

Kelley R Allender
1210 words

I think women had an undeniable influence in the Vietnam War, however this influence was very different for each side. There is a distinct contradiction in the treatment of women who were aiding the Vietnamese and those that were aiding the Americans. Vietnamese women were treated with respect but also a standard of gender equality, one that most Americans probably would've have found inappropriate or even offensive at the time. Vietnamese volunteer corps consisted of both young men and young women that worked side by side; sharing the same tasks and facing the same struggles. American women on the other hand, were treated as prized possessions, and seemed to be shown the utmost respect and appreciation. The American women filled roles of flight attendants, nurses, "donut dollies"; and provided a feminine comfort and softness and also boosted moral. I recognize that there were also cases of abuse against women (most of them went unreported) however because none of the women interviewed by Appy spoke of experiencing abuse themselves, I am temporarily viewing those cases as outliers and excluding them as I make generalizations for the purpose of this paper.

Nguyen Thi Kim Chuy spent four years making new trails in the jungles of Truong Son. She may have not been armed or in the front lines of battle, but the dangers posed to her were just the same as anyone else enlisted in the Vietnamese army. She became so accustomed to American bombs being dropped around her that she claims she and her group could distinguish every kind of bomb just by the sounds it made. In fact the area was so dangerous that when her group had to move, they would only travel at night to reduce the risks of being bombed. Nguyen mentions that the Vietnamese soldiers she encountered traveling along the trails, "loved us because we were courageous girls and worked so hard". This depiction shows that the volunteer women were respected, but this respect came from men recognizing their willingness to put themselves in the same danger soldiers faced in order to serve their country. There was a greater sense of gender equality between the Vietnamese. Women were facing the same hardships, hungers, diseases, and risk that men were. They slept in separate sleeping quarters but bombs didn't distinguish between male and female, nor did malaria, nor did famine. The respect and endearment shown towards women was well deserved; they may not have boosted moral but they served their country just as well as the men did.

Sylvia Lutz Holland enlisted in the Army Nurse Corps, and between 1968-1969 she worked at the Evacuation Hospital in Chu Lai. Her medical skills and ability were potentially just as valuable as her female presence for the patients being treated at her hospital. She recalls young men saying "Boy, you sure look good". She may have been sweaty and dirty at the time, but to men who had been away from their mothers, sisters, girlfriends, and wives for months, or even years, a sweaty nurse was a beautiful sight. Due to the chaotic circumstances or overwhelming number of patients, nurses were allowed to practice any medicine they felt they were confident to do. I'm sure their medical contribution and care was very beneficial, however their feminine softness was just as much so. Sylvia said of her patients, "...as soon as you touched them you could feel the tension drift away. It was a real important part of what we did" (Appy, 171). She later explained the diversity of roles nurses filled, "you were like a sister, mother, grandmother, girlfriend... They had a genuine appreciation that American women were

there... We were treated with the utmost regard. It was like being queen-for-a-day every day” (Appy, 172). She gave insight into an unexpectedly relaxed and fun part of their lives which took place when they were off duty. She reminisces about dancing, eating cheeseburgers, and playing cards some; all activities that I wouldn’t expect an American to be able to enjoy during the Vietnam War. Not to take away from the fact that nurses were also at risk, hospitals were inevitably the target of Vietnamese attacks at times. Sylvia herself disclosed that she had a near death encounter when a mortar struck her hospital. It hit the exact room that she had been in and she owes her life to the pure luck of another nurse relieving her right before. Not to mention the absolutely gruesome situations she encountered regularly and her ability to remain calm, composed, and positive through them. I am in no way trying to take away from a woman that honorably served her country as a nurse and all the lives she helped save; but you can bet the starving Vietnamese women digging trails through the jungle would’ve given just about anything to have one night of music, dancing, and most importantly cheeseburgers.

Nancy Smoyer, was one of many “Donut Dollies” who went to Vietnam with the hopes of boosting the American soldier’s moral. They did this by playing board games with the soldiers, which temporarily liberated them from thinking about the war at hand. She recalls viewing the men as “cute little boys who were surprised to see girls and didn’t know how to act”. That response is logical considering generally soldiers were constantly surrounded by other soldiers, meaning men, depending on how long they had been serving in Vietnam, some of them may have forgotten what women looked and sounded like! Nancy supports this statement saying, “The guys were just so appreciative to see American girls... they were just stunned into silence by seeing us unexpectedly, or they’d try to flirt with us but they were so out of practice they could barely do it” (Appy, 188). The women provided soldiers with an emotional refuge from the war in a sense, and that’s exactly what they were there for. Nancy credits their innocent nature for being able to smile despite being in a war zone. She also admits that she was really naïve about the hardships soldier’s had to endure in the war; the awful things that they saw, friends they lost. Had she known, she says she probably wouldn’t have been able to sit down and play games with them. I have a feeling the “donut dollies” were generally in less dangerous situations than nurses or flight attendants, but anyone who willingly went to Vietnam was honorably serving their country, and with no guarantees of making it home they were doing so with bravery.

It’s impossible to put an exact value on these women’s presence in Vietnam but you can be sure for the soldiers living through the unbearable circumstances of war, it was one of very few things capable of lifting their spirits. The presence of Vietnamese women working side by side with men, sharing the same living conditions and risks, was inspiring to the Vietnamese soldiers. American women may not have been involved in hard labor or battle but their efforts were equally valuable. Nurses actively saved lives. Donut dollies were a key factor in boosting the moral of American soldiers. One thing that all of the women in the Vietnam War have in common, regardless of which side they were on was the respect of the men around them.