Active Viewing: The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter

In this activity, you watch film clips from the documentary The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter, decode a propaganda poster, and analyze statistics about working women during World War II.

Objectives

1. You will compare and contrast government propaganda and the real experiences of working women during World War II.

Instructions

1. **Step 1:** Are you familiar with "Rosie the Riveter." Can you identify the image as wartime propaganda? What do you already know about Rosie? Today, you are going to view a documentary, propaganda posters, and statistical charts to understand who the "real" Rosie the Riveter was. To that end, please locate the Active Viewing Worksheet.

2. **Step 2:** View clip #1: Mobilizing for War (6:17--12:50).

You are to follow the instructions during the video, and will work in small groups to complete the remaining questions in Part 1 of the Active Viewing Worksheet that compare and contrast government propaganda films with the real stories of working women shown in the documentary.

Before moving on to the next step, we will review the main points:

- Government propaganda portrayed women as married white middle-class homemakers with lots of leisure time, who only worked because it was their patriotic duty.
- Real Rosies were working women, and some were the main breadwinners of their families. They flocked to factory jobs that were high paying, unionized, and more rewarding than their previous jobs.

3. **Step 3:** You will now watch a series of short clips about the experiences of women factory workers. Think about the conflicting views presented in the propaganda film and accounts by "real Rosies." We will view any/all of the clips #2-6:
   - Clip 2: Dangerous Work on the Homefront (17:16--25:01)

4. **Step 4:** Please locate the propaganda poster "My husband wants me to work...” Work in groups to complete Part 2 of the Active Viewing Worksheet. If time allows, we will share your responses to question #5: Do you think the experiences of "real Rosies" permanently challenged these assumptions?"

5. **Step 5:** NOTE: Propaganda was also used to encourage women to return home after the war. We will now view Clip #5 "Now He Returns" (46:14--57:38). Discussion: What did women workers want after the war?

6. **Step 6:** Please locate the occupational shifts of women in the workforce by Race and the statistics about women in the workforce and, in groups, complete Part 3 of the Active Viewing Worksheet. When you are finished, we will discuss how the film and primary documents may have changed your ideas about working women during World War II.

Historical Context

Women were recruited into the industrial workforce as never before during World War II. The recruitment effort resulted, among other things, in the iconic image of "Rosie the Riveter." But who was the real Rosie, and who was government propaganda? Films and propaganda from the time depict middle-class women taking on paying jobs for
the first time because of a sense of patriotic duty. However, statistical sources and oral histories convey a very different story of working-class women taking advantage of the war to move from low-paying domestic and secretarial jobs into high-paying and skilled industrial jobs. Such sources indicate that economic motivations were more significant than patriotic duty in building a female workforce during World War II.
The film clips you are about to watch are from *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*, a documentary film about the experiences of women who worked in factories during World War II (1941-45) manufacturing planes, ships, and other war supplies. “Rosie the Riveter” was a popular term for these women factory workers.

The documentary consists of:

- oral history interviews with “real Rosies” who worked in factories in California and New York
- propaganda films (made by the U.S. government during World War II)
- newspapers, photographs, posters and other pieces of evidence from World War II

As you watch the first clip “Mobilizing for War” (6:17--12:50), take notes on images and phrases about women during World War II as expressed by government propaganda films and actual women talking about their experiences.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wartime Propaganda Films</th>
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<th>“Real Rosies”</th>
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Briefly discuss, what was the goal of the government propaganda films? Who do you think they were trying to persuade?

Complete questions 1 and 2. [Re-watch clip 1 if necessary.]

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<th>Wartime Propaganda</th>
<th>“Real Rosies” Documentary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) What was women’s life and work like before WWII</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2) Why did women choose factory jobs?</td>
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Watch the second clip, “Dangerous Work on the Homefront” (17:16--25:01) and complete question 3.

|                                | Wartime Propaganda | “Real Rosies” Documentary |
|                                |                    |                          |
| 3) What were working conditions like in WWII factories? |                    |                          |
Watch the third and fourth clips, “African American Women in the Factories” (26:18--29:48) and “Wartime Women Workers' Double Duty” (30:47--36:46), and complete question 4.

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<th>4) What challenges did Rosies face at home and work? Explain.</th>
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Review the completed chart above and then discuss:

What aspects of women’s work experience during World War II did the propaganda films leave out? Get wrong?
Part 2 - Analysis Worksheet:
“I’m Proud…My Husband Wants Me to Do My Part”

I. Source Info
• What government office created this poster?
• What year was it created? What else was going on at this time?

