

READING 5: WOMEN IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Great Depression was a period in American history that saw the collapse of the U.S. economy, a rapid closure of factories, and a lack of goods and food production, all resulting in widespread hardships for virtually all Americans. Beginning with the stock market crash in October 1929, which wiped out millions of dollars in investments, the United States entered an era marked by extreme poverty and joblessness.

While many men lost their jobs during the Great Depression, employment rates improved for women. In the 10-year period from 1930 to 1940, employment for women rose from 10.5 million to 13 million employed. Why? Women filled jobs in the fields of teaching, nursing, domestic work, and secretarial work. These types of jobs were less affected by the stock market crash and typically paid less.

Women worked long hours, usually more than fifty hours per week, for low wages. According to government statistics, a woman's average annual pay in 1937 was \$525, compared with \$1,027 for men. This wage discrimination and gap persisted beyond the Great Depression and continues to be a challenge for women in the workforce.

Before the Great Depression, women's primary roles were to marry and become housewives. Married women, who traditionally had raised children and worked in the home, faced disapproval by society if they were forced financially to enter the workforce. Working married women faced criticism and were told that they were taking jobs away from men, that a woman's place was in the home, or that children needed a full-time mother. Many men felt threatened by women in the workplace, because men had previously been defined as being the providers and decision-makers for the family.

Because jobs were scarce, there was a common expectation that only one family member should hold a paying job. If a husband found a job, his wife was expected to quit hers. Women were also expected to provide goods and support for the family using available resources. Women tended and expanded vegetable gardens for food, made clothing out of grain feed sacks, and sewed quilts from patches of used cloth. Women stretched food to make it last several meals and bartered with neighbors for things they needed. A woman might wash laundry or sew for a neighbor in exchange for flour or sugar.

Minority women fared worse during the Great Depression. About 400,000 Mexican Americans moved to Mexico in the 1930s, many against their will. While Mexican Americans had filled many domestic, migrant, and labor jobs in the past, the attitude changed so that these same workers were now seen as taking away the jobs sought by "real citizens." White women entering the workforce pushed many minority women out of finding jobs entirely. Government relief programs, meant to help all Americans, were administered at the local level. In some parts of the country, local administrations discriminated against or largely ignored women and minorities. Often, minority workers, especially women, were the last to be hired and the first to be fired.

Source:

Encyclopedia.com. (2020). Gender roles and sexual relations, impact of the Great Depression on.

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