

Bread Maker-Turned-Breadwinner: Representations Of Gender And Power In The Canadian Television Series Bomb Girls

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Abstract

This research explores the representation of gender roles in the Canadian prime-time television series *Bomb Girls*, which depicted the lives of women working at a munitions factory in Toronto during the Second World War. The historical drama, which aired from 2012 to 2013, was set in a period that challenged gender dynamics in the public and private spheres. Women's participation in the workforce more than doubled during the war, reaching 1.2 million by late 1943. Women worked alongside men and in place of those fighting overseas, assuming (or at least sharing) the traditionally-male role of 'breadwinner.' This blurred gendered divisions of labour and challenged stereotypical conceptions of 'womanhood.' Life changed and, with that, so did women. *Bomb Girls* sought to tell the stories of a diverse group of female munitions factory workers 'liberated' from the home and the social restrictions that accompany a traditional division of labour. Through a content analysis of the television series, this study considers whether and, if so, how the series portrayed these shifting power dynamics by analyzing—through a feminist media studies theoretical framework—the characters' personal characteristics, motivations for employment, and attitudes towards their own labour. It argues that *Bomb Girls* challenges dominant discourse on representations of gender in media, capturing the complexity of the character, motivations and attitudes of working women during the war. It ultimately presents a more nuanced and less gendered representation of women in the wartime workforce.

Keywords: gender, representation, television, feminist media studies, Second World War, Canada

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Introduction

Bomb Girls was a Canadian primetime television series that depicted the lives of women working in a munitions factory in Toronto, Canada, during the Second World War. The series aired for two seasons on the Global Television Network from 2012 to 2013, culminating in a series finale movie that aired in early 2014. *Bomb Girls* stands among a select list of Canadian period pieces to “survive” its first season (Bendix, “Exclusive,” 2012). As a serialized period piece, it drew on historical research to recreate an authentic representation of life during the Second World War, complete with its sets, costumes, language, characters, and storylines. The Network describes the series as follows:

Set in the 1940s, *Bomb Girls* tells the remarkable stories of the women who risked their lives in a munitions factory building bombs for the Allied forces fighting on the European front. The series delves into the lives of these exceptional women from all walks of life – peers, friends and rivals – who find themselves thrust into new worlds and changed profoundly as they are liberated from their home and social restrictions. (Global TV, “Bomb Girls,” 2015)

Bomb Girls took place during the Second World War, a period when the Canadian government called on women to enter the labour force in unprecedented numbers in the name of ‘total war.’ With Canadian soldiers overseas, the male labour force was depleted by 1942, and the federal government had no choice but to draw on its “womanpower,” as then Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King called it (King, 1942, p. 5). By 1944, nearly 1.2 million women worked full-time in Canada—almost twice what it was when the war started—and approximately 800,000 additional women worked part-time or on farms (Canada, 1944, p. 7; Pierson, 1986, p. 9). Manufacturing, which was traditionally male-dominated labour, was among the top three industries employing women during the Second World War in Canada, along with service industries and then trade and finance (mainly retail) (Canada, 1944, p. 7).

The war and women’s concomitant surge into the workforce blurred gendered divisions of labour (which confine women to the private sphere of the home) and challenged stereotypical ideas about ‘womanhood.’ Life changed and, with that, so did women. Broadly, this paper explores whether and, if so, how *Bomb Girls* depicted these shifting power dynamics in relation to traditional social constructions of gender. It further considers the significance of this for the lingering social narrative of women’s wartime labour broadly-speaking as well for feminist research on mass media representations of women.

Research Background and Significance

Bomb Girls was the first show of its kind—“a Canadian-made drama, about a piece of Canadian history,... on a network other than the CBC,¹... [that was] not just a serialized drama, but a serialized period piece” (Stinson, 2014). As the Canadian

¹ “CBC” is an acronym for the “Canadian Broadcasting Corporation,” the nation’s public broadcaster with a mandate to “connect all Canadians.” CBC Television airs 91 per cent Canadian content in prime time (CBC/Radio-Canada, “Who We Are,” 2015). In contrast, the Global Television Network is privately owned.

