CANADIAN WOMEN
AND THE
SECOND WORLD WAR
Ruth Roach Pierson

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CANADIAN WOMEN AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

When war broke out in September 1939, Canada was still in the grip of the Great Depression. Out of a population of 11 million, approximately 900,000 workers were unemployed and about 20 per cent of these were women. The Depression had not, of course, brought adversity to everyone. It was a time when goods and services could be bought cheaply. Many housewives were able to afford a new electric washing machine or vacuum cleaner, or to hire domestic help for the first time in their married lives. Many women, however, whose husbands or fathers lost everything in the crash, suddenly found themselves poor. It would be hard to say who was hit worst, the farm wives in the drought- and grasshopper-ridden prairies, the wives and daughters of men out of work and on relief, women raising families on their own, widows, or self-supporting older women who could not find jobs. Married women were simply not hired in the public service and in many private industries. In almost all the areas where women usually worked, in teaching, office work, telephone operating, sales clerking, textile and canning factory work, and nursing, there was wide-spread unemployment.

The one exception was domestic service. Poverty-stricken wives hired themselves out as cleaning women in other women's houses and daughters of jobless fathers took positions as maids in the homes of the better off. During the Depression, employers — not employees — decided wages and working conditions. Various Royal Commissions found that women employed in the textile industry and garment trades, for example, were often exploited shamefully, through low pay, long hours, and a brutal pace of work.

For all those who had known the despair of unemployment or the nervous exhaustion of being badly exploited, the coming of World War II meant the opening up of new opportunities. Between September 1939 and mid-1941, military recruitment and war industry put an end to the unemployment of the Depression. By June 1941, the number of women workers was already higher by 100,000 than in 1931, an increase in keeping with the general upswing in employment. Soon after this date, an unusual demand for female labour outside the home began to make itself felt.

It is often assumed that war accelerates social change. This may be true of the wars that have taken place in this century and particularly of World War II, which saw the introduction of social welfare policies as well as of increased employment for women in Canada. What of the social position and role of women in Canada? Did World War II greatly or permanently alter the place of women in the labour market, corridors of power, and homes of the country?
Women contributed greatly to the Canadian war effort, in the armed forces, in factories, and in voluntary organizations. The three services of the Armed Forces were opened to women, other than nursing sisters, for the first time in Canadian history. In the course of the war, an unprecedented proportion of women left the domestic sphere to enter public employment and service. Women's voluntary labours were also mobilized on a vaster scale than ever before. Finally, a few women rose to positions of considerable responsibility and influence.

All this occurred under the shadow of a war which brought tragedy to those women whose brothers, fathers, sons, husbands and prospective husbands were injured or killed, or who lost European relatives to the Nazi policies of mass murder. For some of these women, the question of whether or not the economic and political status of women had improved during the war would assume particular significance as they sought to maintain families and put their lives back together at the war's end. For all Canadian women, the efforts and sacrifices of the war had been linked to a wider role and larger responsibility in the nation's affairs. The question after the war was to what extent that wider role and larger responsibility would be maintained.

*Women in the Armed Forces*

The Armed Forces were the first to feel the pinch of a manpower shortage after the beginning of the war. As early as June 1940, National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) began looking into the possibility of putting women into uniform and using them in support positions, to release men for active service elsewhere. Several months later, in February 1941, Britain requested that the Women's Auxiliary Air Force of Great Britain be allowed to recruit personnel in Canada for service with the Royal Air Force (RAF), or that the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) form its own women's service. Canada responded to this request by preparing to raise a Canadian Women's Air Service.

These official plans coincided with the keen desire of thousands of Canadian women to serve their country in uniform. British Columbia women were the first to demonstrate this eagerness. A volunteer women's service corps had been formed in that province back in October 1938, on the model of the Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service of the British Army. With the actual outbreak of war, a host of unofficial women's paramilitary groups sprang up across Canada. About 6,700 women were enrolled in such organizations by 1941.

Women who joined these organizations were given training in military drill and etiquette, in physical education, and in jobs such as military
clerical work, transport driving and motor vehicle maintenance, first aid, map reading, wireless and visual telegraphy, and cooking in large quantities. The organizations were self-supporting; the women had to buy their own outfits. Some could afford only armbands. Others were uniformed very smartly in, for instance, a blue-grey tunic and skirt with maple leaf badges in gold, black beret, grey hose, and black brogues. The leaders organized themselves into hierarchies and assumed military titles such as colonel, major, and captain.

These women’s organizations bombarded the Departments of National Defence and National War Services with requests for official recognition. Some clamoured to be sent overseas, but the government refused to allow this. The officials also knew that if they recognized some of the volunteer corps, they had to recognize all of them. Since not every single one could be trusted to be up to standard, they decided not to recognize any. At the same time, they could not afford to ignore the amount of womanpower in the volunteer corps. In the end, when the Departments of National Defence and National War Services were organizing the official women’s services, they found their recruits among these women.

The first Armed Service to open its doors to women (other than nursing sisters) was the Air Force. The Canadian Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (CWAAF) was brought into being in July 1941 and was an integral part of the Air Force from the start. The following spring it was renamed the Royal Canadian Air Force (Women’s Division), commonly referred to as the WDs. The second service to move was the Army. The Canadian Women’s Army Corps (CWAC) was formed in August 1941, but its full integration into the Canadian Army (Active) had to wait until the next spring. The last service to admit women was the Navy; the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS) was formed in July 1942.

