor their children's exposure to inappropriate movies and books, asked their members to help staff day-care facilities for working mothers, and drew the public's attention to public education and the need for school reform.⁴⁴

The vice president of the Woman's City Club of Chicago made a similar argument about schooling: "If public education is important in time of peace, it is even more important in time of war... More than ever our children need to be given confidence in their ability to face the future, with training to back the confidence, and to be taught proper democratic attitudes."⁴⁵ Clubwomen believed that the public institutions and conditions of family life required immediate attention in order to foster democratic attitudes and a productive work ethic in future generations.

The club's Child Welfare Committee continually emphasized the importance of providing social workers, health workers, and educators

42. Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 43.

43. *WCCC Bulletin*, October 1942, 24.

44. *Ibid.*, January 1942, 47; *Ibid.*, October 1942, 24–26.

45. *Ibid.*, October 1942, 22.

to address family issues, and it stressed that life after the war depended on how children were taken care of in the here and now.⁴⁶ To this end, club members supported local and state legislation to reform the juvenile justice system and child labor laws, attended school-board meetings and wrote letters to the mayor, Edward Kelley, regarding school-board candidates and policies, testified about child welfare issues at state budget hearings, and volunteered to staff day nurseries.⁴⁷

When possible, the Woman's City Club of Chicago tried to solve two problems at once, keeping local youth safe and occupied by engaging them in home-front activities. The club's Victory Garden campaign served two such purposes. Members were encouraged to plant Victory Gardens in order to support food rationing and conservation efforts, but the campaign was also framed as a solution to the problem of juvenile delinquency. The president of the Chicago Park District, Robert J. Dunham, designated space for children to plant Victory Gardens on park property, allowing approximately thirty thousand children from grades 5–8 to grow their own vegetables under the guidance of volunteer leaders.⁴⁸ The club asked its members to assume these volunteer positions in order to supervise youth and engage them in a productive activity that would foster the values of citizenship.⁴⁹ This Victory Garden

46. *Ibid.*, May 1942, 7.

47. *Ibid.*, May 1943, 7.

48. *Ibid.*, March 1943, 66; Mayor Kelly, as coordinator of civilian defense for the Chicago area, put the Chicago Park District in charge of the Victory Garden. The district designated Douglas, Garfield, Grant, Lincoln, and Marquette parks for gardens, oversaw staffing, and worked with block wardens throughout the city to identify vacant lots suitable for gardens. See "Victory Garden Drive Is Opened by Mayor Kelly," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 29, 1942, George T. Donoghue, "12,601 Farmers Boost Food Supplies," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 26, 1942, and George T. Donoghue, "Friend of the People: Victory Garden Plowing," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 4, 1943.

49. *WCCC Bulletin*, March 1943, 66.

campaign is an important example of the club's ability to connect the national war effort with its local community work.

In other cases, the clubs interwove wartime initiatives, like the sale of war bonds, with the themes of previous campaigns, like the immediate needs of the community's children. In the 60th-anniversary bulletin the Chicago Woman's Aid Society highlighted its sale of war bonds alongside its ongoing contributions to a nutrition fund for undernourished children, which featured the donation of 65,500 bottles of milk and 175 pairs of eyeglasses to needy children and many other daily goods to children in schools.⁵⁰ Throughout the war, both clubs continued to raise funds and donate to meet the health needs of local children. Such examples bear witness to their belief that national health was rooted in local communities and dependent on their continued civic work as a club.

In addition to financial giving, club members continued to advocate for legal reforms to benefit children. For instance, the Woman's City Club fought for Juvenile Court reform, a campaign with roots in the Progressive Era, by demanding preventative and rehabilitating measures in place of harsh and unnecessary punishment.⁵¹ In its ongoing advocacy, the club insisted that children and youth merited special legal considerations and should not be tried as adults.⁵² They also believed that children should be encouraged to contribute to the war cause, but warned that children needed to stay in school.⁵³ The clubwomen criticized defense industries and other businesses for hiring young people and risking their safety and worked to enforce child labor laws.⁵⁴ This shows that club-

50. "60 Years of Achievement, 1882–1942," *CWAW Bulletin*, December 1942.

51. *WCCC Bulletin*, October 1942, 22.

52. Mrs. John Gutknecht, "Report of the Child Welfare Committee," *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1942, 7.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *WCCC Bulletin*, December 1943, 40–41; Catharine Mulberry, "President's Message," *WCCC Bulletin*, February 1944, 54–55.

women were willing to divert from nationally sponsored messages about the war effort in order to prioritize their own social cause.