II. Content and Composition
A. Identify the following image details from the poster and write down what you think each one represents or symbolizes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AMERICAN FLAG</th>
<th>MAN WEARING A SUIT</th>
<th>LIPSTICK AND NAIL POLISH</th>
<th>RING ON WOMAN’S FINGER</th>
<th>WOMAN WEARING OVERALLS</th>
<th>HANDS OF THE MALE FIGURE</th>
<th>HANDS OF THE FEMALE FIGURE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
B. Which figure in the poster is saying “I’m Proud…my husband wants me to do my part.”

C. Why is the word “wants” underlined in the sentence above?

III. Message and Purpose
   A. What is this poster’s message to American men?

   B. What is this poster’s message to American women?

   C. Check all of the messages that appear in the poster:
      - Factory work was not something women usually did
      - Women should never work in war production jobs
      - Women should work in factories because it is their patriotic duty
      - Women need their husband’s permission to work in a factory
      - Women want factory jobs because they pay well

   D. Why do you think the U.S. government created this poster? What problem(s) was it trying to address?
Part 3 - By the Numbers: White and African-American Women Workers

Using the table on women in the workforce, complete the following questions about the kinds of jobs women did before, during and after World War II.

1. Between 1910 and 1960, the percentage of white women domestic workers increased.
   
   TRUE  FALSE

2. Between 1910 and 1960, the percentage of African-American women domestic workers increased.
   
   TRUE  FALSE

3. What percentage of women were doing domestic service during the following years?

   White 1930 _______ 1940 _______ 1950 _______
   African-American 1930 _______ 1940 _______ 1950 _______

4. What percentage of women were doing factory work during the following years?

   White 1930 _______ 1940 _______ 1950 _______
   African-American 1930 _______ 1940 _______ 1950 _______

   • In 1940, what type of job was most common among white women?

   • In 1940, what type of job was most common among African-American women?

   • Was the World War II era a greater turning point for white women or for African-American women? Use evidence from the chart to explain your answer.
"I'm Proud... My Husband Wants Me To Do My Part"

During World War II, the U.S. government produced a number of propaganda posters aimed at mobilizing women workers to contribute to the war effort, offering images that challenged traditional ideas about the role of women and the nature of their work while still maintaining traditional gender hierarchies.

CREATOR | John Newton Howit/War Manpower Commission
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
Statistics on Women in the World War II Era Workforce

Before World War II (1941-1945), when women worked outside the home it was usually in jobs traditionally considered to be “women’s work.” These included teaching, domestic service, clerical work, nursing, and library science. During the war, the nation needed more airplanes, ships, trucks, and other military hardware, and had fewer men available to work in the factories to make them. The federal government encouraged women to join the industrial workforce as a patriotic duty, and many women did take the highly skilled and better paying factory jobs usually held by men. By 1944, women held one third of all manufacturing jobs in the U.S.

% of Working Age* Women Employed

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1930</th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>1950</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of Working Age* Women Employed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census</td>
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1944 Survey by the Department of Labor Women’s Bureau

75% of women intended to continue working in the postwar period
86% of women wanted their postwar jobs in the same industrial group as their wartime jobs

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women in Industry as a Percentage of All Production Workers</th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>1944</th>
<th>1946</th>
<th>1950</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iron and Steel</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automobiles*</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile Mill Products</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apparel (clothing)</td>
<td>75.2%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. All figures are for the month of October of the years indicated.

* In 1944, this industry did not produce automobiles, but instead tanks, airplanes, military vehicles, etc. This category does not include all airplanes produced, but only those produced by automobile firm.
**Occupational Shifts of Women in the Workforce by Race, 1910-1960**

Between 1910 and 1960, the number of women working for wages in the United States grew from just over 8 million to over 23.2 million, rising from 21 percent to 32 percent of the workforce. The types of jobs that women of different races did also changed dramatically over that time period. These graphs do not include statistics for women who worked in farming, managerial, or professional jobs.

### % of White Women in the Workforce, 1910-1960

- Clerical (secretaries, office assistants)
- Factory (operate machinery in any kind of factory)
- Service (childcare, cooking, cleaning)

### % of African-American Women in the Workforce, 1910-1960

- Clerical (secretaries, office assistants)
- Factory (operate machinery in any kind of factory)
- Service (childcare, cooking, cleaning)

Source: Data from Ruggles, et al, Integrated Public Use Multidata Series