There were no uniforms ready for the first Army and Air Force recruits. Women from the volunteer corps were permitted to wear their old uniforms for the time being, but others had to make do with civilian clothes. One former member of the CWAC remembers how male soldiers made fun of the new female recruits drilling on the parade ground in their motley garb.

The Air Force, Army, and Navy used female labour in the ground crews, behind desks, and on shore, in order to release men for combat duty. The mottoes of the women’s services tell the story: We Serve That Men May Fly; We Serve That Men May Fight; We Are the Women Behind the Men Behind the Guns. National Defence had been using female labour even before the creation of the women’s services. Women had been working as civil servants in the offices of National Defence Headquarters, military districts, and naval and air bases. But now that female employees were in
uniform and under service discipline, their labour was even more at the disposal of the Forces.

The occupations open to women in the Forces were initially limited and all non-combatant. The number of occupations, however, increased as the war went on. The Women’s Division of the RCAF, which began with eleven basic trades, for example, had fifty by February 1943. And, in the Army, a few CWAC personnel were eventually assigned to operational duties with coastal defence units as kinetheodolite operators (testing the accuracy of height- and range-finders and anti-aircraft guns) and broadcasters and plotter-telephonists in gun operations rooms. Recruitment propaganda, however, still assured the young Canadian woman that she would not be called upon to serve on the firing line: “You do not pull any triggers or throw any hand grenades.” By March 1945, women in the CWAC were represented in fifty-five different trades, in addition to the general duty assignments carrying no trades pay, such as driver without technical training, laundress, medical orderly, batwoman, canteen helper, waitress, and officer orderly. Even among tradeswomen, however, the majority were assigned to office or kitchen duty. Of the almost six thousand CWAC tradeswomen stationed in North America in March
1945, fully 70 per cent were employed either as clerk (62.4 per cent) or cook (8 per cent). The secretary in uniform was the typical CWAC and this pattern of female employment was largely the same in the Navy and Air Force.

Nor was this employment pattern out of line with the desires, expectations, or work experience of the women. Of those applying to the CWAC up to mid-1942, over three-quarters were employed at the time of making application: 24 per cent of these were domestic servants, 24 per cent office workers, 15 per cent store clerks, 10 per cent factory workers, and 4 per cent professional women and teachers. Approximately 70 per cent had had some high-school education, while only 6 per cent had attended university. Thirty-six per cent of those seeking admission wanted office work of some kind, 19 per cent wanted duties in the mess or canteen, 15 per cent wanted to be drivers, and 10 per cent store clerks.

The women accepted into the services did not receive the same pay as the men. At the time the women's services were begun, basic pay for all ranks was set at two-thirds that of the men. Furthermore, no dependents' allowances were provided to servicewomen. These inequalities in pay and benefits were cause for complaint on the part of women in the services. There was also a public outcry, led by the National Council of Women.

The Department of National Defence was sensitive to the criticism; for one thing, it was hindering recruitment. In July 1943, the minister announced adjustments in pay and allowances for women in the services. Among other improvements, basic pay was raised to 80 per cent of that paid to men in the same rank; and allowances would now be paid for the dependent parents, brothers, and sisters (but not husbands) of service-women. Although the Armed Services were ahead of private industry in narrowing the gap between men's and women's pay and benefits, the changes did not remove all inequalities. Many servicewomen still expressed dissatisfaction because their pay was not equal to that of the men they relieved.

By mid-1942, recruiting officers had come up against more difficult obstacles than unequal pay. Rumours were circulating about the morality of servicewomen and, consequently, discouraging enlistment. There were cases of venereal disease and pregnancy among unmarried servicewomen, and the incidence of the latter was apparently at higher rates than among the civilian population. Nonetheless, only a tiny percentage of servicewomen was actually involved, yet the rumourmongers sought to tar the entire women's services with the same brush. The Wartime Information Board (WIB) made a study of this "whispering campaign" and concluded that the rumours sprang from a prejudice against the Women's Services. Sexual
respectability, the WIB recognized, was women's vulnerable point, "the traditional focus of attack by those who resent any extension of prerogatives." Wearing a uniform, marching, standing at attention, and saluting were traditionally masculine. Since a woman who did these things was seen as unconventional and "unwomanly," it was easy to assume that she had broken with moral convention as well. There were in fact bitter denunciations of the women's forces in letters from servicemen overseas. Officers in charge of recruitment and public relations decided not to try to refute the rumours, but to play up the positive aspects of women's life in the services and to advertise parental approval of daughters' joining up.

Canadian women braved the opposition, which continued right to the end of the war. Almost 50,000 enlisted in the Women's Services in all: 20,497 in the CWAC; 16,221 in the Women's Division of the RCAF; and 6,665 in the WRCNS. An additional 4,439 served in the Nursing Services of the three Forces. Altogether they represented about 2 per cent of the female population of Canada between the ages of sixteen and forty-five. Some were stationed outside Canada: a total of 568 Canadian Wrens and approximately 740 members of the RCAF (WD) served in Newfoundland; smaller numbers of all three women's services held positions in the United States. The opportunity to serve overseas was reserved for those with the greatest seniority and best service records. In all, over 1,300 Canadian airwomen, some 2,000 members of the CWAC, and 503 Canadian Wrens served in the United Kingdom. Starting in May 1944, select groups of CWACs were despatched to combat areas on the European continent, to serve in the rear of the Canadian Forces taking part in the invasion of Italy, and then France and Germany.