In their attention to the social and moral development of children as citizens, clubwomen deployed traditional ideals of women as family caretakers. In her book, *The Feminist Promise*, Christine Stansell articulates a concept of “Republican motherhood” that dates back to the early years of the nation in the 1790s. As mothers, white women of upper- and middle-class backgrounds were considered a valuable part of the nation’s political life; they were responsible for raising children and promoting civic virtues among the next generation.⁵⁵ This notion continued to inform women’s work during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, the concept of “municipal housekeeping,” which posited that women were uniquely suited for volunteer work, given both their caring nature and keen understanding of the relationship between the public sphere and the private world of home, grew out of a broader understanding of women’s roles as mothers.⁵⁶ In many ways, the clubwomen’s concern for child welfare upheld the status quo by conforming to traditional expectations for motherhood. But clubwomen also exercised an independent voice by challenging and modifying national messages to promote the needs of local children. They were particularly concerned about the ways in which children would bear the brunt of wartime sacrifices, instability, and anxiety.⁵⁷ In their work, clubwomen saw themselves as advocates for this important but “underprivileged” group, and argued explicitly at times that children should not have to sacrifice their right to a childhood, even with the new demands of war.⁵⁸

55. Christine Stansell, *The Feminist Promise: 1792 to the Present* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 13.

56. Spain, *How Woman Saved the City*, 7–9.

57. Mrs. John Sharpless Fox, Mrs. H. C. Dormitzer, and Ruth E. Moore, “By Board Action,” *WCCC Bulletin*, January 1943, 49.

58. Helen Dormitzer, “Back to School,” *WCCC Bulletin*, October 1943, 26;

Strategic Reframing of Local Campaigns

Both clubs argued that previous work to promote the health and well-being of their local community became even more important in the context of war because they would ensure a productive and cohesive home front. In the case of the “War on Rats,” the Woman’s City Club of Chicago reframed a local public-health issue as relevant to the national war effort. When the club participated in Rat Control Week in 1941, club members had emphasized that rat control would prevent food waste and the spread of disease. In 1942, President Fox labeled rat control “a real wartime measure,” because “the enemy might very well spread pestilence through the infection of our rodent population.”⁵⁹ Fox’s statement drew new attention to the local issue of rat control and asserted its importance by framing it as an “integral part of civilian defense,” one that would promote a strong and healthy fighting nation.⁶⁰ Fox also stated, “it is an economic as well as a health measure because each rat eats at least two dollars’ worth of food a year, food that we or our allies may need.”⁶¹ Given the nation’s food rationing, Fox’s emphasis on the food supply made the campaign relevant, which the club directly linked to the war effort by proclaiming that rats were ravaging Victory Gardens.⁶² Fox’s own reframing of the issue and the regular updates of the club’s Clean City Committee showed that the war effort was dependent upon local conditions; public-health and civic concerns should not be abandoned. Fox and other club members thus provided justification for their local efforts in a time of crisis by underscoring the relationship between the local and the national.

WCCC Bulletin, November 1943, 31.

59. Myrtle Perrigo Fox, “President’s Message,” *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1942, 3.

60. *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1943, 73.

61. Myrtle Perrigo Fox, “President’s Message,” *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1942, 3.

62. “Winding up the Year,” *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1943, 19.

In a similar effort to justify local community work, the Chicago Woman's Aid Society defended the importance of women's health-care services. Since the early 1930s the society had sponsored a birth-control clinic that provided family planning and health services to women.⁶³ By 1940 the club had expanded its work and opened a new location to accommodate the community's growing needs. It staffed and operated two clinics, which required a substantial investment sufficient to service the more than three thousand patients that visited each year.⁶⁴ During the war the society defended this continued investment by citing the new demands on the clinic, such as the growing number of young war brides who were seeking these health services.⁶⁵ The society also adopted the language and themes of the national war effort in order to promote its clinics, distributing literature from the National Planned Parenthood Organization to this end.

Planned Parenthood literature utilized the wartime discourse of freedom and democracy, framing women's access to health care and family-planning services as a "democratic ideal" and a right of individuals living in a free nation.⁶⁶ One pamphlet stated:

In fascist countries, women are ordered by the state to bear children as raw material for industrial and military machines, without

63. In March of 1941 the Chicago Woman's Aid Society's Birth Control Clinic was renamed as a Planned Parenthood Committee, in an attempt to distinguish their efforts from the eugenics agenda of "controlling" the population. See Lydia Appel to the Chicago Woman's Aid Society, 7 May 1940, Chicago Woman's Aid Society Planned Parenthood Committee Records.

64. *Ibid.*, April 8, 1941.

65. Lydia Appel, "Report of the Birth Control Committee," 8 April 1941, Chicago Woman's Aid Society Planned Parenthood Committee Records.

66. Planned Parenthood Federation of America, "Planned Parenthood and the War" (1943), Chicago Woman's Aid Society Planned Parenthood Committee Records.

regard for individual freedom of choice or the integrity of the family. Our country is at war against the armed forces of the Axis powers. But it is also at war against a way of life in which human freedom is consistently violated. In America, we believe in the right of parents to control their own lives.⁶⁷

Such literature coopted the justifications for the war to promote a woman's right to birth control and family planning.

