



Home service training class, Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Programme with the University of British Columbia, ca. 1940.  
Credit: Public Archives of Canada/PA-139545

# YOUNG WOMEN AND UNEMPLOYMENT IN THE 1930s:

## T H E H O M E S E R V I C E S O L U T I O N

**Rebecca Coulter**

*L'auteure examine le développement des programmes de formation subventionnés par l'État, pour les travailleuses domestiques, qui fut développé dans le cadre du Programme provincial de formation des jeunes (Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Programme) établi en 1937. Les objectifs et le fonctionnement des écoles de formation en service domestique à travers le pays sont décrits et le succès de ce cours de formation pour jeunes femmes est évalué.*

As the women of Canada contemplate and criticize, enroll in or adapt, current job training schemes designed by the federal government, it is useful to examine the roots of the public policy position which deals with unemployment as an educa-

tional problem rather than an economic one. The notion that particular forms of training would resolve high levels of unemployment, especially among the young, first found a loud voice in the 1930s although, not surprisingly, the unemployment problem was defined largely in terms of the needs of boys and young men. Indeed, a confidential report on unemployment in Western Canada, prepared by the Canadian Council on Social Development in the summer of 1932, claimed that the unemployment of young women was not a difficult problem "because of the adaptability of most unemployed women, the possibility of absorption into family life or housework of the large number, and the great opportunities for co-operative voluntary efforts" with women's organizations which

would train and place domestic workers. It was expected that young women would trade their skills in cooking, sewing and cleaning for room and board, either in the homes of their families or in the homes of others; thus young women were seen as "the least difficult of many angles of the unemployment and relief situation."<sup>1</sup>

It was true that in the 1930s domestic service was the only major occupational area open to women where the demand exceeded the supply. A brief to the government of British Columbia from the Unemployed Women's Protective Association of Vancouver helps explain why, despite the demand, young women consistently avoided employment in domestic service. Wages were very low, there was no guarantee that women would get paid the wages they contracted for, they were



Home service training class, Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Programme with the University of British Columbia, ca. 1935-40.  
Credit: Public Archives of Canada/PA-139549

often expected to work for ten, twelve or even fifteen hours a day and to sleep in a damp basement or with a child of the family, and they were not allowed sufficient time to eat. Many domestic workers were also expected to purchase their uniforms and launder them in their own time. In addition, there were often harsh and demanding employers to contend with: more than one young woman complained of being subjected to the unwelcome attentions of men in the household.<sup>2</sup>

Some of these difficulties were explicitly recognized when a training scheme for domestic servants called Home Service Training became an integral part of the Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Programme (D-PYTP). Established in 1937 as a federal-provincial cost-sharing arrangement, this programme was designed to encourage the provinces to develop training courses for unemployed young people up to the age of thirty. Home Service Training, along with courses in sewing, handicrafts and other traditional skills, became a major focus of the Youth Training Programme for young women.

The Supervisor of Youth Training in Ottawa, R.F. Thompson, argued that a Home Service Training course would give greater prestige to domestic service by making it more skilled, a condition which would, in turn, ensure that fair wages and working conditions were provided to employees. Once domestic service was recognized in this way, young women would be glad to take up this line of work, suggested Thompson, and thus the existing demand for household workers would be met.

Schooling for domestic service was not a new idea in Canada. Several women's organizations, such as the YWCA and the

Junior League, had sponsored occasional training programmes for domestic workers in Montreal and Winnipeg, for example, before the federal government began to provide funding for the task in 1937. After 1937, however, Home Service Training Schools were established in a consistent and patterned way across the country, primarily in major urban centres. While local women's committees continued to offer volunteer assistance in setting up, furnishing and supervising Home Service Schools, the federal government maintained a watchful eye on the organization and administration of all schools in order to exert a centralized control over all decisions. For example, the Supervisor of Youth Training in Ottawa reviewed all provincial Home Service Training plans and would not approve them for funding unless the schools were residential or at least had a "practice home" attached where the trainees could take turns "living-in" and experiencing the daily routines of a "maid's life." He did not wish a government programme to be criticized for its lack of practicality!

