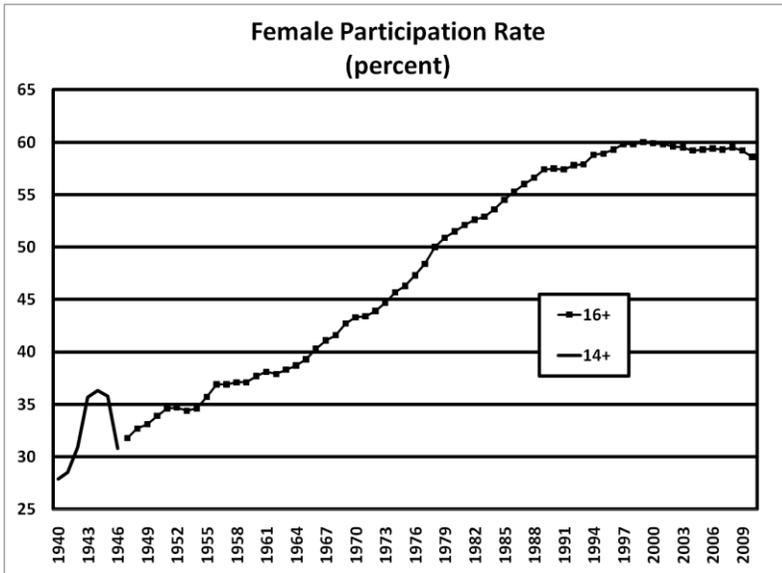


Mitchell's Musings 5-30-11: Women Workers After World War II

Women were encouraged during World War II to replace men who had been drafted and to move into traditionally male factory and other jobs. And they were encouraged to stay there for the duration as the video link below suggests:

<http://www.employmentpolicy.org/dont-be-absentee-ww2-film-keep-women-job-connected-mitchells-musings-5-30-11>

It might have been thought that the jump in female participation in the workforce and the taking up of occupations in traditionally male jobs would have had an impact after the War. As the chart below shows, however, there was a blip up in female labor force participation during the War but it seems to be a one-off event.¹ Thereafter, a long-term, gradual upward trend resumed.



Claudia Goldin's well-known study documents the fact that women who entered the workforce temporarily during World War II seemed to withdraw thereafter.² There is certainly anecdotal evidence that women returned to traditional roles after the War, partly to produce the postwar baby boom. Modern feminism seems more linked to the 1960s than the 1940s.

¹ The modern Current Population Survey which tracks labor force developments starts in 1940. Data through 1946 are for women 14 years old and older. Thereafter, the data are for 16 years and older.

² Claudia D. Goldin, "The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women's Employment," *American Economic Review*, Sept. 1991, pp. 741-756. Available at <http://www.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/goldin/files/worldwarII.pdf>

What to tell your husband
if he objects to your getting a war-time job

BUT I CAN SUPPORT OUR FAMILY!

1. ANSWER: It isn't a question of pride! Millions more women must take jobs or our war effort will bog down! It means winning the war—saving the lives of our boys! It's up to each husband to help his wife get a job.

BUT HOW DOES A CIVILIAN JOB HELP?

2. ANSWER: Just as fighters need weapons, so civilians must have restaurants, stores, laundries, buses, etc. to keep going. That's why housewives, who take vital *civilian* jobs, help speed victory just as much as girls in war plants!

BUT I MIGHT GET DRAFTED SOONER!

3. ANSWER: A wife's job does not, in itself, affect her husband's draft status in any way. And isn't it better for you to get a *job* now... if he's to be called anyway... and have a definite plan to support yourself and your family?

WE'LL TALK ABOUT IT SOME OTHER TIME!

4. ANSWER: Right now is the time to discuss it! Because your country needs women *at once!* Millions of them! With or without experience! Full time or part time! In war plants and in civilian jobs.

BUT HOW CAN YOU FIND A JOB?

5. ANSWER: Easy! The want ads in your newspaper show the kind of jobs in your town. And you can get free advice at your local U. S. Employment Service Office. "*The More Women at Work—The Sooner We'll Win!*"

Published in the interest of the war effort by *Kleenex Tissues

Paper, too, has a wartime job... that's why there's not enough Kleenex to go around. But regardless of what others do, we are determined to maintain *Kleenex quality* in every particular, consistent with government regulations.

While big events such as World War II can have lagged echo effects, it seems puzzling that the immediate impact of the sudden shift of women into the workforce during the War was at best muted. One of the reasons for the limited impact may simply have been that the move of women into the workforce during the War was explicitly labeled as temporary as can be seen here.

<http://www.employmentpolicy.org/displacement-women-workers-after-world-war-ii-linked-mitchells-musings-5-30-11>

There is much in the modern literature on behavioral economics and psychology that suggests the importance of framing. The reiteration in wartime propaganda that women should view their move into employment as temporary and even abnormal undoubtedly had some effect in framing their thinking concerning labor market behavior. Moreover, older cultural norms persisted in the 1950s, particularly regarding work in nontraditional occupations, not only factory work, but also managerial jobs:

<http://www.employmentpolicy.org/attitudes-toward-working-women-1950s-linked-mitchells-musings-5-30-11>

A range of developments *after* the 1950s seemed to change social norms. These included eased divorce laws and “the pill,” as well as legal developments such as the Equal Pay Act and the inclusion of women in Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s and thereafter. Indeed, if we are looking for a second break in the series on the female participation chart that needs analysis, it is the leveling off of the upward trend in the late 1990s. Nothing as dramatic as World War II occurred at that time.

What can be said is that the US seems to be toward the higher end of developed country female labor force participation at present. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the cross-country 2010 participation rates for women, standardized to US definitions are:

Canada 62.4% - Sweden 60.4% - Australia 59.8% - Netherlands 58.8% - US 58.6% - UK 56.8% -

France 51.7% – Germany 51.6% - Japan 48.1% - Italy 38.3%

Is there a ceiling somewhere around 60% as these figures suggest? In any event, history suggests that if the upward trend resumes, the new break will probably not be associated with a great event.