

LESSON 34

WOMEN IN THE U.S. WORKFORCE

LESSON 34

WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE

LESSON DESCRIPTION

The students examine information about changes in the number of women participating in the labor force during and immediately after World War II. They are asked to explain the increase in the number of women working outside the home. They examine basic economic measures of employment, unemployment and the labor force within the context of World War II.

MYSTERY

World War II changed the U.S. labor force. Before the war, the civilian labor force had been made up largely by men; during and after the war, it increasingly provided employment for women. In 1941, only 26 percent of American women participated in the labor force. By 1945, the participation rate had grown to 35 percent. Curiously enough, however, while the number of employed women increased during World War II, unemployment among women increased at the same time. How could this be?

ECONOMIC HISTORY

Workers and employers make choices regarding employment. These choices are influenced by incentives. Employers make choices about hiring. During World War II, many men left the civilian sector to join the armed forces. An ensuing shortage of male workers led employers to turn to another source. They began offering jobs to women. Some provided day care and other incentives to encourage women to take jobs. War-time propaganda also provided encouragement. The new female presence in the workplace was often represented by the iconic figure of “Rosie the Riveter.” Popular songs and posters portrayed Rosie as strong and patriotic — a hard-working woman who supported the war effort and helped to protect soldiers and sailors by making certain that they would always have the guns, ammunition, planes, ships and other supplies they needed.

When individuals think their job prospects are good, they are more likely to enter the job

market and look for a job. If workers think their job prospects are poor, they might choose to get out of the labor market entirely. The results of these choices sometimes lead to unexpected outcomes. For example, the number of people classified as unemployed can increase at the same time that the number of people classified as employed also increases.

CONCEPTS

- Choice
- Incentive
- Labor force
- Labor force participation
- Unemployment

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Use economic reasoning to explain the increase in the number of women entering the U.S. labor force during World War II.
2. Use economic reasoning to explain how unemployment increased among women during World War II.

CONTENT STANDARDS

Economics

- People respond predictably to positive and negative incentives. (NCEE Content Standard 4)
- A nation’s overall levels of income, employment and prices are determined by the interaction of spending and production decisions made by all households, firms, government agencies, and others in the economy. (NCEE Content Standard 18)

History

- The causes and course of World War II, the character of the war at home and abroad and its reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs. (Era 8, Standard 3, National Standards for History)

TIME REQUIRED

45 minutes

MATERIALS

- A transparency of Visuals 34.1, 34.2, 34.3, 34.4 and 34.5
- A copy of Activity 34.1 for each student

PROCEDURE

1. Explain that the purpose of this lesson is to examine changes in the labor force during World War II, with special attention to the new role of women in the labor force.
2. Display Visual 34.1. Ask the students to speculate on explanations of the mystery.
3. Display Visual 34.2. Explain that, for purposes of measuring unemployment, there are two categories of individuals in the U.S. population: those who are qualified to be in the civilian labor force and those who are not. Today, all members of the labor force must be 16 years of age, not in school full-time and not in prison or any other type of institution. Members of the military are employed by the government and not included in U.S. civilian labor force statistics.
4. Continue to display Visual 34.2. Explain that the civilian labor force population is itself divided into two parts: the employed and the unemployed. Employed persons are those civilians working to produce goods and services for formal wages, salaries and benefits. Unemployed persons are those who want to work, are actively looking for work, but are not able to find it. People not actively looking for work are not counted as a part of the labor force.
5. Explain that during World War II, millions of men were called to military service. Ask: How would this affect the civilian workforce? *(To produce goods and services, employers needed to find people to work in the jobs left vacant by the men who went to war. The vacancies therefore increased the demand for women and minority workers in the labor force.)*
6. Display Visual 34.3. Clarify the cause and effect relationship it illustrates, explaining that actions taken by the U.S. government can affect the household and business sectors of the economy. *(World War II increased governmental demand for men [and some women] to serve in the military. In large numbers, workers left their civilian jobs to go to war. This created new incentives for business owners to hire women and minority workers, and to boost wages.)*
7. Display Visual 34.4. Briefly discuss the decrease in unemployment rates during World War II. Then display Visual 35.5. Ask:
 - What happened to the percentage of women in the labor force? *(It increased throughout the war years from a low of 26.2 percent in 1941 to a high of 35.3 percent in 1945.)*
 - What happened to the percentage of women who were actually employed? *(It increased throughout the war years from a low of 25.8 percent in 1941 to a high of 35.2 percent in 1945.)*
8. Distribute Activity 34.1 to the class. Explain why the percentage of women unemployed rose at the same percentage of the women unemployed in the labor force. After they have completed the reading, ask:
 - A. Who in the total population gets classified as being in the labor force? *(To be counted in the labor force, individuals must be 16 years old or older. During World War II, individuals 14 years old and older were counted. They must also have a job or be actively looking for a job.)*
 - B. Who gets classified as employed? *(Employed people are people with jobs. People are considered to be employed if they do any work for pay during the time for which employment data are collected. Work for pay includes part-time and temporary work as well as regular, full-time, year-round employment.)*