Preferred candidates for Home Service Training were young women between the ages of eighteen and thirty who were dependents in urban families on relief. Young women were found to be the "most adaptable and most easily placed" and dependent "girls" from "respectable" families on relief were thought to adjust more readily to the demands of the training schools and domestic service than young, single unemployed women who were already out in the world on their own. For domestic service, dependence was clearly a virtue.

In practice, recruitment to Home Service Training remained almost a constant problem for authorities, and often only

candidates considered most "unsuitable" applied for admission – and then only as a last resort. If other options became available, young women chose with their feet and stayed away from Home Service courses. For example, it was particularly difficult to recruit trainees from May to September in Ontario because seasonal work was available to women then. The Manager of the Protestant Employment Bureau in Montreal blamed low enrollments on inadequate career counselling in the schools and suggested that schools begin directing girls towards domestic service. "Lack of initiative" was the explanation offered by the solid citizens of the Women's Aid Board of Vancouver when it was unsuccessful in interesting young women in domestic service. Other commentators expressed dismay, sadness or frustration at the lack of interest displayed by young women in training for housework, particularly since, as one observer put it, "these courses serve so well to prepare the students for proficiency in their general ultimate occupation of homemakers."

But what about the young women who decided to participate in a Home Service Training School? In order to be admitted they had to complete an application form, provide three letters of reference, and under-go a medical examination. Once admitted to a Home Service Training School, girls were provided with room, board, uniforms for use while on duty, and a small amount of pocket money. Instruction in cookery, household management, laundering, table, door and telephone service, sewing, personal hygiene and deportment, employer-employee relations and home nursing was promised, as was some provision for recreation, often in the form of swimming and gym at the local YWCA.

A typical week in a young trainee's life would involve at least fifty-six hours of practical work and instruction. Trainees got up at 6:45 a.m. and breakfast would be prepared and served and served at 7:45 by some of the women. Lunch was at noon and dinner at 5:00 p.m. While some women were preparing meals, others cleaned and scrubbed, did laundry and otherwise occupied themselves with household tasks or instruction in them.

Learning conditions were not always ideal. In one Home Service School, for example, the instructor noted that a kitchen twenty-eight inches wide and seven feet long had to be used by three to six trainees at one time. There was no kitchen

sink and the refrigerator was in the basement. The kitchen cupboards were six to seven feet high, making them difficult to reach. One bathroom was expected to serve forty people. Furthermore, the instructor complained, although she was expected to keep ten to twelve trainees busy cleaning all afternoon, the furnishings of the practice house were so inadequate the work was done in an hour. In response, a provincial official admitted that perhaps the provisions for women's courses had been too miserly. Indeed, evidence suggests that, while there was a great deal of rhetoric from authorities about the importance of home service training, adequate funding was not as forthcoming; local women's advisory groups found themselves having to furnish practice houses and otherwise make ends meet. Needless to say, the female instructors were also paid less than their male counterparts in other programmes.

Many aspects of the lives of young women in training were subject to regulation. For example, the Household Service School in Edmonton, which had comparatively liberal rules, insisted that women could not smoke in the house at any time – although male guests were not similarly restricted. Magazines or books considered by the instructors to be sensational or “cheap” could not be brought into the house. Trainees were not allowed to go out on Sunday or Monday evenings, but on Tuesdays men were allowed to visit until 10:00 p.m. for a social evening, as long as no dancing occurred and the house mother was present. The young women could go out on Wednesday and Thursday evenings as long as they were in by 10:00 p.m. On week-ends they were permitted to be out either Friday or Saturday (but not both nights) until 11:30.

Rules were much stricter at the Vancouver Practice House. Because the house was small, only three to four girls at a time slept in and worked there full-time. These trainees were not allowed more than one hour per day for exercise and, at the discretion of the matron, might get one or two evenings off a week as well as the occasional Saturday night. On Sundays two trainees were free from after breakfast to 10:00 p.m. and the other two from lunch to 10 o'clock.

This replication of the actual conditions of work that would face trainees when they became domestic servants was nowhere more apparent than in what was called the “hostess method” of training.



