

The Impact of the Great Depression on Women, African Americans, and Minority Groups

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The Great Depression was when the United States faced the worst economic crisis in history. This period was marked by losses in stock values resulting in the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange. The challenging economic time affected different groups living in the United States. American society was divided into two groups comprising the rich and the poor. The gap between the two groups increased during the Great Depression.¹ Although the Great Depression affected everyone, women, African Americans, and minority groups experienced overwhelming poverty due to joblessness, low wages, and lack of access to government programs.

Joblessness caused by the Great Depression had a significant impact on women, African Americans, and minority groups. African Americans experienced unfair treatment in hiring and job retention. Black people were not given priority in hiring during the expansion of production, and they were the first to be laid off during the economic crisis.² They lost their jobs to give room for whites who took over their work opportunities. As a result, the unemployment rate among African Americans was 50%, which was higher than the national average of 25%.³ Women were affected by the Great Depression in diverse ways. For instance, it transformed the employment dynamics favoring men and permitted women to join the labor market.⁴ Men assumed the breadwinner role during the United States' economic prosperity. However, the harsh economic times motivated women to work and care for their families. The ethnic background determined the employment opportunities available to women. African

¹Joseph L. Locke, and Ben Wright, eds., *The American Yawp: A Massively Collaborative Open US History Textbook, Vol. 1: To 1877*.1-19.

² Joseph L. Locke, and Ben Wright, eds., 16.

³Joseph L. Locke, and Ben Wright, eds., 16.

⁴Andriana Bellou, and Emanuela Cardia. "The Great Depression and the rise of female employment: A new hypothesis." *Explorations in Economic History* 80 (2021), 1.

American women also encountered severe unemployment.⁵ The unemployment rates for the population were twice or four times higher than their white counterparts.⁶ At this point, it is evident that the Great Depression greatly impacted women from African American communities because of discrimination experienced in employment. Nonetheless, low wages contributed to suffering experienced by women, African Americans, and minority groups during the Great Depression.

Low wages during the Great Depression caused divisions among the rich and the poor, represented by the whites and African Americans. The Federal government statistics of 1930 revealed that approximately 38% of the African American and 17% of white populations could not meet their daily needs and required assistance to survive. The statistics deteriorated with time, and the Great Depression worst hit African Americans as the whites took over the labor jobs. White women were more educated than African Americans and had a high chance of getting a job as professionals like teaching and nursing. African American women were employed in low-paying jobs such as factories.⁷ The African American women employed dress and consumption patterns to create a modern black female identity.⁸ The evidence from various sources confirms that African American women experienced low economic status than their peers from the white community. The African American men were not spared either in the Great Depression because they lost their labor jobs to white males who lost work during this time.

The Great Depression marked the beginning of job entry by married women. Before the crisis, young and single women left the labor market after getting married. However, the Great

⁵ Phyllis Palmer, "Black Domestic during the Depression." National Archives and Records Administration. National Archives and Records Administration, 1997, 1.

⁶ Sarah Ward, "Women and Work: African American Women in Depression Era America, 13.

⁷ Sarah Ward, 14.

⁸ Johnson, Deanda Marie, "Thoroughly Modern: African American Women's Dress and the Culture of Consumption in Cleveland, Ohio 1890-1940", 1.

Depression caused financial hardships affecting the males who were the breadwinners. As a result, the women took the role of providing for their families. Hence, they sought to work to sustain their families and support their jobless husbands. The Great Depression decreased men's financial stability because they encountered persistent unemployment. Lack of job opportunities, employment gaps, and human capital depreciation forced men to seek lower-paying jobs.⁹

Although the Great Depression opened the job market for single and married women, a social class emerged, dividing the workforce into high and low earners. The period involved movement by African Americans in search of better work conditions in the North. The migration of African Americans from the South to the North created economic erosion for the blacks living in the area because the migrants provided cheap labor.¹⁰ The great migration involved the movement of African American men and women from the South. It is estimated that eight hundred thousand to one million African Americans entered the urban settings as people escaped from poverty in the North.¹¹ African American women and men were seeking better economic opportunities in the North, which lowered their status as immigrants.

African American women were divided between the low and middle classes. The low class could not afford modest clothing because of meager earnings. The Great Depression created differences in social class among African American women.¹² Lack of financial opportunities denied African American women equality in employment. As a result, African American women with well-paying jobs invested in making themselves distinct from those in the lower class. Therefore, the Great Depression affected African American women's lives more than whites.

⁹ Bellou, Andriana, and Emanuela Cardia.4-6.