- C. How could the percentage of women employed during World War II increase at the same time that the percentage of women who were unemployed was increasing? (*Millions of women entered the labor force during World War II. Yet, even during the war-time expansion of hiring, many women who entered the labor force did not, in fact, find jobs. Employers still hired a larger percentage of men than women. Even though the total number of men and women unemployed decreased, women accounted for a higher percentage of the unemployed total — partly because so many women were entering the labor force at that time.*)
- D. Why did many women leave the labor force after the war? (*Many lost their jobs as a result of seniority rules. Many were encouraged, formally and informally, to turn over their jobs to the returning soldiers. Others left because they wished to return to managing their family households.*)

CLOSURE

Review the key points of the lesson. Ask:

- Out of the total U.S. population, who gets classified as employed? (*Employed people are people with jobs*)
- Out of the total U.S. population, who gets classified as being members of the labor force? (*To be counted in the labor force, individuals must be 16 years old or older. [During World War II, the age cutoff point was 14 years old.] They must also have a job or be actively looking for a job.*)
- How do changing economic conditions affect the incentives that encourage people to enter or leave the labor force? (*When workers think the job prospects are good — as many did during World War II — they might choose to enter the labor market and look for a job. This is what millions of women did during the war. If people think that their job prospects are poor, they might choose to leave the labor market entirely.*)

ASSESSMENT

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Individuals are classified as unemployed if they
 - A. do not have a job, are actively looking for work and are available to work.
 - B. do not have a job, have filed for unemployment and are not looking for work.
 - C. do not have a job, have become discouraged and have stopped looking for work.
 - D. have a part-time job, are students and are looking for a better job.
2. People respond to incentives predictably. During World War II, many incentives encouraged women to work outside the home. Which of the following did *not* encourage them to do so?
 - A. High wages
 - B. A desire to serve their country
 - C. Government propaganda urging them to help build weapons to defeat the Axis powers
 - D. Small children at home

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Why do many women today choose to work outside the home? Consider the situation of a woman with two teenage children whose husband is enlisted in the army reserve and is called to active military duty. Why might she look for formal employment after staying at home since the birth of her children?

(*Possible answer: A husband's military income is often less than his civilian salary and benefits, and in this situation his wife might need extra income. Also, teenage children are capable of helping with household duties and do not require childcare during the school day. In summary, the expected benefits of working outside the home increase while the costs decrease.*)

- 2 How might Rosie the Riveter have influenced future labor markets?

(Possible answer: Many women decided to enter the labor market in the late 1940s. In the growing economy, there was increased demand for women workers. Many employers were pleased with the overall performance of women in jobs traditionally reserved for men. As a result, employers revised their ideas about the productivity of working women. Perhaps these developments helped pave the way for further expansion of women's participation in labor markets in the 1970s and beyond.)

VISUAL 34.1

WOMEN IN THE LABOR FORCE

1. World War II changed the role of women in the U.S. labor force, military and civilian.
 - More than 200,000 women entered the military by joining service units such as the Women's Army Corps.
 - Women also entered the civilian labor force in unprecedented numbers. In 1940, 28 percent of women participated in the labor force; by 1944, the percentage had grown to 36 percent.
 - Popular songs and posters portrayed "Rosie the Riveter" as a patriot, a hard-working woman who supported the war effort and helped to protect soldiers and sailors by keeping the supply of war materials flowing.
2. During World War II, the percentage of employed women increased. What is less well known is that, at the same time, the unemployment rate among women also increased. How could this be?

