**What was the most significant impact on the lives of women in World War II?**

World War II impacted British society, and the lives of people in all classes, greatly. However, you could argue it impacted the lives of women most. You could even say women were the unsung heroes of the time. World War II gave them the opportunities to work and have positions of responsibility they would’ve never had before. However, despite being provided with new experiences, they had to bear the hardships that came with war – losing sons, husbands and brothers in the war. But they still went about their everyday lives and provided food, clothes and support for their families despite the circumstances. For these reasons, it is only right for women’s contribution to the victory of World War II to be recognised.

To begin, World War II gave women the opportunity to contribute to the victory of the war in a very meaningful way, rather than just sitting back and watching their husbands and sons sacrifice their lives on the front line. They no longer felt useless and weren’t forced to be housewives. This, as a result, empowered them. For example, all women’s voluntary services became very useful and much needed – they would run the soup kitchens and would supply food for groups of soldiers passing by the station. The women’s institute was also very strong, with regional kitchens and women getting together to preserve food. They were also faced with practical jobs that men would usually take on: the land army was sent to farms all over the country and trained to drive and maintain production lines in factories, some women managed barrages and those in the WAAF (Women’s Auxiliary Air Force) would even fly aircraft with deliveries from factories, to air bases. In December 1941, England actually became the first country to conscript women. By the end of 1942, 10 million women between the ages of 19 and 50, were registered for war work.

In the video/interview attached, Patricia Jarman (right) tells the story of some women who although are never discussed, did highly responsible jobs and had a significant impact on some aspects of the war. One was part of Queen Alexandra’s Royal Army Nursing Corps and followed the 8th army back and forth over North Africa, dealing with the wounded as they came in. Another one of the women was fluent in French, and was dropped several times behind the lines in France. The third of the women was in the WAAF and worked in the plotting office. How could these women go back to living as housewives? They didn’t want to go back to that lifestyle, but were forced to give up their jobs when the men returned from war. “It was an accepted fact that the man was the breadwinner”, Patricia stated. This highlights the unjust gender stereotypes of the time.

However, the women also had to endure horrible uncertainty, pain and lived in fear of what might happen to their loved ones. Perhaps they felt the losses associated with war, most keenly. In addition to this, they had to provide for their families (considering rationing) and keep up diminishing morale. Essentially, they had to bear the brunt of many of the hardships of World War II. But did the opportunities they were given outweigh the harrowing pain and fear they were faced with?

But despite all the things women had to endure, and the strength they demonstrated, they were not given the recognition they deserved and were arguably mistreated. Initially women were paid less than unskilled male workers and this resulted in a strike at the Rolls Royce factory in Glasgow in 1943. The women had a part-victory as they returned to work on the pay of a male semi-skilled worker - not the level of a male skilled worker but better than before the strike. Women were allowed on airfields, but were not given combat roles, as Winston Churchill believed that they would not be able to cope with the knowledge that they had killed a young German man. However, this was unfair because women were allowed to track planes, fuse shells and be present when the firing cord was pulled. Furthermore, although women typically had fewer crashes than men, they were not welcome to fly a plane and were referred to as a “menace” in the air.

To conclude, women played a major role in the war despite not being exploited to their full potential. The gained a lot of independence and respect and their lifestyles were drastically changed. They shouldered so much responsibility and had to stay strong in the face of adversity and the loss of loved ones, and were also given so many opportunities to be part of the imminent victory of World War II. As president Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “They have given their sons to the military services. They have stoked the furnaces and hurried the factory wheels. They have made the planes and welded the tanks, riveted the ships and rolled the shells”. The most significant change that World War II brought about, was that it altered women’s roles in British society, and people’s attitudes towards women. Although there was not a revolutionary change, these were some of the first concrete steps towards equality for women.