Throughout the war, as the U.S. government condemned Nazi Germany's neglect of individual rights and freedoms, and the Chicago Woman's Aid Society criticized the dehumanizing ideology of Nazi motherhood. The Nazi state framed motherhood as a public duty and asserted that German women, or at least those who met a mythic Aryan ideal, could best serve the nation by bearing children and raising them to become National Socialists.⁶⁸ In criticizing the many restrictions that the Nazis had imposed on personal choice, the club asserted that its Planned Parenthood clinics embodied the unique American values of personal freedom by allowing women to exercise personal discretion in family planning. In her history of birth-control politics, Linda Gordon shows that supporters of birth control had traditionally made a case for its social value by arguing that family planning would promote the national economy and a healthier, more peaceful society by stabilizing families (particularly those in low-income communities).⁶⁹ In a similar way, the Woman's Aid Society argued that "children by choice and not by chance" would lead to happier, sounder families, yet it went further by presenting family planning as a matter of individual choice and right regardless of

67. *Ibid.*

68. Lisa Pine, *Nazi Family Policy, 1933–1945* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 3–4.

69. Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 247–48.

its social utility.⁷⁰ The club mobilized wartime discourse to build a new case for women's reproductive rights and the provision of these health services for women in their community. They believed that the protection of these rights and guaranteed access to birth control expressed the principles of American democracy.

Club Perspectives on Gender Relations

Both groups of clubwomen affirmed the value of individual members of their community and related their service to the important sacrifices that soldiers made for American society. In her 1942 message, for example, Myrtle Perrigo Fox told the Woman's City Club that they had a duty to honor young men and women serving their country; and this duty extended to "their children's children, as well as to our fathers and grandfathers who have fought for democracy in the past."⁷¹ Fox emphasized responsibility to the larger community while acknowledging a legacy of male sacrifice. This stance conformed to traditional ideals of femininity that emphasized a woman's appreciation for and duty towards men.

Yet, by contrast to traditions that devalued women's work and elevated the contributions of men, Fox used various strategies to affirm the necessity of her clubmembers' work as women. Employing the home-front analogy, Fox likened club work to battle, "our committees are very much on the firing line in the fight to preserve democracy."⁷² In this case, she compared the club's work to the fight that soldiers faced abroad, acknowledging both kinds of contributions to the maintenance of American democracy.

Fox believed women were not just supporting the war from afar—they were also forging the way, as there were certain domains in which

70. Helen Brody to Mrs. Jesse Gerstley, 18 December 1941, Chicago Woman's Aid Society Planned Parenthood Committee Records.

71. Myrtle Perrigo Fox, "President's Message," *WCCC Bulletin*, April 1942, 70.

72. *Ibid.*

women would hold the "front lines."⁷³ She extended the home-front analogy to include the many facets of clubwomen's work in their local communities. Such language shows that the Woman's City Club deemed the community work of its members, and the personal choices they made, as a vital contribution to national defense. The club valued women's contributions, proudly affirming that "women have proved that they can do practically everything that men can."⁷⁴

While U.S. propaganda emphasized the unity between men and women to wartime service, it still cast women as unequal, even dangerous, in regards to sex—a notion that clubwomen rejected. Christine Simmons has explored a discourse of female sexuality in the early twentieth century that held women responsible for the sexual behaviors of men, however "proper" or "improper."⁷⁵ During the war, female bodies were presented as dangerous "disease spreaders who could weaken male soldiers and sailors," which were thus in need of strict regulation and supervision.⁷⁶ "Loose" and foreign women especially were perceived as a moral and sexual threat that endangered a soldier's well-being. Melissa McEuen cites one poster that threatened, "She may look clean, but Pick-ups, Good Time Girls, Prostitutes spread syphilis and gonorrhea. You can't beat the Axis if you get VD."⁷⁷ Such a message warned that *any* woman could pose a health threat that could ultimately jeopardize an Allied victory.

Public opinion about women's sexuality closely reflected national policies. The American public regarded the WAC with great suspicion, and it was popular rumor that corps members provided sexual favors to

73. *Ibid.*, February 1942, 54.

74. *WCCC Bulletin*, March 1943, 63.

75. Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women's Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16.

76. McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 20 & 50.

77. *Ibid.*, 52.

male soldiers. Concerned about the WAC's reputation and conscious of its public image U.S. military officials decided to disperse contraceptives to servicemen only.⁷⁸ Military discipline also mirrored double standards found in society more broadly: in the few cases where men and women in the marines were found jointly guilty of sexual misconduct, the woman was punished far more severely.⁷⁹

In contrast to the discriminatory policy of the military, the Woman's City Club of Chicago demanded proper reproductive health care for all in need. In this effort, the club attacked the unequal treatment of men and women, particularly as regarded the issue of venereal disease in national propaganda. Like the military and other national bodies in charge of the war, the club acknowledged that venereal disease was particularly dangerous in wartime, stating, "war with its huge camps and industrial projects composed of unattached, restless men merely multiplies the problem." But the club believed the problem could be mitigated with sufficient recreational and social opportunities for soldiers and challenged the view that women alone were responsible and should be held solely accountable.⁸⁰ Club bulletins promoted women's rights and critiqued city policy as unconstitutional:

Women and men are equally guilty in this offense and whatever treatment is meted out to one must be given to the other. The constitutional rights of women demand that we cease punishing the woman and letting the man go his thoughtless way, perhaps to contaminate his own family. But all too often the women are still sent to jail and the men to the clinic for treatment.⁸¹

78. Ibid.

79. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 39.