newspaper the *National Post* described the series: It was “at its heart a story about the empowerment of women at a time when they still lived sheltered lives” (Ibid., 2014). This description is significant because it points to one factor motivating the series’ creation. As its co-creator Michael MacLennan noted: “... the more research I did, the more I realized that really most presentations of the '40s are just not accurate. It was a time of immense experimentation, social experimentation, sexuality—these were women who were, many of them, working for the first time in their lives” (Bendix, “Exclusive,” 2012). *Bomb Girls* looked to remedy this by offering a historically representative or ‘accurate’ portrayal of the war’s [liberating] impact on women. This goal is relevant because the shifting gender [and power] dynamics were not readily or strongly recognized in the broader patriarchal society of the time, nor were these dynamics strongly portrayed in mass media representations of women’s paid labour during the Second World War or, for that matter, in scholarship on the extent to which the war liberated women from social constructions of gender.

With respect to mass media representations of women’s paid work during the Second World War, Canadian newspapers—the commercial and labour press alike—generally presented a story of women’s labour that did not reflect the lived reality or the political economic and social significance of women’s lives as wage labourers (Moniz, 2012).² Coverage consistently reinforced stereotypical values about women and their labour and upheld the patriarchal status quo, leaving “limited, if any, space for a broader or more progressive identity or for the possibility of social change in the direction of women’s equality” (Ibid., p. 196).

Ruth Roach Pierson (1977, 1986) ignited the scholarly inquiry into whether the Second World War “liberate[d] women from patriarchal divisions of labour and conceptions of proper womanhood” (1986, p. 9). To explore her question, she analyzed the Canadian government’s recruitment of women into the paid workforce during the Second World War using, as an object of analysis, archival records of the Women’s Division of the National Selective Service, the government division responsible for organizing the employment of Canadian women during the war. In analyzing the “context of women’s wartime employment and ... the degree to which [government] attitudes towards women’s proper role in society changed during the war” (1977, p. 125), Pierson ultimately argued that women did move beyond the restrictions or boundaries imposed by traditional conceptions of gender in a patriarchal society, acknowledging however that the “war’s slight yet disquieting reconstruction of womanhood in the direction of equality with men was scrapped for a full-skirted and redomesticated post-war model” (1986, p. 220). Much subsequent research on the impact of the Second World War on women’s status in society draws on Pierson’s work. This scholarship largely acknowledges the temporary workplace and financial gains made by women over the course of the war, but largely suggests

² The author’s doctoral dissertation, “Women in the Margins: Media Representations of Women’s Labour in the Canadian Press, 1939-1945” (Ryerson University, 2012), cited in the reference list, explored (via content analysis) representations of women’s wage labour in commercial and labour newspapers published in Canada during the Second World War.

that women's wartime advancement was short-lived and status quo ultimately prevailed.³

The literature, however, also looks beyond macro or systemic change as a marker of the war's impact on the 'gendered' status of women in society and considers, instead, change in women's self-identity brought about through the war. Alison Prentice et al. (1988, 2004) argued that "the opportunity to expand their activities [beyond personal service work, for example] did have a positive impact" on Canadian women (1988, p. 317). Specifically, women "gained an increased sense of self-worth, leading them to chafe at the more traditional and limited notions of women's appropriate roles that re-emerged at war's end" (Ibid., 317). In short, "though few [women] noticed it, a new era had begun for women" (Ibid., 295).

In *Six War Years, 1939-1945: Memories of Canadians at Home and Abroad* (1974), Canadian history writer Barry Broadfoot travelled across the country with his tape recorder asking people: "What did you do in the war?" Hundreds of anonymous Canadians replied to that question, and theirs are the voices heard in this book. The result is an oral history of the Second World War as told to Broadfoot by the Canadian men and women who lived it, and this includes women in the wartime workforce. The following is an excerpt of one woman's response, aptly titled "Women Found Freedom":

I think [the war] did a lot to finish off the idea that a woman's place and her only place was within home. My God, there were tens of thousands of us living a kind of life we'd never known before. More than anything, I guess you could say freedom.... [T]he war and working in the plants so changed me. I became an entirely different person. (p. 358)

This quote illustrates the personal and collective changes that occurred within women. The war granted many women license to experience life in the public sphere workforce and, moreover, to view themselves as part of it. The war changed women and how they viewed themselves, their labour and their social role in a patriarchal society. This study sought to determine whether *Bomb Girls* may, in fact, play a role in (re)producing a cultural narrative about women's lives during the war that offers a more representative story—one of personal empowerment.