¹⁰ Johnson, Deanda Marie.35.

¹¹ Sarah Ward, 7.

¹² Johnson, Deanda Marie, 64.

The Great Depression necessitated government intervention to save the population from extreme living conditions. The low status made it necessary for African Americans to depend on government assistance. However, women, the African American population, and minority groups did not benefit from such programs. The African Americans were exposed to legal inequality because the system discriminated against and incriminated them in crimes they did not commit, resulting in death penalties. The discrimination extended to other areas denying African American access to government programs because of political pressure. For instance, Franklin Roosevelt did not do much to solve challenges encountered by the Black community for fear of provoking southern Democrats.¹³ Also, the government left women out of New Deal programs because they perceived men as the breadwinners while women cared for the family. Therefore, being African American and a woman during the Great Depression was disadvantaged because of seclusion and missed opportunities to access government relief programs. From this perspective, the gap between the rich and poor continued to dominate racial and ethnic perspectives, and the government programs failed to address the problem.

The Great Depression prompted the development of the National Recovery Administration, which resulted in the development of industry-wide codes to prevent further economic deterioration through the industry-wide codes.¹⁴ The codes advocated for better wages for domestic employees and the revival of the production sector involving the textile industry. The codes enhanced better pay packages for textile industry workers and improved husbands' earnings to support their families. Nonetheless, the codes excluded the African American men working in the industry from the coverage. The African American workers were perceived to lack skills possessed by their white counterparts. The perception triggered protests in which the

¹³ Joseph L. Locke, and Ben Wright, eds., 16.

¹⁴ Phyllis Palmer, 1.

Southern black employees identified inequities in the textile industry code and its failure to protect them from unfair work conditions and benefits.¹⁵

Besides, the government-sponsored programs under the FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Administration) and WPA (Works Progress Administration) assisted African American domestic workers. However, African American women suffered because they were expected to serve white families.¹⁶ The voters passed the New Deal to create gender-appropriate employment programs. The employment included men's and women's jobs differentiated by racial affiliations and gender orientations. The women performed household chores and clerical job opportunities. On the other hand, the men specialized in construction, design, and urban and rural landscaping. The white women engaged in learning how to care for their families. Conversely, African American women were taught how to care for other homes.¹⁷ Hence, African American women worked as servants in white households. Therefore, the government programs increased racial divisions between white and African American men and women.

The Great Depression's impact on the white middle class pushed African American women out of employment because they could no longer work as nannies. Consequently, the African-American families suffered as the women and men lost their incomes.¹⁸ African-American women were forced to seek employment in areas without experience. The women worked in occupations assigned to them during slavery and had few opportunities to enable them to work in other employment sectors. Besides, they continued facing discrimination as they tried

¹⁵ Phyllis Palmer, 1.

¹⁶ Phyllis Palmer, 1.

¹⁷ Phyllis Palmer, 1.

¹⁸ Sarah Ward, 13.

to gain entry into other service sectors. Subsequently, they accepted any available work and tolerated long working hours and poor conditions.¹⁹

Also, the Great Depression created competition and rivalry between whites and African Americans, and the latter was greatly affected because they were victims of racism. The urban centers and union organizations used the strategy to deny African Americans equal rights as whites. Some unions refused membership from African Americans.²⁰ Also, the major employers, including the hotels and department stores in Northern urban centers, refused to hire African Americans. Other employers, such as the public utilities and transit system, only offered menial or custodial labor jobs. Therefore, unemployment continued to be a major problem among African Americans, and the situation caught the attention of activists fighting for minority rights. For instance, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) expanded its interests in African American lives to include unemployment and legal and educational rights. From this perspective, African Americans continued to experience joblessness despite migrating from the South to the North.

The Great Depression affected all Americans, but some groups, such as women, African Americans, and minority classes, had painful experiences. The identified groups had fewer privileges than whites in the labor market. For instance, whites were a priority when hiring and laying off staff. The African American men lost their labor jobs to white men who sought employment after losing employment. Consequently, African American men found it difficult to find work during the Great Depression. Similarly, African American women and those from minority groups had lower chances of getting professional jobs because of a lack of education. Therefore, they sought casual work with low wages. Furthermore, race influenced access to

¹⁹ Sarah Ward, 14.

²⁰ Sarah Ward, 21.

government programs. African Americans were more affected than other races because the government did not address their challenges for political reasons. All in all, the analysis of the Great Depression reveals disparities in its effects. African Americans and women were at a significant disadvantage and were subjected to poverty.

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