80. *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1942, 12.

81. Ibid.

The club mobilized the wartime discourse of individual rights to demand equitable treatment for women and to criticize the existing disparate, punitive response. In doing so, they also identified the ways in which society continued to undervalue the contributions of women, despite wartime propaganda that proclaimed their equal dignity and significance.

Clubwomen's Cited Motivations for Involvement in the War Effort

U.S. propaganda encouraged women to contribute to the war effort by implying that their engagement would earn the praise of their community and the attention and admiration of men. Both groups of clubwomen distanced themselves from this implication by articulating a desire to serve the community rather than seek the attention of others. In the case of the Woman's City Club of Chicago, President Fox claimed, "the important thing is to serve where we are needed whether we gain recognition or not."⁸² Such statements of purpose refuted any explicit desire to earn praise and recognition. Similarly, the Woman's Aid Society insisted that the respect and admiration they received was for the work that they accomplished. They stated that the sole purpose of their labors was to extend their sphere of influence and offer leadership to their community.⁸³

Despite rejecting the idea that their club work was carried out to gain male attention, these groups nevertheless upheld many traditional views of gender roles. In claiming that their members should have no selfish or private motivations for civic engagement they reinforced the notion that women are more naturally suited for duty and caring sacrifice.⁸⁴ Even this, however, remains distinct from the idea that women were motivated by the desire to earn the praise and validation of others as

82. *WCCC Bulletin*, January 1942, 46.

83. Mildred Rosenberg, "Incoming President's Address," *CWAW Bulletin*, April 24, 1942.

84. McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 57.

implied by U.S. propaganda. In their analysis of gender relations, club-women were critical consumers of propaganda who exposed social inequalities between men and women. This critique did not end there—they continued to challenge national messages as they explored broader efforts at cooperation within the wartime community.

III. Unity: Cooperation Along Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Lines

The National Context: A Myth of Unity and Equality

War propaganda and films often juxtaposed the freedoms of American democracy against the tyranny of the Axis powers. Propaganda often depicted unity and tolerance between races and cultures as a defining value of the Allies, in contrast to the tyrannical and totalitarian Axis powers. In his analysis of the seven-part documentary film, *Why We Fight* (1943), produced for American soldiers and later released to the general public, film historian André Bazin argues that the film presented an appreciation for cultural diversity as a unique value of the Allies, and one that ultimately strengthened America's national identity.⁸⁵

The photographs used to recruit women for war work adopted these themes and explicitly promoted interracial harmony. Melissa McEuen shows how the War Manpower Commission sought to normalize African American women in wartime culture. It disseminated stories of interracial harmony, cooperation at plants, and friendly relations in the workforce with the hope of encouraging other women to seek and fill positions as much-needed war workers.⁸⁶ Likewise, Maureen Honey

85. André Bazin, "On 'Why We Fight': History, Documentation, and the News-reel," in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, ed. Bert Cardullo, trans. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo, 84 (New York: Routledge, 1997).

86. McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 32.



Figure 10. Lee Russell, “Negro, Mexican and White Girls Are Employed at This Pacific Parachute Company,” April 1942

Source: Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/owi2001003475/PP

writes that national propaganda encouraged home-front solidarity and the employment of minorities by showing examples of black and white Americans working together for victory.⁸⁷ Articles, such as “Negro Women in Skilled Defense Jobs,” promoted acceptance of black women in the wartime economy, while photographs of women war workers often emphasized the interracial diversity of the home-front effort (fig. 10).⁸⁸ National propaganda thus promoted racial harmony, both to promote full participation in a united war effort and to create moral leverage against the Axis powers.

87. Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 51.

88. *Ibid.*

There were, however, clear contradictions between the stated values of U.S. propaganda and the reality of race relations in communities; the racial unity touted by wartime propaganda was largely a myth. Many historians have explored the race-related conflicts and tensions faced by local communities during the war. An increase in African American migration to northern and western cities during the war resulted in demographic changes that sparked racial conflict, and sometimes even race riots, throughout affected cities and neighborhoods.⁸⁹ Racial tensions surfaced frequently in wartime workplaces, which were often unwelcoming for racial, religious, and ethnic minorities.⁹⁰ Indeed, employers often retained race-based barriers that prevented minorities from entering the workforce, despite the political pressure to be more inclusive. The OWI chose to emphasize interracial solidarity among women war workers to promote its cause, but its representations failed to capture the lived realities of many women who faced widespread discrimination as they pursued opportunities for war work.

The Local Context: An Appreciation for Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Diversity

In contrast to the stretched rhetoric of U.S. wartime propaganda, the Woman's City Club of Chicago and the Chicago Woman's Aid Society acknowledged racial discrimination and addressed inequalities within their community. In 1942 President Fox informed her club, "One of our most difficult tasks will be learning to work together. We must develop tolerance, tolerance of ideas and of religions, of failures, and

89. McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 37; Jane Dailey, "Fighting Hitler and Jim Crow: African Americans and World War II," *The Berlin Journal* 11 (Fall 2005): 30.

90. Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 29.

of successes."⁹¹ Both groups expressed values of tolerance and acceptance for racial, cultural, and religious minorities, and their committees advocated fair and just treatment of all community members.

The membership of the Woman's City Club of Chicago was predominately white, but the club intended and professed to be a "democratic institution" open to members of all races and classes.⁹² Records suggest that the club had approximately ten African American members by 1930, but it is difficult to know the extent to which the club was a welcoming space for all potential members.⁹³ Many working-class women would simply not have been able to afford the \$10 monthly fee—annual membership would have cost approximately 20 percent of the 1939 median annual wage for women. Even after the club lowered membership dues in 1942, many working-class women would have still lacked the financial resources and the time required to engage in club work.⁹⁴ The club had however, expressed an ongoing commitment to issues of intolerance and racial conflict that extended beyond mere lip service. In its efforts to "promote understanding between the races," they frequently collaborated with the Chicago Urban League, an organization that served Chicago's African American community, to plan interracial events that addressed issues of racial prejudice.

The Woman's City Club believed that the well-being of the black community was relevant to the welfare of the city as a whole, recognizing

91. Myrtle Perrigo Fox, "President's Message," *WCCC Bulletin*, January 1942, 46.

92. *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1942, 3.

93. Barbara Spencer Spachman, "The Woman's City Club of Chicago: A Civic Pressure Group" (MA thesis, University of Chicago, 1930), 13.

94. Annual membership would have cost approximately 20 percent of the 1939 median annual wage for women. See *Special Edition: 1940 Records Release*, Bureau of the Census (Washington, DC, February 22, 2012), accessed April 6, 2014, www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/cb12-ffse01.html.

that African Americans should have an integral part in shaping the city and addressing community problems. The head of the club's Committee on Race Relations, Roberta Burgess, stated, "your chairman has been pleased to note that other committees have called upon Negroes to discuss problems which have shown the close relation between the colored community and the city as a whole."⁹⁵ While historians have criticized the ways that clubwomen and reformers imposed white middle-class values on the working-class and immigrant groups with whom they worked, this statement suggests that the club made serious efforts to learn from its black peers.⁹⁶ The club argued that black Chicagoans deserved to be respected as community members, who could make valuable contributions in solving urban problems and setting future directions for club work.

The Woman's City Club of Chicago's approach to racial discrimination was more than a message of tolerance, as its committees fought for policy changes and fair, equal treatment for all races and ethnic groups. The Committee on Race Relations hosted lectures and forums regarding equal access to cultural, economic, and political opportunities, believing that individuals should earn recognition and opportunity according to their abilities and accomplishments.⁹⁷ They participated in the Mayor's Committee on Race Relations and worked with the Chicago Urban League to seek employment opportunities for African American women.⁹⁸ The committee criticized the presence of racial prejudice and workplace discrimination that limited opportunities for black Chicagoans and worked to expose the ways in which black war workers were treated unfairly. For example, the club supported and shared the findings of the president's Committee on Fair Employment Practices, an interracial advisory board

95. Roberta Burgess, "Mary McDowell Committee on Race Relations," *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1941, 10.

96. Spain, *How Women Saved the City*, 13–14.

97. *WCCC Bulletin*, October 1938, 23.

98. Mrs. Russell W. Ballard, "Mary McDowell Committee on Race Relations," *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1944, 11.

whose research uncovered discriminatory practices in the wartime workplace.⁹⁹

At a time when the theme of sacrifice dominated national discourse, the Committee on Race Relations' chairwoman, Roberta Burgess, equated equal sacrifice to equal access to opportunities:

Their contribution and that of thousands of Negroes, not only working in all fields of American life but fighting and dying for their country in the present terrible conflict, should make us resolve that the racial discrimination which has belied our professed ideals of democracy should be stamped out forever in a free and truly democratic America.¹⁰⁰

Burgess highlighted the wartime sacrifices made by African Americans, including the lives of African American soldiers, to argue for an end to racial discrimination. In her committee reports, she supported publications such as the *Negro Digest* and cited guest lectures to the club by Earl B. Dickerson, an African American lawyer from Chicago who served on Roosevelt's Fair Employment Practices Committee. Burgess acknowledged the vital role that African Americans played in building the country, citing the historical legacy of figures such as Crispus Attucks and George Washington Carver. She supported and adopted the view of African American writers who felt their community should be recognized and valued for its integral part in past and present national life.

Similar to the case made by the Chicago Woman's Aid Society to promote Planned Parenthood clinics and defend women's reproductive rights, the Woman's City Club deployed the stated values of American democracy and the Allied cause to encourage racial equality and protect the rights of African Americans. Chairwoman Burgess reported:

99. Roberta Burgess, "Mary McDowell Committee on Race Relations," *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1942, 10.

100. *Ibid.*, 11.

