

# Canadian Women and the First World War

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During the First World War, women in Canada became actively involved in every aspect of the war effort. They joined the workforce in unprecedented numbers, they served in the armed forces and they helped in reconstruction work. During the war it was not uncommon to see women making guns and working on the land.

When I researched the work that women did during the First World War and analyzed their experience I found it a profoundly moving exercise. It was with a sad admiration for these women that I read of their fervent hopes for a bright future. I was deeply impressed by the dedication and strength they brought to each task they performed. But I do not want to dwell in great detail upon the degree to which women's sense of patriotism was exploited during the war years. Although I am aware that they were used as a cheap, and often completely unpaid, reserve labour force, it is also important to remember their sense of energy and intensity and their wholehearted involvement in their war activities. In this way we see the importance of women's victories, not merely their defeats.

During the First World War, no government nurseries were established and most of the women who joined the labour force were unmarried. Women were permitted to par-

ticipate in almost every male trade and they performed their work successfully. Later the women were able to use their war-time efforts and achievements to demand the franchise from a grateful government. The employment of women during the war had created a greater sensitivity on the part of the population as a whole to the problems of women in industry. This, and the demands of labour unions, were to result in the enactment of protective legislation for women.

A major recruitment of women was not required during the First World War until 1916. There had been a surplus of labour until 1915. As the war progressed, however, there was a need for business to sustain its levels of production if the war time economy was to survive. Lloyd George, the Prime Minister of England, asked the allied nations for a maximization in their production of munitions.

Many of these orders were placed in Canada. There was an increasing need for labour, as men everywhere were leaving their positions to join the army. And it was necessary to create a new supply of labour in order to fill this gap. The Imperial Munitions Board took on the task of encouraging the training and employment of women in munitions factories.

This organization published a booklet in November, 1916 in which

it discussed the possibility of the dilution of labour at all levels of production. 'Dilution' was the term used to describe the entrance of women into the labour market.

*... it has been clearly demonstrated that women under the guidance of trained tool-makers, are efficient and useful ... Especially have the women astonished engineers in their aptitude for the handling of milling machines.*

It would appear that this particular booklet was published in order to encourage owners, directors, and managers of munitions plants to employ women. At the same time it was probably hoped that women, who had not as yet offered their services in this field, would read this booklet, and be encouraged to do so. Many photographs are used throughout the publication to depict the ability and enthusiastic patriotism of these women workers. Great emphasis is also placed upon the fact that those munitions plants, which at this time did employ women, had gone out of their way to provide extra comforts for their female employees.

Official badges were

issued by the Imperial Munitions Board for women munitions workers after 30 days of employment. A service bar was added for each six months of continuous work at one plant. This booklet ends with a motto which seems to be directed at both factory owners and women workers.

*I can't! does nothing  
I'll try! does wonders  
I will! does everything*

Enid Price, in a Master's thesis written in Montreal in 1919, examined changes in the industrial occupations of women during the war. She found that, in most cases where men had been employed previously, women performed these same tasks with an equal degree of efficiency. In 1918 in Montreal there were 2,315 women employed by railway, steel, and cement companies in positions which had always been filled by men in the past.

Munitions industries however, provided the largest field of employment for the greatest number of women during the war. When conscription was introduced in 1917, at least 35,000 women were working in munitions plants in Montreal and throughout Ontario. In Montreal, out of a total of 15,206 workers, there were

5,460 female employees. This accounts for 35 per cent of the total number of workers. More women were attracted to munitions factories than to any other form of work because they believed that this type of work was more highly paid than any other. Enid Price discovered that from 1917 to 1918 the average wage in this field of work ranged from 23 cents per hour to 45 cents per hour. Women earned anywhere from 59 per cent to 83 per cent of men's wages in this industry. All classes of girls and women applied for munitions work. Many often had high school, business, or university training.

As attitudes gradually changed toward working women, many industries began to employ them on an increasingly larger basis. There were primarily two reasons for this. First, female labour proved to be cheaper. Second, men were needed either for military service or for other occupations . . .

Farmers were encouraged to accept women land workers although it was difficult to convince them of the worth of this plan. 'It was extreme need only that induced the growers to listen to the proposition that city girls should come to fill the gap.' When many farmers eventually agreed, wages were established at the same scale as had been paid to men.