Civilian Employment for Women

By mid-1941, the reserve pool of male civilian workers had been largely exhausted. A government-appointed Labour Supply Investigation Committee noted the large reserves of female labour in the country and concluded that the complete mobilization of these reserves would be necessary for the success of the war effort. It calculated this female labour reserve at 561,000. The figure excluded all rural homemakers, on the grounds that they would be performing indispensible work on the farms, and 85 per cent of urban homemakers; to withdraw any more from the home would result in serious disruptions of family life, in the opinion of the committee. Thus, it was planned to use 15 per cent of urban homemakers in the workforce, or double the number already employed in August 1940. This was not out of line with actual trends. The percentage of the adult female population that was both married and employed had increased by 89 per cent over the ten previous years. Difficulties were anticipated, however. Although Quebec had the highest percentage of adult women in
gainful employment (18.8 per cent in 1931), the committee recognized that there was in French Canada a long-standing tradition against women working outside the home. In the Prairie provinces and the Maritimes, a large proportion of the young employable women would have to be drawn from rural areas. To increase the number of women in employment from 876,000 in August 1940 to the projected 1,437,000 would require, therefore, an aggressive recruitment and placement programme, according to the committee. Its advice was heeded. The National Selective Service (NSS) was established by the government in March 1942.

Prime Minister Mackenzie King, in an address to Parliament, singled out the recruitment of women for employment as the most important single feature of the programme. A special Women's Division of NSS was created two months later, and in September 1942 a registration of women aged twenty to twenty-four was held. The objective of this inventory of Canada's womanpower was to determine how many single female workers were available to meet the increasing shortage of labour in essential war industries. Registration was compulsory for women in this age group, whether married or unmarried, but Selective Service officers were to restrict employment permits to single women or to married women without children, as much as possible.

Thus began the first phase of active recruitment of female labour. The registration itself stimulated young women to apply for jobs. In addition, NSS launched a nationwide publicity campaign using newspapers and radio to popularize war industrial work for young women. The September registration had revealed that in British Columbia, the Prairies, and the Maritimes there were more than twenty thousand young single women without home responsibilities and willing to work full-time. The government decided therefore to transfer women workers from rural areas to the centres of war industry in Ontario and Quebec; an estimated fifteen thousand women were transferred in this way.

The recruiting campaigns paid off. At the peak of female employment, in the autumn of 1944, more than 1,000,000 women were working full-time in Canada's paid labour force, a figure which does not include part-time workers, or the 800,000 women on farms who were doing their share, with or without wages, to meet farm production schedules. The largest number of women found jobs in the service sector, approximately 439,000 as of the autumn of 1943; 373,000 were in manufacturing, 180,000 in trade and finance, 31,000 in transportation and communication, and 4,000 in construction. The peak of female employment in war industry was reached in October 1943, when approximately 261,000 women were employed directly or indirectly in war production.
Women worked in war plants that made guns, ammunition, and tanks, in shipbuilding, and in aircraft production. In 1943, for example, shipbuilding employed over 4,000 women, still mostly as office workers, but also in some semi-skilled jobs as welders, riveters, electricians, drillers, painters, boilermakers, polishers, cleaners, rope slicers, tractor drivers, and occasionally even as crane drivers. The Pictou shipyard in Nova Scotia, the first in North America to do so, employed 300 women in its wartime labour force of 1,300. Other shipyards in Nova Scotia and British Columbia soon followed suit. But it was in the rapidly expanding aircraft industry that women came to play an especially important part. In September 1939, only 119 women were working in aircraft plants. By February 1944, their number had risen to 25,013, almost a third of the work force. Canada’s wartime production of Catalinas, Harvard training planes, Mosquito fighters and bombers, and the Norseman all depended heavily on women’s labour.

Articles in technical journals and popular press alike attempted to justify women moving into new work roles by focusing on the suitability of their supposed character or skills. They maintained that women thrived on routine, “continued repetition of which would drive men to distraction.” Women were regarded as faster than men at sorting small objects and at any task requiring digital dexterity. Women were in fact employed at electric welding, detail fitting, inspection, fabric work, the operation of lighter machines, and in stock rooms. They were also employed in offices and a few did drafting and layout work. Elsie Gregory MacGill, Chief Engineer at the Fort William plant, was one of Canada’s best aircraft designers.

