

INTRODUCTION

Women were essential to the American war effort during World War II. They worked in defense industries, organized scrap drives and bond sales, administered rationing programs, joined the military, and completed countless other tasks to move the Allies closer to victory. In many cases, they made these contributions while still meeting family obligations back home. There's no question that World War II challenged conventional ideas about the role of women in American society, but scholars debate the permanence of that shift. In this lesson, students evaluate two opposing historical arguments about how World War II impacted the role of women in American society, using primary sources to make their case.

GRADE LEVEL

7-12

TIME REQUIREMENT

1- 2 class periods

MATERIALS

+ Copies of the **Student Worksheet**

+ **Evidence Strips** included as inserts with the printed guide and online at ww2classroom.org

OBJECTIVES

Students will evaluate two competing historical arguments about the impact of World War II on the role of women in American society. They will then support their conclusions using evidence from a combination of primary and secondary sources.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8

Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claims.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9






Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g. visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

ONLINE RESOURCES

ww2classroom.org

-  The Home Front Overview Video
-  America Responds Video
-  Rosemary Elfer Oral History
-  Lorraine Taix-McCaslin Oral History
-  Evidence Strips

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR HISTORY

HISTORICAL CONTENT ERA 8, STANDARD 3B

The student understands World War II and how the Allies prevailed.

HISTORICAL CONTENT ERA 8, STANDARD 3C

The student understands the impacts of World War II at home.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 3

The student is able to compare competing historical narratives and evaluate major debates among historians concerning alternative interpretations of the past.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 4

The student is able to support interpretations with historical evidence in order to construct closely-reasoned arguments rather than facile opinions.

PROCEDURES

1. Begin by reviewing the participation of women in the US military, defense industries, civilian defense activities, and other aspects of the American war effort. Use information from the overview essays as needed. Ask students the following questions: How do you think these contributions impacted the roles of women in American society compared with what we have observed earlier in the twentieth century?
2. Introduce the two interpretations from historians William Chafe and D'Ann Campbell regarding the impact of World War II on the role of women in American society. Have students identify the similarities and differences between the two arguments, and clarify difficult vocabulary. Remind students that historical writing is interpretive, meaning that historians write their narratives by examining evidence and drawing conclusions about what they believe the evidence suggests. It is possible for two historians to examine the same set of historical events but interpret them very differently. Chafe's and Campbell's interpretations of World War II as a watershed moment in the experiences of American women provide a good example of this.
3. Inform students that they will now have the opportunity to examine multiple primary and secondary sources in order to evaluate the competing claims presented by Chafe and Campbell. Divide the class into groups of 2-4 students each and give each group copies of the **Student Worksheets** (pages 97-99), the **Visual Sources** (pages 100-101), and the **Evidence Strips** (included as inserts in the published kit or available online at ww2classroom.org). Another method is to have each group examine and discuss one source at a time and then rotate sources with a nearby group.

NOTE: You may also want to include additional sources, especially if you have locally significant newspaper articles, letters, photographs, or other items at your disposal.

4. Instruct students to decide which historical interpretation (Chafe or Campbell) each **Evidence Strip** or **Visual Source** supports, and record their decision on the **Student Worksheet** along with an explanation of their reasoning. Remind students to be attentive to the date, origin, and type of source they are examining and to consider how those attributes might impact the source's reliability. You may want to examine one or two of the sources as a group to model this process.
5. Once the groups have assigned all of their sources to one historical interpretation or the other, have students choose which historical interpretation they find most convincing and articulate their reasoning in a couple of sentences.

6. Return to the whole group and have students share their conclusions and their reasoning. If students are divided over which interpretation is most convincing, encourage them to debate the issue by using the evidence they examined to support their claims.

While asking students about the evidence they selected, challenge them to think critically about the reliability and explanatory power of the sources. Do the dates of the source make a difference? How about the role of the author? Do the author's conclusions seem to be based on qualitative observations or statistics?

ASSESSMENT

You will be able to assess students' ability to analyze primary sources based on the notes they take on the **Student Worksheets** and the discussions they have in the whole group. Their written responses to Step 5 will demonstrate their ability to evaluate competing historical claims and deploy primary source evidence to support their reasoning.

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT

1. Have students write a 250-word text panel for a museum display discussing the impact of World War II on American women and their role in society. Emphasize to students that, given space limitations, they will need to choose an argument or point of view to frame their narrative.
2. Have students collect additional primary sources pertaining to the role of women in American society during World War II (e.g. newspaper articles, advertisements, political cartoons, letters, yearbook entries, oral histories, magazine articles, etc.), and determine which historical interpretation (Chafe or Campbell) they best support.

TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF THE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR II ON AMERICAN WOMEN

INTERPRETATION 1

“Within five years, World War II had radically transformed the economic outlook of women. Instead of frowning on women who worked, government and the mass media embarked on an all-out effort to encourage them to enter the labor force. The war marked a watershed in the history of women at work, and, temporarily at least, caused a greater change in women’s economic status than half a century of feminist rhetoric and agitation had been able to achieve.”

William Henry Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 135-136.

INTERPRETATION 2

“It is difficult to argue that World War II, in itself, constituted a watershed in the experience of American women. For the majority of American women, the war years may have altered some specific activities, but they did not change their interpretations of their primary roles.”

D’Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 236.



Women hard at work in the Republic Drill and Tool Company in Chicago, Illinois, 1942.

(Image: Library of Congress, LC-USE6-D-005713.)

NAME:

DATE:

INTERPRETATION 1

Directions: For each primary or secondary source that you examine, record any evidence you believe supports the interpretation below. For each piece of evidence you select, write a brief explanation of how or why it supports the interpretation.

Interpretation: “Within five years, World War II had radically transformed the economic outlook of women. Instead of frowning on women who worked, government and the mass media embarked on an all-out effort to encourage them to enter the labor force. The war marked a watershed in the history of women at work, and, temporarily at least, caused a greater change in women’s economic status than half a century of feminist rhetoric and agitation had been able to achieve.”

William Henry Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 135-136.

EVIDENCE

Source:

Explanation:

Source:

Explanation:

Source:

Explanation:

Source:

Explanation:

Source:

Explanation:

NAME:

DATE:

INTERPRETATION 2

Directions: For each primary or secondary source that you examine, record any evidence you believe supports the interpretation below. For each piece of evidence you select, write a brief explanation of how or why it supports the interpretation.

Interpretation: “It is difficult to argue that World War II, in itself, constituted a watershed in the experience of American women. For the majority of American women, the war years may have altered some specific activities, but they did not change their interpretations of their primary roles.”

D’Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 236.