In conclusion I feel constrained to appeal to all intelligent groups such as ours to do all in their power to check race prejudice and intolerance in our own America. We are horrified by reports of the brutal treatment of racial minorities in some of the European dictatorships and perhaps do not realize that those nations, smarting under our criticisms, are pointing to our lynchings as justification for their behavior.¹⁰¹

The club argued that the democratic process depended on interracial understanding and interreligious cooperation, and that such cooperation had to move beyond empty promises.¹⁰² Such principles would protect American democracy from the exclusionary practices of the Nazi state and its racial ideology, against which the Allies were supposed to be fighting. To this extent, the club's arguments echoed those made by black newspapers at the time, which compared Nazi racism and state policies to those of the United States and the Jim Crow South.¹⁰³ The Woman's City Club of Chicago adopted the rhetoric of its black peers, exposing injustice and racism within American society.

The Chicago Woman's Aid Society was also concerned with issues of racial and cultural tolerance, especially in the workplace.¹⁰⁴ During the war, the club joined the Fair Employment Practices Committee, the Union for Democratic Action, and the Mayor's Committee on Race Relations to advocate for "undiscriminating employment" for African

101. *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1939, 14.

102. Mrs. Walter F. Heineman, "Training Chicago's Future Citizens," *WCCC Bulletin*, April 1939, 70–71.

103. Dailey, "Fighting Hitler and Jim Crow," 48–49.

104. Like the Woman's City Club of Chicago, the Chicago Woman's Aid Society also formed a Race Relations Committee that explored such issues as fair employment for the black community in Chicago. See *CWAW Bulletin*, November 28, 1941.

Americans.¹⁰⁵ The club also ran a letter campaign to address employment practices and asked Chicago businesses such as Marshall Field's and Sears, Roebuck to "give employment to qualified colored women as clerks, stenographers and bookkeepers."¹⁰⁶ The club believed that better employment opportunities would help to alleviate some of the challenges faced by Chicago's African American community, including poor living conditions.

In seeking company support, however, they were careful to emphasize the ways in which fair employment would benefit the national war effort. In a letter to Carson Pirie Scott, for example, President Rosenberg argued that fair employment was essential to the national cause. Rosenberg encouraged the department store to expand employment opportunities for black Chicagoans, "because we believe that the morale of over 7% of our fighting men will be improved in the knowledge that their people are being treated fairly," and "because we believe the friendship of our Allies will be strengthened by every sincere expression of genuine democracy."¹⁰⁷ Rosenberg cited the role of African American soldiers to show that the African American community had a stake in American democracy and should be treated equally.

The Chicago Woman's Aid Society also advocated for fair housing for the African American community. After World War I, thousands of blacks had left the South to pursue job opportunities in northern cities. Between 1916 and 1920 more than fifty thousand African Americans moved to Chicago.¹⁰⁸ This migration pattern continued throughout World War II, as African Americans moved north to pursue jobs in the

105. Chicago Woman's Aid Society, Interracial Committee Report, March 19, 1946, Chicago Woman's Aid Society Race Relations Committee Records.

106. Mrs. Magnus Rosenberg to Mr. Frederick H. Scott, 23 December 1943, Chicago Woman's Aid Society.

107. *Ibid.*

108. Olivia Mahoney, *Chicago: Crossroads of America* (Chicago: Chicago History Museum, 2006).

war industries. In Chicago, however, African Americans faced restrictive housing covenants that forced them to settle in restricted area on the South Side, where they paid high rents for substandard housing. The Chicago Woman's Aid Society distributed material from the Mayor's Committee on Race Relations, which stressed that due to discriminatory housing practices "300,000 [blacks] were crowded into dwellings that should normally house about half of [that] number" and where an estimated 30 percent of household income was directed to rent.¹⁰⁹

In addition to working with the Mayor's Committee on Race Relations and organizations like the Chicago Urban League, the Chicago Woman's Aid Society provided direct service to the African American community. To alleviate the issues caused by low-quality housing and overcrowded neighborhoods, the society supported local community work and recreational centers. In 1941 the club formed a women's auxiliary to the Good Shepherd Community Center, which served a predominately African American community on the South Side.¹¹⁰ In 1944 the club became involved with Lower North Centers, helping to host parties and community events and raising funds to enhance facilities and build a playground.¹¹¹

The society's Jewish religious identity informed its definition of community, which extended beyond the local and national to include

109. Mayor's Committee on Race Relations, "Negroes in Chicago," October 1944, Mayor's Committee on Race Relations brochure, Chicago Woman's Aid Society Race Relations Committee Records, Chicago Urban League, "Jean S," 1944, Chicago Urban League material, Chicago Woman's Aid Society Race Relations Committee Records.

110. The Good Shepherd Community Center was located at 51st Street and South Parkway. It was later renamed the Parkway Community House. See "Parkway Community House Records," *Black Metropolis Research Consortium Survey*, accessed July 12, 2016, bmrcresearch.uchicago.edu/collections/2502-1.

111. Race Relations Committee Chairman to Mr. Eugene Bernstein, 14 December 1944, Chicago Woman's Aid Society Race Relations Committee Records; Chicago Woman's Aid Society, Interracial Committee Report, March 19, 1946.