The war industry paid good wages. This accounts for the fact that from 1939 to 1944 women’s industrial earnings increased more rapidly than men’s. However, the average hourly earnings of women in industry were still only two-thirds those of men in 1944 (47.9 cents as compared with 71.2 cents), despite the lip service paid to the principle of equal pay for equal work. Still, women could earn more in war industry than in other jobs. For instance, the average hourly wage for women in the aircraft industry was 83 cents, compared to 48.7 cents in the women’s clothing industry, or with the even lower 37 cents in the hosiery and knitted goods industry. About fifty thousand women left domestic service from 1941 to 1944 and the textile industry also complained to government about its loss of women workers. The government responded by designating production in some textile mills essential to the war effort. National Selective Service held drives in 1943 to recruit women for the textile industry in those centres where the labour shortage had become critical. This helped, but the Department of Labour was well aware that long hours, low rates of pay, and poor working conditions were responsible for the textile industry’s difficulties.
In anticipation of labour shortages, several provinces changed their legislation affecting women's employment. In Quebec, for instance, an order-in-council was passed allowing war industries to employ women for night work and to allow them to exceed the maximum hours for women workers (ten a day or fifty-five a week). Some provinces considered employing women in mining operations. The Mines Regulation Act of Ontario prohibited the employment of any "girl or woman ... in or about any mine, except in a technical, clerical or domestic capacity." To get around this, the Cabinet issued a series of orders-in-council starting in August 1942 which permitted specific Ontario mining companies, such as INCO of Sudbury and Port Colborne, to employ women in some fifty occupations above ground. This permission was given, subject to the observance of regulations safeguarding the health and welfare of the female labourers, such as a maximum eight hour day and forty-eight hour week, provision of separate washrooms, rest rooms, and changing houses for women, "suitable" supervision, and the use of no fewer than two women on any shift in an isolated location. In Manitoba, as well, arrangements were made through the federal government to permit women to work in surface mining operations. But in British Columbia and Alberta, the Coal Controllers' Office of the federal Department of Munitions and Supply ran up against the negative attitude of mine owners and strenuous opposition from the all-male United Mine Workers' Association when it sought to ease the shortage of male help in the mines there in May 1943. In the end, there was no relaxation of the statutes prohibiting women's employment as miners in those two provinces.

By mid-1943 there were labour shortages in many areas of the service sector, which depended on female labour. Women had been leaving not only for higher paying employment in war industries; by the summer of '43 more than twenty-five thousand women had joined the armed services. Hospitals, restaurants, hotels, laundries, and dry cleaners were clamouring for help, but the former surplus of female labour had evaporated. It became necessary to appeal to housewives and to groups that would not ordinarily take jobs. While the first recruitment had sought young unmarried women and then childless married women for full-time work, in mid-1943 NSS began to seek women with children for part-time employment.

The opening campaign for part-time women workers, mounted in Toronto in July, served as a model for similar campaigns in other Canadian cities throughout the autumn. NSS first made sure that employers in hospitals, restaurants, hotels, laundries, and dry cleaning establishments would agree to employ women part-time. NSS then directed its appeal to housewives or others who would do a part-time job for six days a week, several hours per day, or several full days each week.
The drives sought part-time workers for essential services, but also in some cities for jobs in the textile industry. The Ottawa campaign aimed to get former female employees of the Civil Service, now married, to return to work to overcome the shortage of workers in the war departments of government.

Through 1943, NSS continued its recruitment campaigns for full-time women workers as well. When in late July a sudden need developed in Toronto for about 3,500 women to fill full-time high-priority jobs in war production, NSS hit upon the novel scheme of appealing to housewives to sign on for only three months' service. October and November saw drives to recruit female workers for the textile factories of Peterborough, Hamilton, Welland, St. Catharines, and Dunville. An extensive campaign was planned for Montreal. But despite decades of high participation by Quebec women in the province's textile, electrical, and tobacco industries, there was considerable francophone opposition to the entrance of women into war industry. Various organizations, both religious and secular, passed resolutions deplored the employment of married women, particularly those with children, in war plants. The press warned that work in the production of shells and explosives was hazardous to the health of women, especially to their child-bearing capacity. But economic motives triumphed; the higher wages in war industries were as attractive to women in Quebec as in Ontario. About nine thousand women were employed in the Dominion Arsenals in Quebec City and Valcartier alone. Nonetheless, in November 1943, NSS officials and Montreal employers, fearful of renewed attacks on war industries, opted for small recruitment drives specifically for hotel, laundry, hospital, and textile workers rather than a large-scale campaign covering war industries as well.

The last major appeals to women workers occurred in 1944. In the first three months of that year, war industry declined slightly, and the number of women in the labour force actually fell by ten to fifteen thousand. Although the end of the war was in sight, NSS put out publicity asking that women remain on their jobs, until victory was secured. Then in June 1944 came a new emergency: the invasion of France. Ammunition plants in Ontario and Quebec had once again to operate at peak production for a brief period. The need for an estimated ten thousand new women workers gave rise to a last, large-scale recruitment campaign. The slogan was “Women! Back Them Up — To Bring Them Back.”

There had also been recruitment of women into agriculture. In all provinces, farmers' wives and daughters took over the running of farms in the absence of male relatives, but they needed help. A Dominion-Provincial Farm Labour Agreement was negotiated to help farm owners who were hard pressed to attract and hold workers against the lure of higher
industrial wages. Ontario entered into this agreement in 1941 and British Columbia in 1943. In the latter, school girls and boys and female teachers were mobilized during holidays for agricultural work. The Ontario Farm Service Force divided female farm-labour volunteers into three brigades: the Farmerette Brigade for female students (sixteen and older) and teachers to work in fruit, vegetable, and truck farming during their holidays; the Women's Land Brigade for other non-farm women who could pitch in on a day-to-day basis or volunteer for year-round service; and the Farm Girls' Brigade for farm women under twenty-six who could lend a hand when and where necessary. National Selective Service helped to publicize the appeals for Farm Labour Service.

