

– an excerpt on Discrimination and Racism in WWII Industry

For American industry as a whole, practices varied widely. In **Boeing's** facilities in Seattle they made up 47 percent of the work force. In Seattle women held 1.8 percent of the jobs at one shipyard, 21 percent at another. Despite regional differences, the total number of women in war industries soared, in Detroit alone the figure rising from 46,800 to a high of 215,000 female industrial workers. Apart from patriotism, the chief reason why women poured into factories -- dirt, noise, and danger notwithstanding -- was money. Even without wage parity, women earned more as factory workers than in their previous jobs. By 1945 at Willow Run, one-third of the women workers had experienced pay raises of 100 percent since the war began, compared to one-ninth of the men.

Though the prejudice against working women declined, or rather was suspended for the duration, one thing that did not change was the refusal to take full advantage of women's potential. Black women were discriminated against in war plants even more than white women, not only by employers but by workers. During one two-week period in Detroit there were live "hate" strikes occasioned by the employment of black women. Yet black women were more eager than whites to work. While the participation rate of all women in the Detroit work force rose from 29.5 percent in 1940 to 39.7 percent in 1944, the rate for nonwhite women went from 31.6 percent to 48.8 percent. By 1945 the percentage of employed black women who were in private household service had declined from 60 to 45. As a woman later said: "Hitler was the one that got us out of the white folks' kitchen." They would not go back.

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