This image of Rosie the Riveter shows the importance of female workers to the war effort.

Rosie the Riveter

For some Americans on the home front, particularly for women, daily life did change dramatically. During the depression, the government had discouraged women, particularly married women, from working. The government now urged them to enter the job market to replace departing soldiers. One government poster showed a female worker in bandanna and overalls. The caption read: "I'm Proud . . . my husband wants me to do my part." Advertisements and a popular song promoted **Rosie the Riveter**, the symbol of patriotic female defense workers.

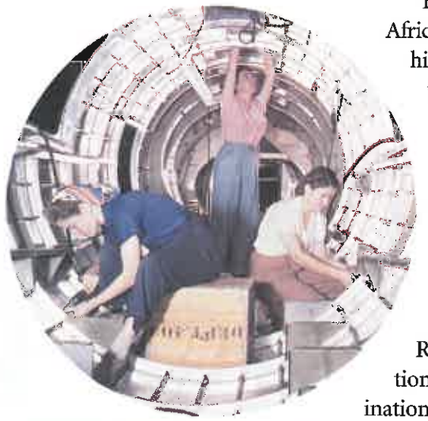
From 1940 to 1944, the number of women in the workforce increased by about 6 million. Women worked in war plants and replaced men in a host of jobs ranging from newspaper reporting to truck driving. Many of these new workers were married women who were taking jobs outside the home for the first time. Many women already in the paid workforce left traditional "women's work" such as domestic service to work in factories.

Women's participation in the war effort gave many a new sense of pride and self-worth. One female aircraft worker finally felt a sense of achievement after feeling "average" at other jobs.

History Makers Speak

"Foremen from other departments come to my machine to ask me to do some work for them if I have time because they say I'm the best countersinker in the vast building! At forty-nine I've at last become not better than average, but the best!"

—Female aircraft worker, quoted in *Independent Women*, November 1943



Female workers continued to be paid less than men for the same work. African American women and women over 40 found few employers willing to hire them. Many women and men assumed that most of the jobs held by women during the war were temporary. However, some people expected more permanent change. A shipyard manager predicted that "these women who are willing . . . to lend a hand with the war will be the . . . office personnel of . . . the future."

✔ **READING CHECK: Making Predictions** How might increased female employment during the war change American society after the war?

Discrimination During the War

Racial tensions did not disappear during wartime. However, the cooperation the war effort required caused the government to try to reduce discrimination in war industries.

INTERPRETING THE VISUAL RECORD

Female workers. Without the efforts of American women, the United States could not have produced the materials needed to win the war. ***What are these female workers doing?***

Demands for equal treatment. For African Americans, the war brought both continued discrimination and greater opportunities. Many black workers moved into better-paying industrial jobs and played a key role in the military effort. About 1 million African American soldiers served in the armed forces, including several thousand women in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps. However, African Americans continued to serve in segregated units, and most were kept out of combat. Black soldiers were often assigned to low-level work.

Millions of African Americans in the workforce struggled to gain acceptance. Many war plants would not hire African Americans. Some would employ black workers only as janitors. Despite labor leaders' no-strike pledge, some white workers staged strikes—called hate strikes—designed to keep black workers out of high-paying factory jobs.

In 1941, before the United States entered the war, African American labor leader **A. Philip Randolph** planned a march on Washington, D.C., to protest discrimination against black workers. Fearing the unrest it might cause, President Roosevelt wanted to prevent the march. Randolph agreed to call off the march after Roosevelt issued an executive order forbidding racial discrimination in defense plants and government offices.

To enforce the order, on June 25, 1941, Roosevelt created the **Fair Employment Practices Committee** (FEPC). The FEPC investigated companies engaged in defense work to make sure that all qualified applicants, regardless of race, were considered for job openings. It was strengthened by a May 27, 1943, executive order requiring nondiscrimination clauses in all war contracts. The FEPC, however, lacked strong enforcement powers and was unable to prevent widespread abuses.

As during World War I, many African Americans moved northward to take advantage of the high wages being offered in war plants. In crowded cities where no new homes were being built, African Americans faced discrimination in housing. Competition for limited housing created tensions that sometimes led to outbursts of violence against African Americans. In Detroit in 1943 a fight between African American and white residents at Belle Isle, a popular Detroit park, spread to other parts of the city. Some 34 people died in several days of rioting before federal troops sent by President Roosevelt restored calm.

During a rally at Madison Square Garden, A. Philip Randolph fights to save the Fair Employment Practices Committee.

The zoot-suit riots. World War II brought both opportunities and problems to Mexican Americans as well. More than 300,000 Mexican Americans served in the military, and 17 earned the Congressional Medal of Honor. The 88th Division, a top combat unit known as the Blue Devils, consisted mostly of Mexican American soldiers.

Mexican Americans also helped meet homefront labor needs. University of Texas history professor **Carlos E. Castañeda** served as assistant to the chair of the FEPC and worked to improve working conditions for Mexican Americans in Texas. In 1945 the FEPC ordered a major Texas oil company to discontinue hiring and promotion practices that discriminated against Hispanics.

Many Mexican Americans moved from the Southwest to industrial centers in the Midwest and on the West Coast. Under a 1942 agreement between the United States and Mexico, thousands of Mexican farm and railroad workers—known as **braceros**—came north to work in the Southwest during World War II.

These Mexican Americans were arrested during the zoot-suit riots. Many others served heroically during World War II, and 17 won the Congressional Medal of Honor (left).