Young, unmarried women had been the first of the female population sought by the National Selective Service in its recruitment drives. Next were married but childless women. But from the very start, mothers in need of employment, including those with young children, took advantage of the increased job opportunities created by the war. It was discovered in September 1942 that many mothers working in Montreal's war plants had told their employers that they were single, because they had been afraid that they would not get jobs otherwise. It was evident that the special needs of working women, especially those with dependent children, would have to be met. There were reports of "car babies" (infants locked in parked cars while the mother or both parents were at work). There was also concern over "latch-key" children as critics began to blame working mothers for juvenile delinquency.

The country was, however, increasingly dependent on the paid labour of women with young children. The Dominion government therefore took steps to make child care available to working mothers for the duration of the war. Late in July 1942, it agreed to co-operate on an equal-cost-sharing basis with any province interested in establishing day-care facilities for children of mothers in war industries ranging from care of school-age children and pre-school children to foster care for children under two. Only Ontario and Quebec, the two most industrialized provinces, actually took advantage of the Dominion-Provincial Wartime Day Nurseries Agreement, however. The programme was also slow in getting off the ground and limited in extent. Day nurseries did not start opening for example until 1943 and, at first, no more than 25 per cent of any nursery was to be open to children of mothers in jobs outside war industries. There was strong objection to this quota, however, on the grounds that it was unfairly discriminatory. In many cases, the woman doing the "non-essential" job was freeing a man or another woman for work in war industry. The agreement was finally amended in 1944 to include children of all working mothers, although children of mothers working in war industry still had priority at all times to any facility established under the agreement.
By September 1945 there were 28 day nurseries in Ontario accommodating about 900 children, and 44 school units accommodating about 2,500 children. At the same time in Quebec, there were only 5 wartime day nurseries, all in Montreal, and with an average enrolment of only between 115 and 120 children. After the war, government subsidies and interest came to an abrupt end. The Quebec government terminated the agreement in October 1945, despite appeals from social agencies, teachers, and working mothers. The programme lasted a bit longer in Ontario, while governments haggled over whether day nurseries were a federal, provincial, or municipal concern, but finally the Dominion government took the initiative and terminated the agreement. All the school-age centres were closed in Ontario as of the end of June 1946, though some of them reopened shortly afterwards; about half the pre-school nurseries survived the withdrawal of federal funds.

**Volunteer Work**

By far the largest contribution made by Canadian women to the war effort was through their unpaid labour in the home and their volunteer work. Women’s domestic work was as crucial to most families in wartime as in peace, although the war did see a rise in communal kitchens and commercial laundries. The main purpose of these was to ease the burden on women working in “essential” industries, but who at the same time had to do equally essential domestic chores. Canadian society was almost totally mobilized to fight the war and women were called upon as preparers of food, clothes makers, consumers, and managers of family budgets. Homemakers helped the war effort by coping with shortages, accepting rationing, and preventing waste; they also helped by saving and collecting materials that could be recycled for use in war production.

To increase Canada’s food production, women cultivated “victory gardens” and canned the fruits and vegetables. Some learned for the first time how to remake old clothes, save scraps and oils for the ammunition industry, or pennies to buy war stamps. Women were told to “Dig In and Dig Out the Scrap” and save metals, rags, paper, bones, rubber, and glass. Someone had to collect the salvage. Someone also had to take in the contributions to Victory Loans and pass out information on how to practice domestic economies necessary for the war effort. Almost all of this was done voluntarily by women. Indeed, at the local level, women volunteers working in or outside the home or both, sustained a vast network of wartime services and activities.

_PAC, Picture Division, C-33442. Poster._

14
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THEY ARE USED IN WAR SUPPLIES

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UNDER AUTHORITY OF NOY. J. O. GARDINER, MINISTER OF NATIONAL WAR SERVICES.
The government stepped in, in the fall of 1941, to take charge of coordinating their efforts; a Women’s Voluntary Services (WVS) Division was set up within the Department of National War Services. But the main burden of the programme was carried by local WVS Centres, which were set up eventually in forty-four cities. These centres kept a roster of the local societies and clubs performing war services, they recruited volunteers and placed them according to interest and ability, and they passed on information from the war departments of the federal government.

Most of the centres were staffed by volunteers, although a few of the bigger ones had paid secretaries or directors. Although they were mainly referral and coordinating agencies, the centres participated directly in many tasks, such as distributing rationing cards, recruiting and training volunteer staff for Wartime Day Nurseries, or helping with the National Clothing Collection, which gathered 12 million pounds of used clothing for distribution in devastated countries.

Women who wanted to contribute voluntarily to the war effort, however, had not waited for action from the federal government. Immediately after the declaration of war, many volunteer organizations had sprung into being. In Winnipeg, for instance, early in the war, a group of women funded a Central Volunteer Bureau which registered volunteers and directed them according to their skills and interests to the appropriate club or agency. This bureau turned itself into the Women’s Voluntary Services Centre of Winnipeg in October 1941, after National War Services set up its WVS Division.

In Ontario, the coordinating organization for women’s volunteer war work resisted the federal government’s takeover. It had been founded by a group of Toronto women, only one month before the creation of the WVS Division. Since they intended, once they got Ontario organized, to spread into other provinces and develop a national organization, they had called themselves the Canadian Women’s Voluntary Services (Ontario Division). When the Canadian government decided to intervene, it notified them not only that their work would be superseded but that they would have to relinquish their name. The result was a furor. Members pelted the Department of National War Services with letters, protesting that unsalaried, charitable work was women’s domain, questioning the government’s right to intervene, and demanding to know why anyone should be getting paid to coordinate volunteer work anyway. In the end, the Ontario local lost the battle and was absorbed into the federal system.