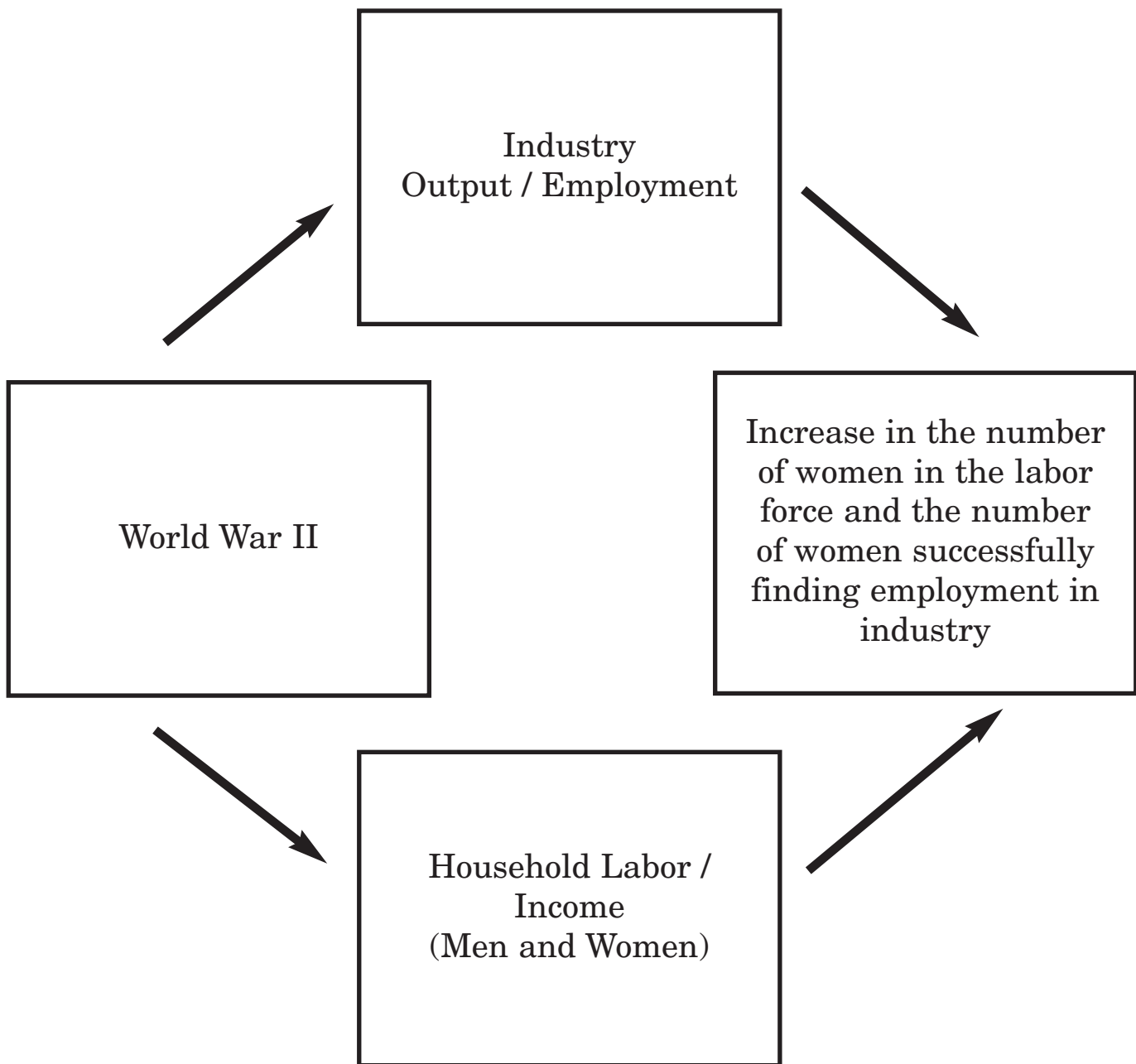
VISUAL 34.2

DEFINITIONS OF LABOR FORCE, EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT

- Today, the civilian labor force is composed of the number of people aged 16 years and older who are not in the armed forces and are employed or seeking employment.
- Before 1949, the age minimum was 14 years.
- Employed people are people with jobs.
- Unemployed people are individuals who are actively seeking jobs but cannot find them.
- The unemployment rate is the percentage of the civilian labor force that is unemployed.

