Did World War II change the Women Labor Market forever?

Like in most wars the majority of able-bodied men left the labor market. This shortage caused an increase in wages and an opening into new fields for women. Did this action cause a whole new attitude about women's role in the labor market?

The increase in wage enticed many women to join the labor force. History usually assumes that this increase in the women labor market (specifically married women), and the new jobs opened to women, caused this ideological change in our society. These changes lead to the acceptance of married women in the workplace, and a more desegregated workplace. “Evidence now seems more convincing that wars as well as other historical watersheds were superimposed on an underlying dynamic of women’s increasing involvement in wage labor and their persistently marginal relationship to the labor market.” In this paper we will look at the women who left the workplace after the war, the incentives that drew women into the labor market long term, and briefly the attitudes toward women working during the war and the past experience of women working in World War I.

“Between 1948 and 1985, women’s share of the labor force grew from 29 to 45 percent as women’s labor force participation rate jumped from 33 to 55 percent.” These statistics would indicate a change in attitudes that lasted long after the war. One article written by Anderson was written while World War II was going on. She drew her conclusions from the opinions of the time, and the experience from World War I. Many people at the time felt that women should give up their jobs after World War II in order to make way for returning soldiers. Anderson helps us remember that we often repeat history, “In World War I as in the present conflict womanpower became increasingly valuable….Nevertheless, no sooner had hostilities ceased than a reaction against women workers set in.” Since people were aware that there could be a decrease in the demand for women workers based solely on their gender they were possibly able to influence some of these tendencies.

Incentives are different for different people, even different groups of people. When we look at the incentives that drew women into the labor market, we need to look at women. In an
article written by Scheitzer the concept of household production function is used to explain the events that happened to the women labor market during World War II. "In his early work Mincer found that changes in family income and the wife’s wage could account for 70 percent or more of each decade’s increase in labor force participation of married women, from the decade 1919-1929 to the decade 1949-1959." The household production function says that women consider their husband’s income, and the household responsibilities when deciding if they should work. To demonstrate the effects the household has on women Scheitzer divides women into groups of married, non married, older married women whose children were not in the household, married women with children at home. Each of these groups had different incentives for joining the workforce during WWII. They each also, had their own incentives for either wanting to stay in or leave the workforce after the war. As you can imagine with a labor shortage during the war, many firms made efforts to draw women into the labor force. The decrease in husbands income was an incentive, “When a husband was inducted into service, his income was likely to fall at the same time that his wife’s responsibility were lessened,” for women married without dependents. Goldin also makes this observation, “A husbands absence often meant that his wife had less to do in the home and that the family’s labor income dropped considerably”. Obviously the wage increased, but even services like daycare were offered in order to help women balance home responsibility with work responsibility. Household responsibilities affect the desire of women to work. This can be demonstrated by the different times, when different groups of women entered the labor market. “Of all the women employed in March of 1944, 61 percent had been working the week before Pearl Harbor, 17 percent had been students, unemployed, too young or unable to work, and only 22 percent had been housewives.” Scheitzer sites the different incentives firms offered to ease the household workload for women with children. “The turning point in the local hiring of housewives in large numbers appears to have been the second half of 1943, when manufactures and community groups began their efforts to provide housekeeping goods and services that could not be bought on the market.” These women were drawn into the labor market long after women who were mostly influenced by wages had
already joined the labor market. After the war they were the first to leave the market, because after the war many of these incentives disappeared.

After the war when incentives changed many women left the workplace, does this mean the labor market was not changed by the war? Goldin presents evidence that the women that left the workplace to take care of children or to start a family later rejoined the labor market. Goldin uses different surveys to come up with her conclusion including the Palmer Survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work Experience</th>
<th># of Women Employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1940 and 1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1940, 1944, and 1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1944 and 1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>entire sample</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Goldin states some problems with these surveys, “An important and somewhat limiting, aspect of the Palmer Survey is that all persons were working full-time for at least one month during 1950. The March 1944 census data are used to infer the work histories of women who were not in the labor force during 1950.” From the Palmer Survey Goldin concludes that half the women who were working after the war were also working before the war. Therefore only half the increase of married working women can be attributed to WWII at that point in time. Another result of her data is that women who worked during the WWII period did so consistently. Goldin states, “The data, once again, reinforce the findings of other studies that show a tendency for women to remain in the labor force.” Staying in the labor force was linked with family responsibilities. “Many of the women who took jobs in record numbers to ease labor shortages during World War II—especially married women wanting no more children—remained on the job.” The problem comes when you separate married women from unmarried, it seems married women do not have the same
permanency in the labor force. It is also consistent with the evidence presented by Schweitzer, “The high wages of war work disappeared for women, as did the incentive to work for many of those women with major household responsibilities.”

In conclusion the war accented the current trend toward an increase in the women labor market. The war also drew in women who were married, but they were more likely to leave the labor market after the war. The fact that many of these women re-entered the work force later leads us to believe that the importance of working might have changed for these women. The reason they left was not that they didn’t want to work, but that the incentives for them to work disappeared when their husbands income increased and the cost of their household responsibilities increased.

---

2 Bloom E David Women and Work American Demographics, Vol. 8, No. 9 (Sept 1986), pp. 26
11 Bloom E David Women and Work American Demographics, Vol. 8, No. 9 (Sept 1986), pp. 26