Most of Canada’s volunteer war work, then, was performed by millions of Canadian women, organized into hundreds of local societies and clubs and orchestrated by the local Women’s Voluntary Services Centres under the direction of Ottawa’s WVS. The latter worked to publicize voluntary
work. From Ottawa's WVS Centre, for example, came the idea of "Miss Canada Girls." These young women promoted the sale of war savings stamps and other patriotic events in support of the war.

Local women's organizations were given the task of making "warsages," boutonnières with war savings stamps attached, and WVS Centres threw their weight behind the 1944 drive of the Postmaster General to get more letters written to members of the Armed Forces. On a regular basis, volunteers distributed salvage cards, staffed blood donor booths, informed apartment dwellers about window box victory gardens, and arranged hospitality and entertainment for servicewomen and servicemen on leave and far from home. Within the individual clubs, women sewed, knitted, and quilted, packed parcels, and put together "ditty bags" containing small necessities for the servicemen and women overseas. They also made jam, collected clothing bundles, and raised milk money for Britain.

In the countryside, it was the Women's Institutes all across Canada that carried the burden of voluntary war work. Between 1943 and 1945, the Women's Institutes of Canada raised over half a million dollars in cash and made almost the same number of garments for the Red Cross and others. After the war, Women's Institutes and WVS Centres alike organized committees to welcome returning veterans and to help foreign "war brides" of Canadian servicemen feel at home in their new country.

Another way in which women contributed to the war effort was by helping to monitor inflation. After the Wartime Prices and Trade Board established price and production controls in 1941-42, women's clubs across Canada appointed committees to keep an eye on prices and the availability of goods essential to housekeeping and family care. Women took pad and pencil to food, clothing, and hardware stores and made notes of prices that were out of line or products that were scarce. Once again women had taken the initiative, only to have the federal government step in to coordinate their activities when the Consumer Branch of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board came into being. Canada was divided into fourteen administrative areas, each with a Women's Regional Advisory Committee, sub-committees in urban centres, and corresponding members in smaller communities. In addition, every individual women's organization was to appoint a liaison officer to keep in touch with the local sub-committee. Through this network, a third of Canada's three million adult women was mobilized to keep a close watch on prices and production restrictions across the country and report to Ottawa.

The Leaders

A number of women rose to positions of public prominence and responsibility in association with the war effort. Within the Armed Forces,
the highest position a woman could have was head of one of the women's corps and in 1944 these positions were held by Wing Officer Willa Walker, Senior Officer, RCAF, Women's Division; Colonel Margaret Eaton, Director, CWAC; and Commander Adelaide Sinclair, Director, WRCNS. In government, women rose to high positions directing women's branches of federal war departments. For instance, Fraudena (Mrs Rex) Eaton was in charge of the Women's Division of National Selective Service in the Department of Labour; Nell (Mrs W.E.) West was made Director of Women's Voluntary Services in the Department of National War Services.

The leaders came mainly from the elite of Canadian society; they were either professional or businesswomen themselves, or married to successful business or professional men. They also had a record of public service. For example, Fraudena and Rex Eaton, born in Nova Scotia and graduates of Acadia University, moved as young adults to British Columbia, where Rex entered the lumber business, and Fraudena, community service. By the time of her appointment to National Selective Service, Fraudena Eaton's record included help with the founding of the Elizabeth Fry Society, active membership in the Local, Provincial, and National Council of Women, seven years' service as the only woman member of the British Columbia Board of Industrial Relations, and organization of the Community Self-Help Association of Vancouver during the Depression. For a woman to hold high office effectively, being well connected sometimes helped more than anything else. Margaret Eaton, for instance, came from the Timothy Eaton family. When first approached to become an officer of the CWAC, she refused on the grounds that her only qualifications were that she "knew the best night clubs in London and hunted with the best packs." But after being promoted to the position of Director, CWAC, it was precisely her high social standing that put her in such a "strong position vis à vis the boys": it was difficult for the male officers, no matter how high their title, to pull rank on her. The top ones, she recalled, never addressed her as "Colonel," but rather always as "Miss Eaton."

With few exceptions most women who held wartime governmental positions were appointed because the work was seen as within women's domain. For example, in keeping with the role of women as consumers, the position of head of the consumer division was given to a woman in both the Department of Agriculture and on the Wartime Prices and Trade Board. Miss Laura Pepper was made Chief of the Consumer Section, Department of Agriculture; Miss Byrne Hope Sanders, Chatelaine editor, was made Director of the Consumer Branch, Wartime Prices and Trade Board.

In addition to creating leadership positions in government and armed forces, war increased the opportunities of women in the media. Women writers, broadcasters, and photographers were given special assignments to
help with the mobilization of women. The journalist, Lotta Dempsey, wrote the lead article for each of the three special issues on “Woman at War” which Mayfair published in May, June, and July 1943. In 1939 Mrs Mattie Rotenberg, a homemaker with a Ph.D. in mathematics and physics from the University of Toronto and an interest in elementary education, began making public affairs broadcasts over CBC radio, on an afternoon programme for women. Her messages became progressively more concerned with women’s rights as the war went on. The war also gave a boost to the career of Kate Aitken, radio broadcaster, lecturer, and author. Her contributions to Canada’s war effort included serving as Conservation Director for the Wartime Prices and Trade Board, touring Canada with her “Remake Revue” which showed women how to create new clothes from old, and using her broadcasts and cookbooks to instruct housewives how to cook good meals despite rationing.

