

Handout #1: World War II & Women in the Workforce

Fig. 1

U.S Active Military Personnel (1939-1945)

YEAR	ARMY	NAVY	MARINES	TOTAL
1939	189,839	125,202	19,432	334,473
1940	269,023	160,997	28,345	458,365
1941	1,462,315	284,427	54,359	1,801,101
1942	3,075,608	640,570	142,613	3,858,791
1943	6,994,472	1,741,750	308,523	9,044,745
1944	7,994,750	2,981,365	475,604	11,451,719
1945	8,267,958	3,380,817	474,680	12,123,445

Data from the National World War II History Museum, New Orleans. Importantly, when reviewing these numbers, understand that the total number of women among active military personnel was 358,074, none of whom were allowed in combat.

Fig. 2

Women in Industry as a Percentage of All Production Workers

INDUSTRY	1940	1944	1946	1950
Iron and Steel	6.7%	22.3%	9.4%	5%
Automobiles*	5.7%	24.4%	8.9%	10%
Textile Mill Products	43.0%	51.4%	46.7%	43%
Apparel (clothing)	75.2%	78%	76.9%	76%

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

*In 1944, this industry did not produce automobiles, but instead tanks, airplanes, military vehicles, etc.

Fig. 3



“Rosie the Riveter” is character featured in wartime propaganda, meant to encourage women to enter the workforce to cover for men away at war. During World War II the number of women in the U.S. workforce rose dramatically, from 27% to 37%. Rosie later became a cultural icon for the feminist movement.

Fig. 4



Two women working at an airplane manufacturing plant in 1942.
In the aircraft industry, women went from being 1% of the workforce in 1938 to 65% in 1943.

Answer the Following Questions:

1. After looking at Fig. 1, how do you think the massive number of men enlisted in World War II by 1945 changed the American workforce during that period?
2. In Fig. 2, in which year do you notice a significant increase in the percentage of female production workers? Why do you think there was such an increase?
3. Looking at Fig. 3, “Rosie the Riveter,” what do you think she was supposed to represent to women during World War II? What appears to be Rosie’s attitude in the picture? What is being promoted?
4. How was the call to have men enlist in combat related to the call to have women enter the workforce at home?