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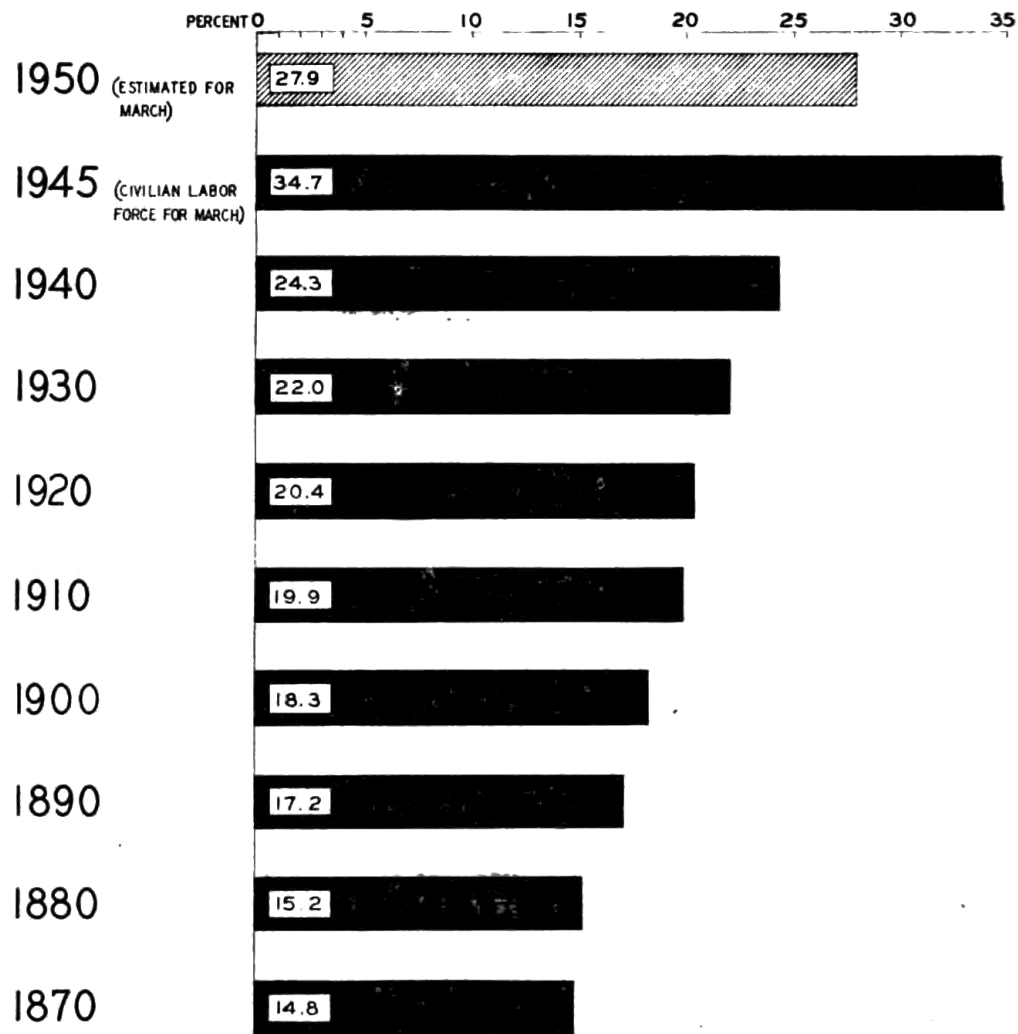
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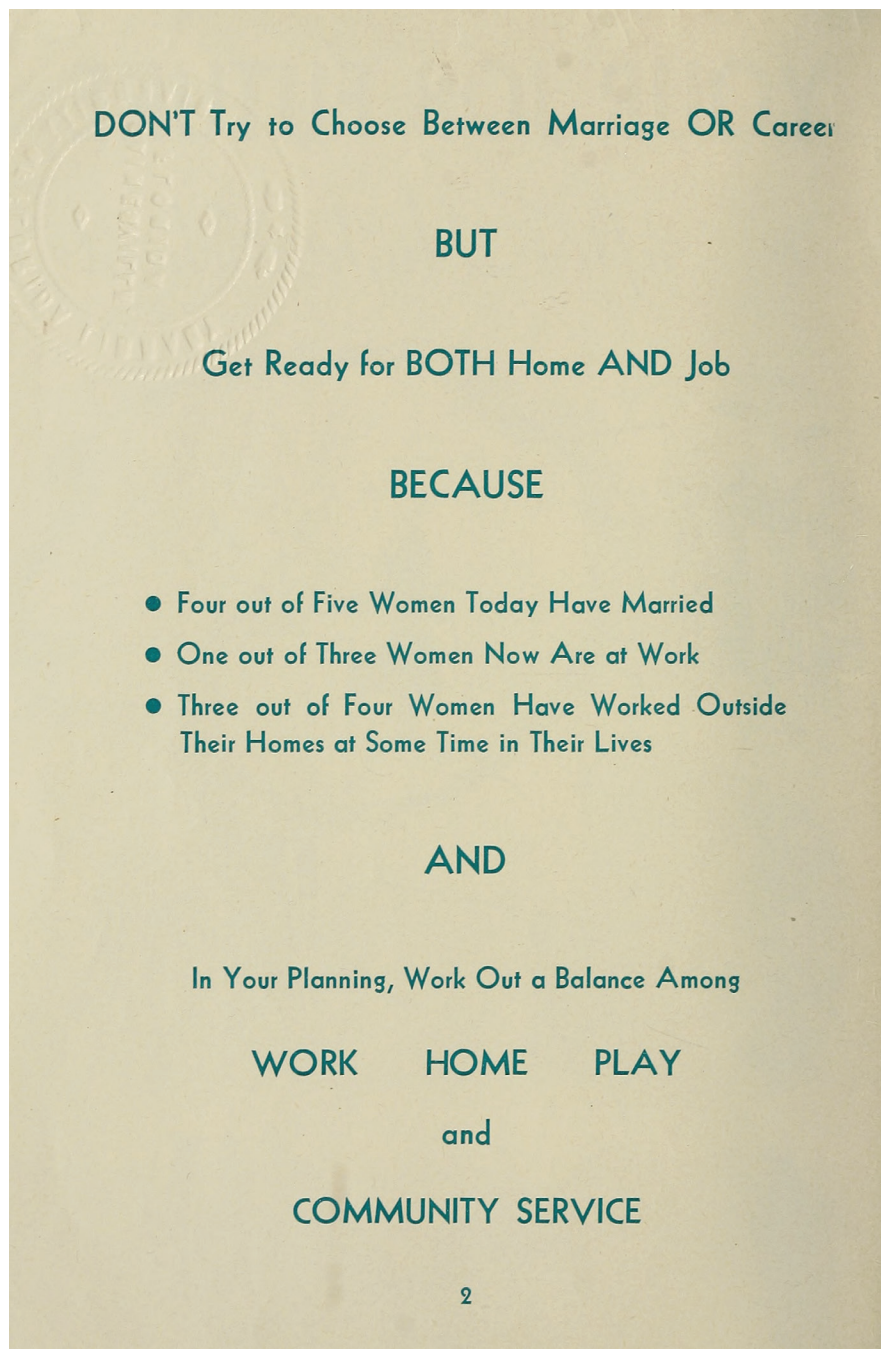


PROPORTION OF ALL WORKERS WHO ARE WOMEN 1870 - 1950



SOURCES: U. S. CENSUS; BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS

Source: US Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, 79th Congress, 1st session, 1945, 18.*



Source: Women's Bureau, US Department of Labor, *Your Job Future after High School* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1949), 2.