

To what extent did World War II lead to women in the United States becoming permanent participants of the labor force?



Women working in construction. <<http://www.historiasdecinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/women-at-war-II.jpg>>

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Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of sources

This investigation will explore the question: To what extent did World War II lead to women in the United States becoming permanent participants of the labor force? The years 1940 to 1950 will be the focus of this investigation, to allow for an analysis of women's employment during the war, as well as its evolution in the post-war period.

The first source which will be evaluated in depth is Julia Kirk Blackwelder's book "The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995", written in 1997. The origin of this source is valuable because Blackwelder is a professor of history at Texas University, specializing in Modern US and American women's history, and has written extensively on women's employment in scholarly journals and books, indicating that she is knowledgeable on this topic. Furthermore, the date of the publication of this source, 1997, strengthens its value, as it indicates that Blackwelder, benefitting from hindsight, has been able to analyze a comprehensive range of sources, including government documents, interviews and statistics. However, the origin of the source is limited in that Blackwelder is not a professional expert in economics, with which this topic is closely related and, consequently, might have misinterpreted some of the economic data presented.

The purpose of Blackwelder's book is to analyze the trends of American women's employment in the 1900-1955 period, and "to let evidence speak for itself" (Blackwelder xiii). This is valuable, for it indicates that an extended period of time has been examined, permitting for connections to be made between the trends discovered. However, the fact that the author has covered nearly a century

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of economic developments limits its value to a historian studying economic developments within a short time period.

The second source evaluated in depth is Mary Anderson's 1944 address American Economic Association "The Postwar role of American women", which was delivered in March, 1944. The origin of this source is valuable because the address was delivered by the head of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, and therefore provides an insight into the views of a well-known figure regarding women's employment and post-war plans. Additionally, the date of delivery of the address, 1944, indicates that the source allows for a valuable understanding of contemporary views on women's employment. However, this date is also a limitation, for it suggests that the source, having been written before the completion of the war, is likely to fail to analyze extensive research on women's employment. In terms of origin, the source is also limited in that Anderson was herself a former factory worker and was "particularly well attuned to the thinking of female employees" (Weatherford 256), indicating that she might have tended to shape the address according to her views, and, consequently, may have provided a slightly subjective insight into government plans.

The purpose of this source is to underscore the importance of the adoption of measures to secure the position of women in the American post-war workforce. The address therefore provides a valuable insight into government plans at the time. The source is, however, limited in its purpose in that the address, having been written to convince others of Anderson's point of view, perhaps omits some 'inconvenient truths' about the government's views, merely describing encouraging plans for female workers.

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Section 2: Investigation

Few historians would disagree that World War II brought about a dramatic increase in female participation in the American labor force during the early 1940s. Between 1940 and 1944, women's participation in the workforce rose by 23.5% (Clark, Summers 8), a change affecting women of all ages (See Table 1 of the Appendix). As a whole, women workers grew by 5 million in the 1941-1944 period (Anderson 239), with one-sixth of the working women being employed by a war-related industry (Goldin 753). The war was therefore responsible for the unquestionable incorporation of women into the American labor force. However, historians disagree on the extent to which these changes had long-term effects. While some refer to this war as a "watershed" event leading to the permanent incorporation of women into the labor force, others refute this statement by arguing that the war's influence on women's employment "appears to have been more modest" (Goldin 741).

Upon Japan's surrender in 1945, the situation regarding women's employment was uncertain. On the one hand, 75% of women who had been employed during the war years intended to continue working after the conflict (Weissbrodt 11) and, according to estimates, 3 million women would abandon the jobs acquired during the war, whereas 15 million women would remain in the labor force in the post-war period (Anderson 239). Important public figures encouraged the implementation of measures to face the "challenge" of maintaining the opportunities gained in war. However, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the measures defended were a realistic part of the government's plans. This is due to the fact that important public figures, such as Mary Anderson, who made

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some of the first public statements defining the attitude of the government towards this change, which was to have far-reaching consequences for the American female population, are likely to have shaped their addresses so as to encourage the female working sector. Indeed, the hopes of working women failed to materialize, for the immediate postwar period saw a significant diminution of the opportunities gained during the war. In 1947, for example, the participation of women in the labor force had declined by 12% (Hartmann) and about half of the women who had entered the labour force during the war left it shortly after 1944, with 4.6 million of the wartime entrants leaving labor force by February 1946 (Blackwelder 124). The participation of women aged 20 to 24 in the workforce fell from 54.4% to 46% in the April 1945-1946 period, and that of women aged 25 to 34 fell from 33.3% to 23% in the same one-year period (Durand 154). Women in the war industries were particularly affected, with the number of female autoworkers falling by 16.5% between 1944 and 1946 (Chafe 160) and another 800,000 workers being laid off by the air-craft industry shortly after V-J day (Chafe 159). It therefore appears that the employment of women workers during the war, was, as pointed out by Goldin, shortly reversed after the conflict, leading revisionist historians to argue that the effects of this event were limited as to the persistence of "Rosies" as part of the labor force (Goldin 750).