This line of inquiry has implications for feminist media research on representations of women in mainstream media. This research largely reflects the work of feminist media scholars who argue that mass media "contribute to the reinforcement of gender differences and inequalities" and, as such, constitute a "key site through which oppressive feminine identities are constructed and disseminated" (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 7). More specifically, feminist analyses of media seek to understand this connection between image and (patriarchal) ideology—that is, how images and cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality, domination and oppression (Gill, 2006). According to feminist media scholar Liesbet van Zoonen (1995), media representations of gender—masculinity and femininity—are expressions of dominant gender discourse and reflect a dichotomous, binary and hierarchical definition of

³ Such Canadian scholarship (using mass media as an object of analysis, among other sources) includes Forestell 1989; Keshen 1997, 2004; Korinek 1996; Nash 1982; Pierson 1977, 1986; Prentice et al. 1988; Smith 2008.

gender. This includes reinforcing gender roles, which reflect a male-female or masculine-feminine dichotomy and hierarchy—public-private, workplace-domestic, active-passive, powerful-powerless, resolute-submissive, protector-victim (van Zoonen, 1995, p. 320). For example, in explaining the media's dichotomization of gender, she characterized representations of women with the terms: "underrepresentation, family context, low-status jobs, no authority, no power, related to others, passive, emotional, dependent, submissive and indecisive" (Ibid., p. 320). Oppositely, media characterize men in terms of the following key words: overrepresentation, work context, high-status positions, authority, powerful, individual, active, rational, independent, resistant and resolute (Ibid., p. 320). These representations, then, become part of human subjectivity, offering ways of understanding and representing oneself.⁴

This, then, prompts the question: Given the stated impetus behind *Bomb Girls*, might the series present an exception to stereotypical images of women dominant in the mass media through its depiction of working women and their connections to their own labour?

Methodology

Research involved a pilot study based on a two-part content analysis of the first season of *Bomb Girls*, which comprised six episodes.⁵ Two trained graduate student research assistants watched the episodes and coded the data in two parts: a general episode analysis (where the unit of analysis was each episode in its entirety) and a character analysis (where data was collected about each female character). Both parts aimed to draw inferences about how the series represented female gender roles by examining three variables: (1) the personal characteristics or personality traits of the female characters who work at Victory Munitions, (2) their motivations for holding paid work, and (3) their personal attitudes toward their own employment. The pilot study helped to refine the categories of analysis and the variables therein, test the coding schedule and clarity of the coding guidelines, and ensure inter-coder reliability.

The data collected was then analyzed using a feminist media studies lens which, as previously explained, views the mass media reinforcing gender differences and inequalities and constructing and disseminating oppressive feminine identities.

Results

Through a content analysis of the television series, this study considered whether and, if so, how the series depicted the shifting power dynamics in wartime society by analyzing—through a feminist media studies theoretical framework—the characters' personal characteristics, their motivations for working, and their attitudes towards their own employment. Combined, these various analytical threads suggest that *Bomb Girls*, in its first season, challenged traditional representations of gender prominent in

⁴ See Brooks and Hébert 2006; Byerly and Ross 2006; Carter, Branston and Allan 1998; Covert 2001; Ferguson 1983; Friedan 1963; Gauntlett 2008; Gill 2006; Kimmel 2008; Poindexter, Meraz, and Weiss 2008; Byerly and Ross 1999; Scanlon 1995; Smith 2008; and Tuchman 1978.

⁵ The first season comprises six episodes, however only five were analyzed in the content analysis because one of the episodes was used for training purposes.

the mass media in how it started to capture the shift in women’s public-private roles and the impact of this on women’s self-identity and in their day-to-day lives.

Personal Characteristics

This section considers the personal qualities traditionally associated with male and female gender roles in relation to the depiction of the female characters in *Bomb Girls*. In terms of the traditional gendered or male-female binaries analyzed in this study—active-passive, protector-victim, independent-dependent, brave-afraid—Figure 1 reveals that female characters were portrayed as embodying both characteristics considered stereotypically masculine and feminine, with somewhat greater emphasis on the former—that is, women as active, protective, independent and brave.