European Jews with whom they shared a religious identity. Even before the United States involvement in the war, the society's members took an interest in European political affairs and were concerned for fellow members of their religious community. The society's weekly bulletin for January 31, 1941, stated:

Last Year the Jews in Germany, Czecho-Slovakia, and Poland were the ones in need. This year almost the entire continent of Europe west of Russia is under Nazi Domination. Three and one half millions of Jews are in desperate circumstances. Only we of America can help them! We dare not condemn these millions to starvation, exposure, and disease... We must contribute generously to the Jewish Welfare Fund!¹¹²

The society was deeply alarmed by the growing power of the Nazis and supported the fight abroad by raising funds and donating to the British War Relief Fund.¹¹³

Just as these clubs drew attention to racial discrimination, the Chicago Woman's Aid Society worked to expose anti-Semitism in America through organized rallies, letter-writing campaigns, and lectures. The U.S. government criticized the Nazis for their anti-Semitism and anti-democratic values, but the Chicago Woman's Aid Society confronted the offensive presence of anti-Semitism locally and nationally, within American society.¹¹⁴

Although it was an organization of Jewish women, the Chicago Woman's Aid Society collaborated with other clubs and organizations. In running its Birth Control Clinic, it sought to provide services to everyone in the community. Its records show that Catholic, Protestant,

112. *CWAW Bulletin*, January 31, 1941.

113. *Ibid.*

114. *CWAC Bulletin*, November 21, 1941.

and Jewish women alike visited the clinic. In its commitment to inter-religious cooperation, the club also participated in the Chicago Round Table of Christians and Jews. The Woman's Aid Society members did not want their work to be limited to those who shared their religious identity, but rather desired to be an integral part of their larger Chicago community.

IV. Morale

The National Context

The ideal wartime woman was one who made personal sacrifices while keeping up her physical appearance for the sake of the nation.¹¹⁵ In other words, beyond mobilizing for the war effort, women were expected to sustain national morale by meeting physical and social ideals that would mark them as something “worth fighting for.”¹¹⁶ Even as women were drawn into war work, they were expected to meet traditional physical and social ideals of femininity. Melissa McEuen analyzes advertising campaigns from 1941 that encouraged American women to wear lipstick as an “appropriate response” to the Pearl Harbor attack, as women's beauty would help to foster national morale.¹¹⁷ Other historians have emphasized that these images taught that women should not be threatening in their new social roles and would ultimately continue to fulfill traditional social prescriptions regarding femininity.¹¹⁸

115. Melissa McEuen also discusses how popular media and wartime advertising for beauty products narrowly portrayed the ideal wartime woman as white and middle class. See McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 47–56.

116. *Ibid.*, 47.

117. *Ibid.*

118. McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 43.

The Local Context: Negotiating Traditional Gender Roles

Both the Woman's City Club of Chicago and the Chicago Woman's Aid Society believed that aesthetics had an important role in fostering morale. For example, the Chicago Woman's Aid Society instructed women to plant “flowers for morale.”¹¹⁹ The Woman's City Club of Chicago also suggested that fashion could help to raise women's spirits. In October of 1942 the club advertised a hat-decorating workshop called “Topping It Off.” The bulletin promised its members: “This will give the final lift to our morale. A new hat is a flag of courage whether it comes straight from the milliner's, or is last year's model converted into tomorrow's design.”¹²⁰ Likewise, the Chicago Woman's Aid Society held a host of workshops and fashion shows to reinvent old clothing.

Propaganda told women that their beauty would inspire soldiers, and Woman's City Club leadership sometimes suggested this as well. When President Fox encouraged women to do their own housework, she reassured members, “a reduced hip-line is only one of the good results that may come from pushing a vacuum cleaner.”¹²¹ Throughout the war, a new, national emphasis on a thin ideal emerged from the extensive discourse about the ideal female body.¹²² Here, Fox encouraged members' participation in the war effort by suggesting that it would help them reach these standards.

As in other dimensions of their work, clubwomen were not passive consumers of messages about female beauty—they neither accepted nor rejected wartime messages in their entirety. Instead they both adopted and reframed nationally sponsored rhetoric to support their local

119. *CWAW Bulletin*, February 20, 1942.

120. *WCCC Bulletin*, October 1942, 24.

121. Myrtle Perrigo Fox, “President's Message,” *WCCC Bulletin*, April 1943, 70.

122. *Ibid.*

communal goals. Both clubs believed in the importance of nurturing morale wherever possible, but they emphasized its practical purpose rather than its function as a uniquely female duty. They recognized the importance of fostering communal bonds to sustain the war effort and survive the difficult realities of home-front life. As a result, they believed that it was important to devote time to recreation despite the constant demands of the war effort.

Both groups hosted social gatherings for the many servicemen who passed through Chicago. They opened up their club tearooms, hosted Valentine's Day parties for sailors, and stored magazines and books for their use. In offering such opportunities, the clubs provided entertainment for those in service and promoted a healthy and active social life. The Woman's City Club also offered recreational activities for their community members, suggesting neighborhood square dancing parties and community events to honor the veterans who were able to return home.¹²³ Similarly, the Chicago Woman's Aid Society promoted active games and dancing opportunities for youth and free sources of entertainment for working adults.¹²⁴ Both clubs felt that their community would be able to commit more to the war effort if civilians' social needs were also addressed.

