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Q.:

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

## 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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