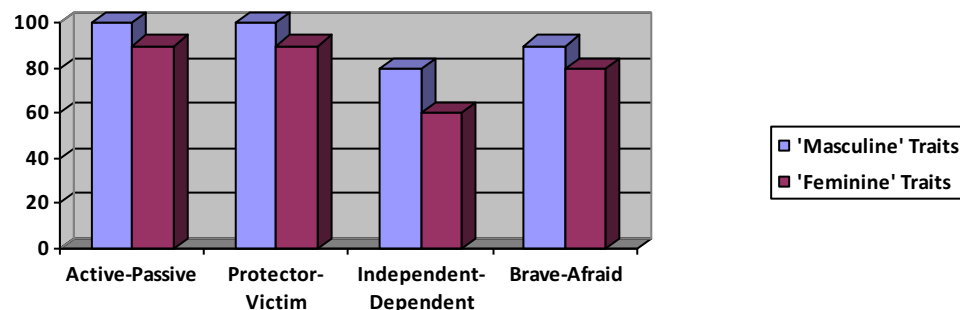


Figure 1: Analysis of Female Characters’ Personal Characteristics, by Percentage of Episodes in Season One

These findings point to the complexity of women’s lives during the war. In *Bomb Girls*, as in life, the women who lived and worked in wartime were not one-dimensional individuals—as in, only wives or mothers or daughters who embodied stereotypically-feminine personality traits. Rather, women were complex. In the first season, the female characters were depicted as active slightly more so than passive—that is, as strong, alert and lively, in mind and/or in action and as taking charge more so than they were portrayed as weak or accepting. This suggests that women were active in the workplace, but also living within and perhaps struggling against traditional societal expectations of their secondary or ‘passive’ role in a gendered society. The female characters were also depicted as protectors more often than victims, meaning as individuals who stood up to defend themselves or others more so than as helpless individuals who remained passive in the face of challenge. The first season also depicted the female munitions workers as independent more so than dependent and as brave or courageous more so than irrationally or unreasonably fearful.

One character who stood out in the analysis as embodying these personal characteristics—active, protective, independent and brave—was Lorna Corbett. Corbett was the show’s matriarch. At Victory Munitions, she was the senior position of floor matron, supervising the ‘Blue Shift.’ She was married to Bob, a veteran of the First World War who was left in a wheelchair and not returned to work since (Eramo, 2013). They had three children—twin sons at war overseas and a daughter at home

who works as a nurse's aide. Corbett was a complex character—a competent, strict supervisor in the factory; a protective mentor to and advocate for the women in the factory; a largely passive wife in the home (even though she is the breadwinner); a mother who feared for the lives of her sons fighting overseas; a seemingly moral and traditional person; and a woman who longed for love (Ibid., 2012). In Season One, Corbett had an affair with a male colleague at the factory, became pregnant and eventually miscarried after her husband learns of the infidelity. Hers was a complicated, yet true-to-life existence.

The content analysis of Season One revealed the following about the development of Corbett's character: She was portrayed as an active character in all episodes and as passive in only 10 per cent of episodes. She was portrayed as a protector far more so than as helpless—at a ratio of 90-to-20 per cent, respectively. She was never overtly depicted as dependent or as independent (40 per cent of episodes alike). She was finding her courage, as evidenced in 20 per cent of episodes, and she simultaneously struggled with the new fears and complications that the war had introduced into her life, which we see in 60 per cent of episodes in the first season.

Corbett was just one example of the complexity apparent in the female workers' lives on the home front during the Second World War. It will be interesting to see how she and other characters evolve in full-scale research study (which will extend to the second season and the series' finale film) and, more specifically, to see if the gap between these binaries widens as the characters become more entrenched in the workforce and, with that, in their new wartime identities.

Personal Motivation to Work

As Figure 2 reveals, *Bomb Girls* depicted a variety of factors motivating women to work outside the home: Patriotism foremost, followed closely behind by financial need and independence, and then ambition and a sense that they had a 'right' to work.

