

SECTION
FOUR

REALITY CHECK

Did the War Really Change the Role of Women in the Workforce?

WORDS TO KNOW

munitions
secondary sources
primary sources
propriety
public sphere

With a partner, brainstorm a list of all the jobs (paid or unpaid) that a woman might have done in the early 1900s. How might the First World War affect this list? Share your list in a class discussion.

BEFORE
READING

Female Population and Labour Force Participation, Canada, 1901–1931

Year	Female population	Labour force participation rate
1901	1 957 000	14.4%
1911	2 521 000	16.6%
1921	3 184 000	17.7%
1931	3 875 000	19.4%

Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada, 1982.

Evidence 1.27

Percentage Distribution of Working Women by Leading Occupational Groups, Canada, 1901–1931

Occupational group	1901	1911	1921	1931
Clerical	5.3%	9.4%	18.7%	17.7%
Personal Service*	42.0%	37.1%	25.8%	33.8%
Professional	14.7%	12.7%	19.1%	17.8%
Commercial and Financial	2.4%	6.8%	8.5%	8.3%
Manufacturing and Mechanical	29.6%	26.3%	17.8%	12.7%
Other	6.0%	7.8%	10.1%	9.6%
Total	100.0%	100.1%	100.0%	99.9%

Interpreting Statistical Evidence

1. Look at Evidence 1.26. During which decade did women make the most gains in their participation rate in the workforce?
2. Why are these data useful or not useful for your reality check?
3. What specific data would make the information in Evidence 1.26 more helpful in understanding women working during the First World War?
4. Examine Evidence 1.27. In your notebook, rank in order (most popular to least popular) the occupations in 1921 and 1931.
5. Where have significant changes occurred?
6. How might you account for the changes or lack of change?

7. Which occupational group increased the most as a result of the war years? Which occupational group decreased the least?
8. Speculate on why the changes in question 7 occurred in these two areas. Can you make any connection with the war?
9. Based on Evidence 1.26 and 1.27, state your preliminary observations and conclusions on the employment gains made by women during and immediately after the First World War.

NOTE: Because detailed annual data were not collected until 1945, we do not know to what extent participation rates responded to short-term economic shifts (such as labour shortages). This lack of detail is one reason that examining this issue is difficult.

DURING READING

Interpreting Quotations

The quotations in Evidence 1.28 about women and the workforce during and immediately after the First World War are taken from secondary sources. The authors of these quotations drew their conclusions based on considerable research using primary sources. Carefully examine the quotations. Using a “Both Sides Now” chart like the one opposite, organize the evidence to help you answer the question: Did women make advancements in the paid workforce as a result of the war?

Both Sides Now

Did women make advancements in the paid workforce as a result of the war?

	Evidence that supports	Evidence that does not support
Decision		
Reasons		

DURING READING

Evidence 1.28

QUOTATION

- 1 The need to send inexperienced women from the cities to work on farms arose because the demands of war had created a shortage of labour in many Ontario industries; agriculture was no exception. Farmers, desperate for workers, although skeptical of the plan, finally agreed to ... a government scheme to use “city girls” to harvest small fruits and vegetables such as strawberries, apples, tomatoes, and beans.
- 2 Urban working women saw their employment opportunities change. Although many continued in domestic service, still the largest employer of women, new jobs opened up. ... [T]he most widely publicized were in the munitions industry ... Although munitions manufacturers paid wages well above those earned by women in traditional occupations, female munitions workers in 1917 earned only 50–83 percent of what their male co-workers earned.
- 3 ... the war established, once and for all, the propriety of women working for wages before marriage, even when the young women belonged to the middle class.
- 4 Even though women actively participated in the war effort, they were expected to revert to their previous status when the war was over.
- 5 The war got more women out of the house and into factories, volunteer activities, and even into the voting booths. After the war, women still wanted to be part of these activities.
- 6 Women’s salaries never matched those of the men they replaced and they were fired from their “untraditional” jobs at the end of the hostilities, but women got a sense of what they could do in the public sphere when they had a chance.

SOURCE

- Report to the Trades and Labour Branch for 1917, Vol. I, Part IV, 1918, p. 47. Cited in Pat Staton, *It Was Their War Too: Canadian Women in World War I* (Toronto: Green Dragon Press, 2006).
- Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt et al., *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996), p. 144.
- Alison Prentice et al., p. 146.
- Ontario Women’s Directorate website, “Women in First World War,” 2005.
- Ian M. Hundey and Michael L. Magarrey, *Canada: Understanding Your Past* (Toronto: Irwin, 1990), p. 108.
- Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, *History of the Canadian Peoples, Vol. II, 1867 to the Present*, 4th ed. (Toronto: Pearson Education, 2005), p. 187.