*Home service training class, Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Programme with the University of British Columbia, ca. 1920s.*

*Credit: Public Archives of Canada/PA-139548*

Although the Supervisor of Youth Training in Ottawa opposed this form of training because it placed students in the homes of local citizens for their practical work, where they might easily be exploited and could not be centrally supervised, he was sometimes forced to allow it. Such a case occurred in New Westminster where a six-month course, rather than the usual three-month one, was established using the hostess method after successful lobbying by the Local Council or Women and pressure from the B.C. Minister of Education, G.M. Weir. Young women in this programme received classroom instruction from 9:00 to 2:00 each week-day and otherwise were expected to be on duty in the homes of the “hostesses” for an additional forty-five hours a week. Trainees were only given one afternoon and one evening off each week as well as every other Sunday from 2:00 p.m. Although each mistress was warned not to get the girls up each day before 6:00 a.m., she could expect the trainee to report for duty by 7:00 a.m. Clearly trainees had a very onerous work-week – one which resembled what they would find in the “real world,” although at least there they would receive a monetary reward for their efforts.

The plan for the New Westminster course is one of the few which can still be found. It outlined the purpose and design of the course and noted that one of the first goals should be to “give the girls a right mental attitude towards their position in the home, their mistress and the course of study and work.” Furthermore, instructors were admonished to emphasize to trainees that it was their “privilege during the course to learn to be as useful as possible to the people with whom they are associated.” This professed aim must

have done much both to stir fears that the hostess method was exploitive and to alienate trainees from domestic service.

While this desire to change the attitudes of young women so that they would consider it a privilege to serve their employers was rarely expressed so explicitly, it is probably true that this was a part of the curriculum, however hidden, in all Home Service Training Schools. Although prospective employers seeking to pay reduced wages or let an employee go often argued that domestic workers lacked necessary skills and knowledge, the extant follow-up reports on placements, almost without exception, assess domestic workers primarily on attitudes and appearances. For example, Margaret M. was described as coming to the school a lazy, uninterested “ungainly, dirty rag-bag” who, after training and placement with a “very fine family,” became a “tall, neatly dressed, absolutely ‘beaming’ girl.” Irene S. was a trouble-maker who entered a school “wearing sloppy clothes and enough make-up for a dozen girls.” She improved in appearance and became “a big fine looking girl” who was placed in a farm home where she was forgiven for many transgressions by “an exceptionally considerate employer,” though one who was not so considerate as to provide her work beyond the busy season: she was let go just before Christmas. Other girls were commended for taking “a keen interest” in their work, for being “very good workers” with “happy dispositions,” for being “very willing and anxious to please” and for doing their best not to cause employers any worry by misbehaving or staying out late.<sup>3</sup>

Domestic work was not an attractive option for women and many trainees did not take it up after leaving their training

course. Those who did, however, were encouraged to return to the training school for help, advice and "refresher" courses. A few remaining letters from graduates indicate that some women did return to visit or seek advice. Despite their experiences of long hours of hard work, these women tended to remember the Home Service Training Schools fondly for the chances they felt the schools offered for the development of friendships among young women, or because as individuals, they had benefitted from the care and concern of specific instructors who had helped them achieve a sense of confidence and self-assurance.

All told, however, a limited number of women received training and went on to work in domestic service. In 1938-39, for example, eighteen schools were operating in Canada, but only 1,561 young women were given training. Less than half were placed in employment and fully 409 women dropped the course part way through. Of those actually placed in domestic service, many stayed only until something better came along – as it very often did once Canada entered the war.

As with most of the work women do,

domestic service – despite the stated aims of the initiators of Home Service Training – never became a well-paid, respected job with acceptable working conditions. Instead, women chose work opportunities that offered better wages and working conditions, less supervision of their personal lives and more chance to work in an environment with other women.

<sup>1</sup>Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), MG28, I 10, Vol. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes come from PAC, Records of the Department of Labour, Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Programme, RG 27. Specific citation provided on request.

<sup>3</sup>Some comments have been drawn from Ontario Archives, Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Programme, RG 7 XIV 1, Box 2.

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