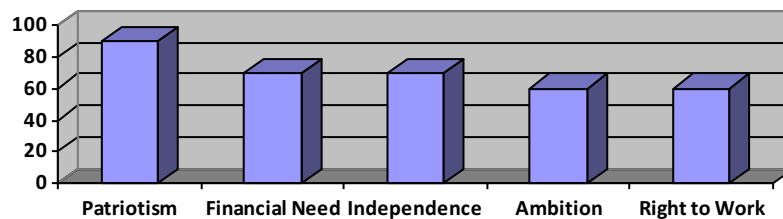


Figure 2: Analysis of Female Munitions Workers' Motivations to Work for Wages, by Percentage of Episodes in Season One (N=5)

These depictions of women's motivations for seeking employment represent ways that the series offered a more comprehensive portrayal of women in the wartime workforce. During the Second World War, the Canadian government and news media rhetoric focused exclusively on patriotism as women's main motive for seeking paid employment. As chronicled in the "History of the Wartime Activities of the Department of Labour": "In many instances, particularly in 1942 and 1943, no solution could have been found to the labour shortage situation except that Canadian women, confronted with their patriotic duty, were willing to forego the ordinary course of their lives in order that war demands should be met" (Library and Archives

Canada, "Employment of Women," n.d.,⁶ p. 29). In House of Commons debates during the war, women were "praised and sentimentalized for their patriotism" which, as M. Teresa Nash (1982) argued, served four important functions in terms of maintaining the place of women within the patriarchal system: (1) It reinforced the idea that "women are motivated by sheer goodness; by a devotion to duty and country that is far beyond anything so crass as money, working conditions or equal rights"; (2) It "neutraliz[ed] the notion that women might desire and be motivated by economic independence"; (3) It set up "'the norm' for women", presenting "a model of the 'proper' attitudes and behaviour to which women should aspire"; and (4) It "confirms the idea that while women may have a duty to work when it is required of them in times of national emergency, the right to work is still the sole prerogative of men" (p. 88-91). In this view, women worked out of patriotic duty and not out of an inherent right or desire to work or out of economic necessity. Yet, we know that women's reasons for working in wartime were more complex, and the series *Bomb Girls* captured this complexity.

For instance, it was financial need and not patriotism that drove many women into the paid workforce. Scholarship supports this,⁷ as does a survey of women with children conducted by the Department of Labour in 1945 at 19 wartime day nurseries in greater Toronto to determine why mothers worked. The survey found that "financial reasons are by far the most frequent reasons for mothers working outside their own homes" (Library and Archives Canada, "History of the Day Care of Children," n.d., p. 13). We also know that women enjoyed working—so much so that many women intended to remain in the workforce "indefinitely," according to 89 per cent of respondents in the aforementioned survey by the Department of Labour. This suggests the real 'bomb girls' felt more toward their own labour than a sense of duty to the nation and, in fact, experienced a more personal drive to work.

As Table 2 further demonstrates, *Bomb Girls* depicted the female munitions workers as viewing their own employment as a path to financial and personal independence and as from their ambition to succeed professionally and personally. To take this one step further, some female characters who worked in the munitions factory were depicted as working because it was their inherent right to work—the same as men.

The character of Betty McRae provides an example of a character's whose motivations for working are complex. McRae was a lead character on the show—a hardworking, skilled and seemingly 'tough' worker who moved to Toronto from the Prairies to work in the munitions factory, as did many women (Bendix, "Liebert," 2012). This character is a good example of one whose motivations to work extended beyond patriotism. The war was a time of intense nationalism and patriotism and *Bomb Girls* depicted this. It also went beyond patriotism to show the complex factors

⁶ The year of publication for this government report is not indicated in either the government document itself, obtained with permission from Library and Archives Canada, or the archival record. However, the document was published sometime between April 1, 1945 (the latest chronological date noted in the document) and August 24, 1950. Ruth Roach Pierson (1986) indicated in an endnote citation that this government document was published "sometime before August 24, 1950" (240). This report contains two parts: (I) Employment of Women, and (II) Day Care of Children.

⁷ For literature that cites financial need as a main a main motivator for women to seek wage work during the Second World War, see Kealey, Frances, and Sangster 1996; Keshen 1997; and Kesselman 1990; Pierson 1986.

that drove women to work. McRae was patriotic. We see her patriotic spirit as a motivator on-the-job in 70 per cent of episodes. As the season unfolds, however, we see more than patriotism. We see her financial need in 40 per cent of episodes the first season. McRae needed a job to financially support herself. She struggled in her attempt to live as a single, independent, self-sufficient lesbian at a time when women were expected to marry and be homemakers—dependents of their husbands (Ibid., 2012). But McRae had her own plans. She needed to earn money to fulfill her dream to buy her own home. She wanted to build a life for herself, as herself. This motivated her to go to the factory every day. We see her desire for independence and her belief that it was her inherent right to hold a job in 30 per cent of episodes, respectively.

