

## **FAMILY LIFE DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION**

The Great Depression was a period of American history marked by the collapse of the United States economy. During this period, the country experienced rapid factory closings and reduced food production, which resulted in hardship for many American families. Struggling families experienced structural changes as women entered the workforce to make more money and all family members contributed to money saving measures.

### **Women in the Workforce**

Factory closings across the nation resulted in men having their wages cut or jobs eliminated. More women had to enter the workforce to make money for the family. These women took jobs that were seen as socially unacceptable for men. These jobs included secretary positions, telephone operators, and nurses. These jobs had stable employment during the Great Depression because they were necessary parts of American society.

Women who went to work often faced criticism from others. Many people shamed women for taking jobs from men or for leaving the household. Women were also accused of not properly caring for the home. Women, however, took many measures to save money at home.

### **Women's Evolving Role at Home**

Many families combated the Great Depression by cutting household costs. Because women were traditionally homemakers, they were often responsible for finding ways to save money.

Ways to save money were advertised on radio shows and in women's magazines. Women were encouraged to save money by making cheap dishes like casseroles and one-pot meals, keeping small gardens at home, and bartering with neighbors instead of spending money at the store.

### **Remaining Inequalities**

Women were very important for families' survival during the Great Depression. They worked difficult jobs and made many decisions for the household. Despite their importance, they still faced many gender inequalities.

Because jobs were scarce, many believed that only one family member should hold a job. If the man of a household found a job, the woman was expected to quit hers. Women were also paid lower wages than men. According to government statistics, a woman's average annual pay in 1937 was \$525. A man's average annual pay was \$1,027.

Inequalities were worse for minority women. When white women entered the workforce, they took jobs that minority women often held. These minority women were often fired from these jobs, or they weren't hired for jobs that white women wanted.

## FINDING WORK DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Great Depression was a period of American history marked by a difficult job market. At the peak of the Great Depression, it is estimated that a quarter of Americans were unemployed. By 1932, over 12.5 million Americans were unemployed.

### Job Loss

Widespread economic hardship meant fewer people were spending money on goods and services. Businesses cut production because they were making fewer sales. Industries like construction and logging stopped operations. Whole factories, mills, and mines closed. Workers in these professions were suddenly without jobs.

Those fortunate enough to keep their jobs often had their wages dramatically cut. Many full-time workers were reduced to part-time work. In some industries, wages were cut by nearly 50%. Americans across the nation suffered from reduced incomes, whether they lost their job or not.

### Difficult Job Searching

With so many production centers closing, people couldn't easily find new jobs. Americans throughout the country had to find creative ways to make money, whether they had lost their job or suffered reduced wages.

Many people left home in hopes of finding work. Young people, often teenagers, hopped on freight trains to search for employment. This illegal practice, known as "riding the rails," carried these roamers across the nation to look for farm work and odd jobs. Riding the rails offered some freedom, but it was also isolating. Many riders complained about how lonely this life was.

Women who had been homemakers for a long time had to find ways to make more money. They often found work in positions like secretary roles and nursing jobs. These positions were more abundant because they were seen as "women's work." Most men wouldn't take these jobs. Women would also find ways to trade work for necessary household items. Many women would do odd jobs, like laundry or sewing, in exchange for supplies like flour and sugar.

### Unequal Treatment of Workers

Many men had trouble finding work, but it was even harder for minority men and women to find jobs. Black men and women were often fired first if a company had to cut jobs. The Great Depression also affected Black Americans more than others. Black Americans were already relegated to lower-paid professions due to discrimination. Many jobs that they typically held were eliminated entirely or given to White job seekers.

## ART AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Industrial production slowed dramatically during the Great Depression, but art thrived. Artwork offered relief from daily life in the form of music, visual art, and novels. It also encouraged social change and offered hope to struggling Americans. New government programs also emerged to support artists, leading to increased creative output.

### Federal Government Support

As part of the New Deal, Franklin Delano Roosevelt established a landmark program to support artists. This program, known as the Federal Art Project, was the first major government patronage of visual arts. The program employed over 5,000 out-of-work artists and commissioned them to create works for a wage of \$23.50 per week. These artists created lots of new art pieces, many of which were colorful murals painted on public government buildings.

### Themes of Artwork

The artwork of the Great Depression reflected the dire conditions of the country. Paintings like *Dispossessed* by Mervin Jules reflected the harsh reality of homelessness. Other paintings, like *Tenement Flats* by Millard Sheets, illustrated the poor housing conditions that many were forced to live in.

Photography was also used to artistically document hardships of the average American. Many photographers were employed by the government. These photographers were tasked with capturing the impact of the Great Depression through photos. Some captured the harrowing conditions of the Dust Bowl. Others documented struggling Americans working in harsh conditions or those migrating to find jobs.

### The Writings of John Steinbeck

Many writers took pen to paper to document the stories of the Great Depression. One of these writers was struggling novelist John Steinbeck. At the time of the Great Depression, Steinbeck had written some works that saw minimal success. His first successful book was *Tortilla Flat*, a collection of humorous short stories.

After this success, Steinbeck began to write about the conditions of the Great Depression. In 1936 he published *In Dubious Battle*, a novel that chronicled the strife of abused laborers and horrible work conditions. The controversial novel generated favorable reviews.

*In Dubious Battle* was followed by *Of Mice and Men*. This novel described the conditions of the Great Depression through the story of two migrant farm workers, George and Lennie. However, Steinbeck's greatest success came in 1939 when he published the work *The Grapes of Wrath*, a harrowing tale of a family's journey from Oklahoma to California in search of work.

## Sources

Digital History. (2021). *Children and the Great Depression*.

[https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active\\_learning/explorations/children\\_depression/depression\\_children\\_menu.cfm](https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/children_depression/depression_children_menu.cfm)

Encyclopedia.com. (2020). *Gender roles and sexual relations, impact of the Great Depression on*.

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/economics/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/gender-roles-and-sexual-relations-impact-great-depression>

Konkel, L. (2018, April 19). *Life for the average family during the Great Depression*. History.com.

<https://www.history.com/articles/life-for-the-average-family-during-the-great-depression?>

Mintz, S. (n.d.). *The human toll of the Great Depression*. History Resources. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/human-toll-great-depression>

Rotondi, J. P. (n.d.). *Underpaid, but employed: How the Great Depression affected working women*. History.com.

<https://www.history.com/articles/working-women-great-depression?>

Ware, S. (2009). *Women and the Great Depression*. History Now, 19. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/women-and-great-depression>