V. Conclusion

In evaluating the war's impact on women, historian Susan Hartmann argues that the war had no uniform effect on women's roles.¹²⁵ In themselves national campaigns embodied complex and sometimes contradictory messages about gender, while the diversity of women's experiences based upon factors such as class, race, religion, age, or the

123. *WCCC Bulletin*, January 1943, 51; *ibid.* April 1943, 71.

124. *CWAW Bulletin*, February 27, 1942; "60th Anniversary Celebration," *CWAW Bulletin*, December 1942; *CWAC Bulletin*, April 30, 1942.

125. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 153.

wartime community in which one lived ensured additional differences. Certainly, these two groups of Chicago clubwomen do not represent all American women, nor even all Chicago women, but they do provide a valuable entry point for understanding the ways in which women responded to the national wartime rhetoric about women's roles in private and public life.

It is worth questioning how clubwomen's work was received by members of Chicago's local communities, given the ways in which clubwomen tended to assume the role of a moral authority for others. Clubwomen saw themselves as the "moral guardians" of the city and spoke out against vice, delinquency, and the conditions of the "unfortunate."¹²⁶ Some historians have criticized the ways in which social-welfare reformers of the early twentieth century assimilated immigrants and the working poor, seeking social control and enforcing middle-class values as they attempted to "sanitize" urban spaces.¹²⁷ It is also true that women's groups and feminist movements have at times focused on issues that are primarily relevant to white upper-middle-class women, excluding and alienating women of minority backgrounds.¹²⁸

It is difficult to know how local communities would have experienced club work. Yet we do know that both groups of women made a conscious effort to work with and learn from the individuals that they were trying to serve, a commitment that was particularly evident in the Woman's City Club of Chicago's and the Chicago Woman's Aid Society's work within and alongside the African American community. By hosting joint events, attending lectures with other clubs, and making regular home visits in the communities where they worked, clubwomen strived to

126. *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1942, 7; *ibid.*, January 1943, 48; "60 Years of Achievement," *CWAW Bulletin*, December 1942.

127. Elizabeth J. Clapp, "Welfare and the Role of Women: The Juvenile Court Movement," *Journal of American Studies* 28, no. 3 (December 1994): 360, www.jstor.org/stable/27555835; Spain, *How Women Saved the City*, 9–13.

128. Stansell, *The Feminist Promise*, 267–72.

create opportunities where all community members could exercise a voice in directing improvements and enacting reforms.

Historians have debated the extent to which World War II contributed to women's liberation. Some have emphasized the new career roles open to women, while others, including Leila Rupp and Maureen Honey, have emphasized the extent to which propaganda and popular culture encouraged women to maintain and fulfill their traditional domestic roles while assuming new ones.¹²⁹ Such arguments indicate that the war era failed to alter women's status in society significantly.

A study of the Woman's City Club of Chicago and the Chicago Woman's Aid Society, however, shows that important precedents were formed for later activism at the local and national levels. Years before the civil-rights or the women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, these clubs had begun to analyze critically issues of race and gender politics. When President Rosenberg stated that "in time of war, we must assume much more than our peace-time share of community responsibility ...because of the greater demands that are made on us," she recognized that the war was opening up new opportunities for women to participate in public life. Clubwomen seized wartime opportunities to exercise independent leadership. Furthermore, they coopted new themes in wartime discourse to advocate for fair treatment and the protection of individual rights—on behalf of themselves and members of their community. Within an evolving context of war, they assumed new positions and were able to craft new arguments for reproductive rights, health care, and racial and gender equality. This tradition of advocacy laid important groundwork for the future work of activists who followed.

The clubwomen's activism is an important demonstration of women's engagement and influence in creating a vision for their wartime community. Chicago clubwomen were never passive consumers of a national

129. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War*, 167; Knaff, *Beyond Rosie the Riveter*, 57; Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 1.

ideology of womanhood. Despite new, urgent, national needs and the inevitable intrusion of the war effort upon the lives of individuals, Chicago clubwomen believed that the success of the nation was rooted in the local, specially, the health and well-being of the individual members of their community.

These two women's clubs demonstrated flexibility while maintaining their commitment to local issues. In finding solutions to local problems, both groups consistently favored reforms that addressed the root, structural causes of problems, particularly those that encouraged education to support long-term change. For example, in their efforts to address juvenile delinquency, they demanded reforms that would provide a "more constructive approach," which would involve work "before the commitment of a boy" to the penitentiary or reform schools.¹³⁰ Their approach dismissed short-sighted initiatives suggested by the pressures of war in favor of solutions that would provide longer-term benefit to the rights of the disadvantaged, including women, children, the sick, the poor, and Chicago's cultural, ethnic, and religious minority groups. In many dimensions, they capitalized upon new wartime opportunities to promote a more inclusive vision of the common good.¹³¹

130. *WCCC Bulletin*, May 1942, 7.

131. "60 Years of Achievement," *CWAW Bulletin*, December 1942; *WCCC Bulletin*, January 1942, 46.

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