Personal Attitudes toward their own Labour

Similar to women’s motivations, *Bomb Girls* also delved into how women felt toward their employment during the war. As Table 3 demonstrates, nearly all episodes depicted women’s sense of duty to work as part of the war effort. In fact, it was a wartime imperative. The enlistment of men for active duty overseas created labour shortages on the home front, and so the government aggressively recruited female labour. Government campaigns recruiting women into the paid workforce appealed to “patriotic duty and the necessity to make sacrifices for the nation at war. Women’s obligation to work in wartime was the major theme, not women’s right to work” (Pierson, 1986, p. 22-23). This is how government propaganda framed it, but not necessarily how women felt about their own employment.

Bomb Girls suggested this, rarely positioning employment as a ‘sacrifice’ or as an unwanted obligation on the part of women in its first season. Instead, other factors such as self-identity (women viewing their employment as an integral part of who they are and how they view themselves) and pride best described women’s attitudes toward their own employment.

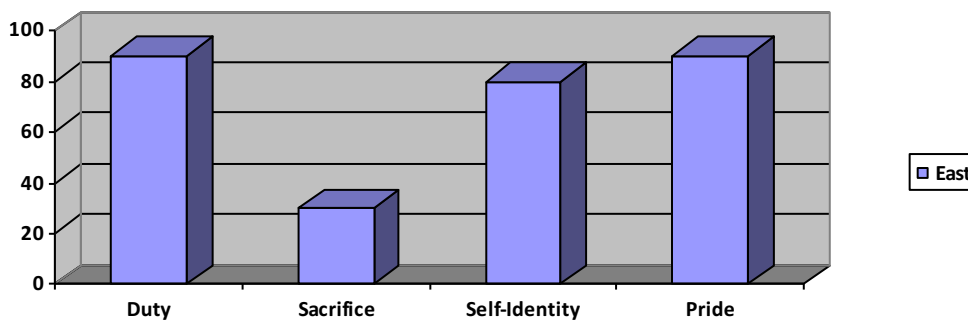


Figure 3: Analysis of Female Munitions Workers Attitudes toward their Own Employment, by Percentage of Episodes in Season One (n=6)

Gladys Witham, another lead character on the series, was the 22-year-old daughter of a wealthy Toronto family. She was privileged, cultured and naïve, yet outspoken, defiant and filled with ideas about life—and womanhood (Eramo, 2014). Viewers met Witham in the first season as the fiancé of an equally wealthy young man. Theirs was poised to be the perfect marriage, in the eyes of the families at least. And then the war happened and disrupted the flow of life. The war changed Witham. In Season One, the

viewer met a young woman eager to ‘do her bit’ for the war effort. On average, 80 per cent of episodes conveyed her sense of duty to do her part in the war. But as the season unfolded, we see an intense pride grow within Witham toward her labour. She defied her family by taking a job on the factory floor, even though volunteer work was more characteristic of upper class women at the time (Ibid., 2014). She seemed to feel a deep sense of satisfaction from working in the munitions factory (indicative in 20 per cent of episodes) and her role as a worker appeared tightly linked to her self-identity (as evidenced in 40 per cent of episodes). For Witham, the war offered an opportunity to change course in life, and she grabbed hold of it. In the first season, Witham struggled to step outside the confines of class and gender and their intersecting threads to understand her role and recreate herself in a society changed by war.

Conclusion

Canadian women ‘made history’ during the Second World War, and that history changed them. The Canadian television series *Bomb Girls* offers a dramatized, yet historically-informed look at the changes brought about within and around the women who lived and worked the war. Based on this pilot study, the series presented a fuller, more nuanced and less gendered representation of women who took to the public sphere workforce during the war. It presented female workers as caught in a push-and-pull between traditional conceptions of ‘womanhood’ and their new-found freedom in the public sphere and, with men away at war, the private sphere too. *Bomb Girls* challenged dominant discourse on representations of gender in media, instead capturing the complexity of the character, motivations and attitudes of working women during the war.

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