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Underpaid, But Employed: How the Great Depression Affected Working Women

More women entered the workforce during the economically tough era, but the jobs they took were relegated to "women's work" and poorly paid.

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During the [Great Depression](#), millions of Americans lost their jobs after the [1929 Stock Market Crash](#). But for one group of people, employment rates actually went up: [women](#).

From 1930 to 1940, the number of employed women in the United States [rose 24 percent](#) from 10.5 million to 13 million. The main reason for women's higher employment rates was the fact that the jobs available to women—so-called "women's work"—were in industries that were less impacted by the stock market.

"Some of the hardest-hit industries like coal mining and manufacturing were where men predominated," says [Susan Ware](#), historian and author of *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s*. "Women were more insulated from job loss because they were employed in more stable industries like domestic service, teaching and clerical work."

‘Women’s Work’ During the Great Depression

By the 1930s, women had been slowly entering the workforce in greater numbers for decades. But the Great Depression drove women to find work with a renewed sense of urgency as thousands of men who were once family breadwinners lost their jobs. A 22 percent [decline in marriage rates](#) between 1929 and 1939 meant more single women had to support themselves.

While jobs available to women paid less, they were less volatile. By 1940, 90 percent of all women’s jobs could be cataloged into 10 categories like nursing, teaching and civil service for white women, while Black and Hispanic women were largely constrained to domestic work, according to David Kennedy’s 1999 book, *Freedom From Fear*.

The rapid expansion of the government under the [New Deal](#) increased demand for secretarial roles that women rushed to fill and created other employment opportunities, albeit limited ones, for women.

Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins

Women during the Great Depression had a strong advocate for First Lady [Eleanor Roosevelt](#). She lobbied her husband, [President Franklin D. Roosevelt](#), for more women in office—like Secretary of Labor [Frances Perkins](#), the first woman to ever hold a cabinet position and the driving force behind the [Social Security Act](#).

Ironically, while Perkins held a prominent job, herself, she advocated against married women competing for jobs, calling the behavior “selfish,” since they could supposedly be supported by their husbands. In 1932, the new Federal Economy Act backed up Perkins’ sentiment when it ruled that spouses of couples working for the federal government would be the first to be terminated.

Discrimination Against Women

For those women who managed to stay employed, meanwhile, the fight for decent compensation got tougher. Over 25 percent of the National Recovery Administration's wage codes set lower wages for women, according to T.H. Watkin's *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s*. And jobs created under the [Works Progress Administration](#) confined women to fields like sewing and nursing that paid less than roles reserved for men.

While women were permitted to join certain unions, they were given limited impact on policy, Kennedy writes. Ultimately, smaller wages and fewer benefits were the norm for women in the workforce—and this was especially true for women of color.

Mexican-American Women and the Great Depression

Some 400,000 Mexican-Americans moved out of the United States to Mexico in the 1930s, many against their will, according to Kennedy.

"The attitude was 'they're taking our jobs,'" says historian Natalia Molina, author of *Fit to Be Citizens*. "Before the Depression, Mexican immigrants were seen as 'birds of passage' coming here to do jobs Americans didn't want to do, like picking seasonal crops," she says. "Women were especially targeted because having families in the states meant the workers would stay."

Mexican-American women who could find work often participated in the informal economy, working as street vendors or renting out rooms to lodgers as people downsized their homes.

Black Women and the Great Depression

For Black women, meanwhile, the entry of more white women into the workforce meant jobs and decent wages became even harder to find.

"In every place where there could be discrimination, Black women were doubly disadvantaged," says Cheryl Greenberg, a historian at Trinity College.

“More white women were going into the workforce because they could and because they had to. Black women had been in the workforce since 1865. Black families had virtually never been able to survive on a single wage.”

One-fifth of all Americans receiving federal relief during the Great Depression were Black, most in the rural South, according to Kennedy. Yet “farm workers and domestic workers—the two main places you found Black women— had no pension or safety net,” says Greenberg, referring to [their exclusion](#) from the 1935 Social Security Act. Rather than fire domestic help, private employers could simply pay them less without legal repercussions.

All federal relief programs were administered locally, meaning discrimination was rife, according to Watkins. Despite these obstacles, Roosevelt’s “Black Cabinet,” led by [Mary McLeod Bethune](#), ensured nearly every New Deal agency had a Black advisor. The number of African-Americans working in government [tripled](#).

Rosie The Riveter

By 1940, only 15 percent of married women were employed vs. nearly 50 percent of single women. But the stigma around married women taking jobs from men was set aside as America hurtled toward [World War II](#). As men were deployed overseas, women were called to take their places in manufacturing roles on the home front. Icons like [Rosie the Riveter](#) celebrated women’s newly expanded contributions to the workforce—at least until the war’s end.