VISUAL 34.3

**CAUSE AND EFFECT RELATIONSHIPS: WORLD WAR II
AND ITS IMPACT ON THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN THE U.S. ECONOMY**



VISUAL 34.4
U.S. UNEMPLOYMENT, 1940-1947

Year	Unemployment Rate
1940	14.6
1941	9.9
1942	4.7
1943	1.9
1944	1.2
1945	1.9
1946	3.9
1947	3.9

Source: Economic Report of the President, 1995 to the Present, Table B-35 Civilian Population and Labor Force, 1929-2004.

VISUAL 34.5
LABOR FORCE DATA ON WOMEN, 1940-1947

Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population 14 years old and over by sex. Annual averages, 1940-47.

Year	Women as a percent of total...			
	Population	Labor Force	Employed	Unemployed
1940	50.4	25.4	25.1	27.0
1941	51.0	26.2	25.8	29.5
1942	52.3	28.6	28.2	35.3
1943	55.0	33.7	33.4	46.7
1944	56.3	35.1	34.9	47.8
1945	56.3	35.3	35.2	40.4
1946	52.2	29.2	29.5	20.7
1947	51.4	28.1	28.2	25.5

Source: Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-50, No. 2 and 13.

ACTIVITY 34.1

SOLVING THE MYSTERY OF WOMEN IN THE LABOR MARKET DURING WORLD WAR II

The mystery in this lesson asks why the percentage of unemployed women increased during World War II even though the overall unemployment rate of men and women fell. To solve this mystery, let's review how employment is measured.

Who Is in the Labor Force?

To be classified today as in the labor force, individuals must be 16 years old or older. During World War II, the required age was 14 and older. People in the labor force must also have a job or be actively looking for a job. All others are counted as not being in the labor force.

Who Is Employed?

Employed people are people with jobs. This may not be as obvious as it appears. For example, people are classified as employed if they did any work at all for pay during the time for which employment data are collected. The work for pay might include part-time and temporary work as well as regular, full-time, year-round employment.

Who Is Unemployed?

People are classified as unemployed if they do not have a job, have actively looked for a job recently and are available for work. To be considered unemployed, a person must be in the labor force.

Who Is Left Out of the Official Count?

Those people who are not in the labor force include retired people or people going to school. Family responsibilities may keep others out the labor force. Still others have a physical or mental disability that prevents them from participating in the labor force.

What Does All This Mean?

The number of people in the labor force changes. It can increase as the population grows. And it expands or contracts depending on how the economy changes and how these changes influence people's labor choices. During a period of economic expansion, individuals are presented with incentives to enter the labor market. This was the case during World War II. Overall, the labor force in 1944 was nearly 10 million people higher than it had been in 1940. Labor force participation by women increased by 30 percent during the war.

Yet, even given the expansion of hiring during World War II, many women who entered the labor force did not actually find jobs. Employers still hired a larger percentage of men than women. Even though the total number of unemployed men and women decreased, women accounted for a higher percentage of the unemployed total, partly because so many women were entering the labor force. This explains how we can have an increase in the percentage of unemployed women even while the percentage of people employed is rising.

Where Did Rosie Go after the War?

Popular songs and posters portrayed "Rosie the Riveter" as a patriot, a hard-working woman who supported the war and helped to protect soldiers and sailors by making certain that they would always have the guns, ammunition, planes, ships and other supplies. What happened to Rosie after the war was won? Economist Claudia Goldin found that more than half of the women who entered the labor force between 1940 and 1944 left the labor force by 1950. Many lost their jobs as a result of seniority rules and encour-

ACTIVITY 34.1, CONTINUED

SOLVING THE MYSTERY OF WOMEN IN THE LABOR MARKET DURING WORLD WAR II

agement to turn their jobs over to the returning veterans. Others left because they wished to return to managing their households. Many couples postponed having families during the war years.

Some evidence suggests that women who did go to work during the war had an important influence on future labor markets. Many employers were pleased with the overall performance of women in jobs traditionally reserved for men. As a result, they revised their ideas about the productivity of working women. Overall, the growing U.S. economy increased demand for women workers. Much of this demand was in clerical and sales jobs. It was not until the 1970s that women's participation in the labor markets would increase to the participation rates of World War II.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- A. Who in the population gets classified as being in the labor force?

- B. Who gets classified as employed?

- C. How could the percentage of women employed during World War II increase at the same time that the percentage of women who were unemployed was increasing?

- D. Why did many women leave the labor force after the war?