Housing was secured and camps were organized with women supplying their own bedding and towels and paying \$4-a-week for room and board. They also assisted with meal preparation and dish washing. The women wore bloomers for their work because it was found that skirts were too dangerous for climbing trees to pick fruit.

Working conditions were in many ways unsatisfactory; the employment was uncertain and the rates were quite low. In 1917, for example,

half of the female pickers earned only \$5 to \$7 per week and a 10-hour-day was quite usual. Because most farmers were unwilling to accept women labourers, it was very difficult for the women to secure an agreement which guaranteed steady work. As a result, all losses of pay through poor weather conditions were borne by the women themselves.

Some women worked as conductors on the trams in various cities in Ontario during the war. Maude Chart, who was employed by the Kingston, Portsmouth, and Cataraqui Electric Railway Company on October 15, 1917, was the first woman conductor in Canada. After Chart was hired, 11 other women eventually followed as conductors. All of these women more than fulfilled the expectations of their employer, winning the admiration of even the most pessimistic observers. They collected fares for as long as 10 hours a day and naturally, 'their unflinching politeness and courtesy at all times were commended by visitors as well as citizens.' Their wages were fairly good in comparison with other occupations — they earned an average of \$18.50-a-week. Their employer was extremely pleased with the calibre of their work.

*... I have absolutely no fault to find with any of them. They are punctual in arriving for work, courteous while performing their duties, and I am convinced that they have been able to collect as many fares as the men. In comparison from every standpoint they are their equal . . .*

Given the opportunity, women performed as well as men. In fact, in most jobs, their social training dictated their cheerfulness and their willingness to help others. During the First World War, many Canadian women went

overseas to work as nurses, voluntary aids and ambulance drivers. Their diligence and bravery were deeply appreciated by all those to whom they gave aid. 'Canadian women have marched shoulder to shoulder with their sisters from all parts of the empire. They have crossed the ocean to work within the sound of guns.' Most women who went continued their work for years, long after the initial enthusiasm of the early war years had subsided. In all there were 2,000 Canadian nursing sisters caring for sick and wounded soldiers in England, France, Egypt, and Salonica. M. C. MacDonald, the Matron in Chief of the Canadian nursing service, went overseas in the first days of the war and remained for its duration. Canadian nurses had an excellent reputation. They were well trained and were often cited as 'sympathetic women and brave soldiers.'

*Canada will never forget her nurses drowned by Germans while doing their duty, killed or dying of wounds from bombs dropped on hospitals, or dying of illness contracted while on active service.*

Many of these women won the nurse's decoration of the Royal Red Cross and others received military medals for 'gallantry and devotion to duty during an enemy air raid.' Of all the allied nations, Canadian women were the only nurses who received the rank and pay of officers. Although their rank and pay were equal, decorations were not. The Military Cross was reserved solely for men . . .

In general, the pattern during the war years was for wages to increase. This helped to narrow, but did not eliminate, the wage differential between men and women. In 1918, an Order in Council was passed which called for

equal pay for women. This measure did not survive the war and was generally unsuccessful. Enid Price, investigating this issue in various industries, constantly re-asserts the reason given by employers for their use of female labour. Women workers were much cheaper than men. This would appear to disprove the claim of certain women journalists who maintained that women were paid at the same rate as men during the war years.

Agnes Laut (Maclean's, 1918) points out that previous to the war, work outside the home had been seen as a temporary makeshift for women. Society had not sanctioned the idea of women going out to work after marriage. And even if they did, there had never been any possibility of them working up to an executive position. But now, while the men were away at work, Laut claimed that partnerships were being offered to women as they earned them. This is just another example of the naïve optimism which these journalists often displayed.

There is indeed a kind of romanticism about the future possibilities of women in the writings of the period. However, the lack of careful investigation on the part of these journalists into the problem of equal pay was not so much a result of deliberate blindness, as it was an expression of a fervent hope and belief that women would indeed make tremendous gains after the war. There is a deep sincerity and commitment on the part of these women. The articles they wrote were not written in bad faith. Instead, the women wrote from an exuberance which the vastness of women's war efforts had given them. They could not do other than believe that this remarkable energy would be harnessed and channelled into a fight for new gains . . . ©