

Women and Work: Changes and Challenges from WWI Through the Great Depression

Victoria Worden

Department of History, Carthage College

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Abstract

The lives of women began to change with events such as World War I and gaining the right to vote. Women were now looking at their lives in a different way; there were new ideas of independence, education, work, marriage, and family. As these changes began to take place, the Depression hit. Many women still wanted to get jobs and there was now a greater need for them to be working as men were being laid off and not able to get jobs as easily as women. Married women in the workforce became a contentious political and social issue. Women working with families was another change that occurred because of factors relating to the Depression and created changes that affected the entire family. After WWI and during the 1920s women's lives were changing. They were beginning to leave the home to get better jobs, better education, and they now had the right to vote. When the Depression hit those advancements women gained were challenged. They were blamed for taking men's jobs, jeopardizing the family, and abandoning their proper place at home. Reading works by historians such as Lois Helmbold, Winifred Wandersee and others as well as first hand accounts, this research discusses the changes women were experiencing at the end of WWI through the twenties and the challenges women's advancements faced during the Depression.

Introduction

The decade after WWI often referred to as the roaring twenties opened a new door for women in the home, the workforce, and marriages. Women's expectations were changing in terms of working and families as well as the idea of marriage.

Young women were now able to leave their homes and look for jobs; some were able to move from temporary jobs and into professional schools to further their education and move up. Jobs that women were getting included the following: sales, marketing, publishing, accounting, credit, and life insurance.

When the Depression hit women who were working or who had been looking for jobs were under the scrutiny from the country. Their new found independence of the decade prior to the 1930s was being seen as a threat to the security of men's jobs. Now these advancements that women were making were challenged by the entire country and "In the depression, every woman discovered that her own decision to undertake wage work, or not, rested on a larger set of social issues."

Married women in the workforce became a contentious political and social issue. Women working with families was another change that occurred because of factors relating to the Depression. Mothers who left the home to work created changes that affected the entire family.

Research

Female advancements came during and after WWI. Better education and new job opportunities became available as well. Family changes such as better birth control and smaller family sizes gave women the feeling of more control over their lives.

When the Depression hit, the effects that women's labor had on the workforce was what gave women more opportunity to work during trying times. Women's labor was cheaper and therefore led employers to hire women instead of men. This wage discrimination gave women better and more opportunities to get a job. There was also discrimination of the types of jobs. Jobs typically seen as feminine jobs were more likely to be held by women than men.

Much of the objection to women working came from the argument that women working had an effect on husbands/fathers and any children they might have as well as women were taking jobs from men. The Depression was seen as a problem for men not women. There was also a strong case against married women working during the Depression. The common argument against married women was that if their husband had a job they should not need to get one and them doing so took away opportunities for other men and women.



Figure 1. During WWI new job opportunities opened up to women such as these women operating stock boards at Waldorf Astoria in 1918.

Conclusion

Final research from secondary sources and primary sources including personal letters, WWI there was a need for workers and while men were overseas it was left up to women to get these jobs. This along with other advancements led to women changing their views on their own personal life as well as a new view of families that continued even after the war ended.

Women were now more present in the workforce, which started during WWI, and this created a new sense of "freedom" for women. They were able to go to school, get an education, and even a job.

The lives of women began to change drastically when WWI began and they continued to change throughout the twenties until the depression hit. While the twenties was a time when women were challenging their traditional role as homemaker and asserting their independence, the depression unleashed the beast upon which the temporary tolerance of women's independence crumbled. The depression, while devastating to the country, tried to push women back home and back to tradition, to forget that they could have a life outside of the roles of mother and homemaker.



Figure 2. Women lined up for work during the 1930s.

Acknowledgements & References

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Figure 3. Married women also encountered challenges and faced laws passed by the government against married working women. Lea Miller, a professor at the University of Washington was fired after getting married and fought for her right to work.