But even at the young and flexible National Film Board of Canada, first created in 1939, of the nearly one hundred people employed in film production at the height of the war, only three or four women rose to prominence as directors and producers. The largest proportion of women were employed as secretaries, stenographers, and librarians, and as negative cutters, working for long hours with poor equipment amidst noxious fumes in a poorly lit, poorly ventilated room. The situation became even worse for women at the NFB after the war.

The Emancipation of Women

The attainment of such prominence by a few women, their replacement of men in some traditionally male occupations, and women’s public involvement in the war effort on such a large scale led some people to believe that the war had emancipated women. The ceremonial launching of a ship that women workers had helped to build “from the first bolts and staves to the final slap of paint and piece of polished brass,” moved Lotta Dempsey to suggest that the event symbolized the launching of women as well: “...the great and final stage of the movement of women into industry ... on a complete equality with men.” National Selective Service in 1943 spoke of the war as having “finally brought about the complete emancipation of women.”

It was true that there appeared to be an equalizing of the roles of men and women in society. What was glossed over by those supporting this trend was that equalization usually involved a “masculinizing” of women’s roles, rather than a “feminizing” of men’s. Pants became acceptable attire for women. Women moved into male-monopolized fields, but the reverse did not happen. Women became truck drivers; men did not become day nursery attendants.
The extent to which women were becoming like men worried some Canadians. The fear that servicewomen would cease to be feminine and chastely monogamous, for example, was shown to be the main reason for opposition to women's joining the forces. Public applause for women's trailblazing in non-traditional fields often went hand in hand with assurances that things would return to "normal," once the war was over. Female applicants for war industrial work were assured that the job they were being asked to do would not diminish their femininity, while it would definitely speed up the return of Canadian men from overseas. A promotional photo series on "the typical Bren girl" showed her in her boarding house "dolling up" before an employees' party and jitterbugging after she got there. Similarly, public relations for the armed forces assured female recruits that they would not be required to do anything "unwomanly," and that being in the services would not stand in the way of their having dates.

For Mayfair's 1943 celebration of Canadian women's contribution to the war effort, Westinghouse of Canada developed a series of large two-page ads on the theme "These Are Tomorrow's Yesterday." One pictured a nine- or ten-year-old boy writing to his mother in 1955 to tell her that he and his friends had stumbled onto an "old book" on "Women at War" that had got them to talking about things back in 1943. The ad conveyed not only a tribute to Canadian women's role in Canada's struggle, but also the expectation that in ten or twelve years' time the women would all be back where they belonged, taking care of the home and rearing Canada's future generation, with the aid of Westinghouse appliances. In Quebec, La Presse exhorted women to remain feminine and attractive beneath their "external appearance of energy and will." For the men who were fighting, La Presse reminded the women of Quebec, your "beauty is a reward, a stimulant."

Postwar planners also saw most women returning to the home at the end of the war. One example is the sub-committee appointed by the federal government's Advisory Committee on Reconstruction to consider the postwar problems of women. While its final report agreed with the principle of women's right to work, whether married or not, it estimated that 45 per cent to 55 per cent of the six hundred thousand women who had entered the paid labour force since 1939 would be responding to "the normal urge towards marriage, and home, and family life," and would therefore be leaving their paid jobs at war's end. Another example is the L.C. Marsh Report on Social Security for Canada which emphasized that women's commitment was primarily to homemaking and childbearing and argued that most female industrial workers after the war would "retire voluntarily from the labour market through marriage;" that social security
benefits for wives should be dependent on "recognition of the husband as the chief wage-earner;" and that a system of children's allowances should be paid to mothers as a way of promoting motherhood and mothers' individual rights.

The Women's Sub-Committee strongly supported this stance. Its own report, however, had recognized the plight of unmarried women workers with adult dependents. But as far as married women workers with young children were concerned, the primary role envisaged for them was in the home. The sub-committee recommended only part-time nursery schools; and it gave priority to finding sufficient well-paid employment for men since, when the husbands were employed, women could withdraw from wage work to devote themselves to home and family. The sub-committee thus implicitly accepted the reduction of women to the status of secondary earner. Moreover, while it insisted on the principle of equal pay for equal work, in considering what to do about the estimated 180,000 working women who would lose their jobs at the end of the war and for whom marriage would not come to the rescue, the sub-committee accepted the channelling of women into areas where they would be least in competition with men. Its list of possible professional careers for young middle-class women, for instance, included only the traditionally female occupations: school teacher, nurse, physiotherapist, dietitian, librarian, personnel advisor, social worker. As for university positions, there would be only "a limited field" for women instructors, lecturers, and professors, but rather more opportunities "in professional schools such as household science, library, music, etc., and in extension departments for adult education." To soak up jobless working-class women, the sub-committee recommended domestic service, proposing training schemes for upgrading the status of maids and a change of terminology from "domestic servant" to the less stigmatizing one of "household worker."