However, the late postwar period gave way to a reversal of this initially unfavorable effect, for women's employment soared in the 1947-1950 years. In this period the percentage of working women between 25-64 years of age increased from by 2% (Clark, Summers 1982), and that of working married women rose from 20% to 23.8% (Goldin 742). Additionally, the number of employed female operatives in metals and machinery manufacturing increased

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from 175,246 to 331,140 between 1940 and 1950. (Blackwelder 145). Also, twice as many women were employed in California in 1949 as had been employed in 1940 (Chafe 161). These examples of growth have led some to point out that the war did, indeed, have, a “ long-term rather than temporary impact on women's place in the labor force” (Blackwelder 147). The 5.25 million female increase in the labor force between 1940 and 1949 (Chafe 161) further strengthens the point that the war was, despite the initial postwar setback, a “milestone for women in America.” (Chafe 172). Conversely, it seems relevant that only 22% of the eventual 1950 women workers joined during the war years (Goldin 744) and that more than half of the women employed in 1950 had been employed before the United State’s entry in the war (Goldin 744). “Rosies” of 1944 were only 20 % of the eventual 1951 employment among married women (Goldin 750). These figures indicate that a majority of the jobs offered during the war period disappeared at its conclusion, and, consequently, that the women that participated in the labor force during the war years only constituted a small percentage of the late postwar employment. This suggests that the changes brought about by the war were more moderate than suggested by enthusiastic modern historians such as Blackwelder, who, perhaps in an effort to analyze an extensive time period, might have failed to examine short-term trends, consequently venturing to claim that "World War II had clearly accelerated the feminization of the U.S. labor force and increased employment among married women." (Blackwelder 146).

It therefore seems that World War II was indeed, responsible for an incorporation of females in the American labor force during the war years, an increase that is likely to have lead to a change in the perspective of male employers and public officials towards women employees, and might have played an

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important role in the rise in women's employment during the late postwar period.

However, evidence regarding the percentage of "Rosies" that were to form part of the postwar labor force suggests that the conflict did not secure a permanent incorporation of war female workers into the American labor force. World War II can therefore be seen as responsible for a number of significant ideological changes regarding women's employment but its direct influence in terms of persistence of women's participation in the labor force appears to have been modest.

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Section 3: Reflection

This investigation has allowed me to gain an insight into some of the methods used by historians, as well as to the challenges that historians face when carrying out historical investigations. I feel I have developed a skill that is fundamental in the study of history, that of carefully analyzing sources, often presenting different points of view on a same subject, to reach a justified conclusion. In order to carry out the investigation, I read books by renowned historians on the subject, analyzed statistical evidence, read government documents and public addresses concerning the subject of this study, all of which are methods often used by historians.

When comparing evidence provided by different types of sources regarding my research question I also became more aware of the challenges facing historians. As I began reading about this subject, I was initially surprised that the main theses of the sources that I was using differed significantly from each other. On the one hand, some, such as Blackwelder in her book *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995* and Anderson in the address "The Postwar Role of American Women", argued that the incorporation of women in the workforce brought about a dramatic change that would have far-reaching consequences in the post-war era. Others, for example Claudia D. Goldin in her article *The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women's Employment* stated that the effects of the war had been modest, and the incorporation of women in the workforce was reversed shortly after its conclusion.

Although I initially found it difficult to reach a conclusion, as I continued the investigation I began to understand the work of the historian better. In history, unlike mathematics or science, there is no "absolute truth". However, this does not

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mean that all versions of an event are equally acceptable. It is the task of the historian to find the most 'acceptable version', which often involves assessing the values and limitations of the sources at hand to find a version that is more closely aligned with the truth. I personally found this a challenge during my investigation. However, by considering the limitations of the sources I was employing I was able to reach a conclusion. For example, I regarded the evidence presented by the extensive article by Claudia D. Golding more valuable than that of Julia K. Blackwelder's book because the former focused specifically on women's employment in the World-War II and post-war period, while the latter evaluated nearly a century of developments in the workforce. This meant I that I tended to side with Goldin's view as I found that her 'version' of events was probably more accurate and well-researched than Blackwelder's, who only devoted a few chapters to the World War II period in her book. I also employed a similar method to assess the reliability of primary sources, in particular, Mary Anderson's address. Anderson defended that the war had far reaching consequences for women in the workforce. Although providing an interesting insight, I deemed this primary source as only partially valuable for my investigation, due to the fact that it was a piece of persuasive writing, and it was delivered in 1944, before the effects of the war could be fully assessed.

All in all, this investigation has provided me with a valuable insight into the tasks and challenges facing the historian, and has allowed me to understand the importance of assessing the reliability of historical sources when forming an opinion.

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Appendix

- Table 1
 - The following table shows the evolution of women's participation in the labor force from 1940 to 1945:

Age	Participation in the labor force (%)	
	April 1940	April 1945
20-24	45.6	54.4
25-34	37.9	33.3
35-44	38.4	27.3
45-54	33.3	22.4

(Durand 143)

- Table 2
 - The following table shows the evolution of women's participation in the labor force from 1945 to 1946:

Age	Participation in the labor force (%)	
	April 1945	April 1946
20-24	54.4	46.0
25-34	33.3	23.0
35-44	27.3	22.9
45-54	22.4	17.0

(Durand 154)

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