In 1944 the only woman on the Economic Advisory Board of the Province of Quebec, Renée G. Vautelet, produced a similar report on the postwar problems of Quebec women, generally endorsing the recommendations of the federal sub-committee. In the Quebec report, women's role in the survival of the francophone culture and Quebec's rural economy took top priority. On the other hand, the report noted that almost half of all Quebec women between twenty and forty were not married and that many women needed therefore to seek employment outside the home. Nonetheless, it proposed that policies be developed to reduce industry's reasons for employing women in preference to men and that serious consideration be given to the possibility of recognizing legally the economic value of a woman's work within marriage, by giving the wife a legal right to a percentage of her husband's earnings.
Mme Vautelet, like so many others, saw domestic service as “one of our best post-war hopes” for absorbing surplus women workers into paid employment. Even during the war, such Quebec groups as the Jeunesse ouvrière catholique had campaigned to persuade young rural women to stay on the farm and the daughters of urban working-class families to become maids. At the end of the war, the demand for household help grew sharply in many parts of Canada at the same time that there was fear of unemployment among discharged servicewomen and female war workers. As a result, the National Employment Service introduced the “Home Aide” project, an attempt to recruit domestic workers for light housework to be done in regular shifts and on a live-out basis, as its main job creation programme for women in the postwar period. Similarly, the Canadian Vocational Training Programme of the Department of Labour pushed Home Assistants’ Courses for household workers as the preferred rehabilitation training for demobilized servicewomen and female war workers. But these training programmes alone could not bring about any real improvement in the working conditions of household help. For that, the whole category of domestic, from charwomen to parlourmaids, would have had to be brought under the federal Unemployment Insurance Act, as well as provincial legislation on minimum wage, maximum hours, and workmen’s compensation. As it was, the “Home Aide” project left the issues of pay, work load, and hours to the good-will of the employer. Canadian-born women continued to show distaste for domestic service and the Canadian government resorted to its old method of using immigration to provide a supply of cleaning women for the middle- and upper-class homes of the nation. Two years after the war, the Department of Labour and the Immigration Branch were combing the “displaced persons’ camps of Europe for women between the ages of eighteen and forty, suitable for and willing to accept and remain in domestic employment.

The expendability of women’s labour in the public sphere was illustrated most dramatically after World War II in the armed forces. During 1946, all three women’s services were disbanded. Not until the Korean War in the 1950s were women enlisted again in the regular Forces. The Second World War experience was a clear case of last hired, first fired, not just of individual women, but of an entire group of women. It proved that women could serve as a reserve army of labour for the armed forces, as well as for the civilian labour market.

But Canada’s ex-servicewomen were not to be simply turned out into the cold. The country’s generous rehabilitation programme for ex-service personnel was called in March 1945 “the most comprehensive of any yet advanced by any country.” And Dr Olive Ruth Russell, appointed in January 1945 to the Department of Veterans’ Affairs as an Executive
Assistant specializing in the rehabilitation of servicewomen, doubted that any other country had gone as far as Canada in “abolishing sex discrimination and the granting of equal status to women” in its legislation pertaining to ex-service personnel.

She was to a large extent justified in making that claim. Ex-servicewomen were equally eligible with ex-servicemen for the $100 clothing allowance, the rehabilitation grant of 30 days’ pay and allowances, and the war service gratuity (of $7.50 for every 30 days of service in the western hemisphere and/or $15 for every 30 days of service overseas). For help with buying a home, repairing a house, buying furniture, or starting up a business, female as well as male veterans could apply for “Re-establishment Credit.” There was to be no discrimination on the basis of sex, with respect to the benefits and opportunities for university education, or vocational, technical, or other non-university training. The Pension Act was amended to apply also to female members of the armed forces, and women were technically fully eligible for the benefits of the Veterans’ Land Act, the Reinstatement in Civil Employment Act, and the Civil Service Act which provided for preference for veterans. Dr Russell acknowledged one minor exception to all this equality of status and opportunity: the out-of-work benefits provided by the Post-Discharge Re-Establishment Order were not available to a married ex-servicewoman whose husband was capable of supporting her.

There were, however, other sex-typed inequalities. As pensions were based on service pay, and as servicewomen’s pay was only four-fifths that of servicemen’s, the pension rates payable to former members of the CWAC, RCAF-WD, or the WRCNS, were four-fifths of the standard men’s pensions. Furthermore, the preference that ex-service personnel were to be given in the civil service applied only to those who had seen active service overseas or on the high seas. Women were thus at a disadvantage, since only about seven thousand had been posted to overseas duty and none had seen service on seaborne vessels. As well, the Canadian Vocational Training programme, set up by the Department of Labour for former war industrial workers as well as ex-service personnel, focused on training women in household service, practical nursing, or Home Making and Family Living.

Within these limitations, however, ex-servicewomen would appear to have made good use of their rehabilitation benefits. Of the almost 50,000 former members of the women’s services, more than 25 per cent took advantage of the training and education benefits, a higher proportion than that of male veterans. Over 12,000 embarked on vocational, high-school, or university courses. In both academic and job training, however, the women tended to end up in traditionally female fields. Of the 2,600 enrolled
in university, "encouragingly large groups" were to be found "in Public Health, Social Service and Education." Fully 85 per cent of the women taking vocational training chose the following five occupations, out of 91 for which courses were available: commercial (which included training for work as secretaries, stenotypists, clerks, and office machine operators); dressmaking; hairdressing or "beautician" work; nursing; and pre-matriculation. Half chose to be trained for a "commercial" job, and more trained as beauty operators than the market could easily absorb. In 1946, 16,000 were already listed as married. That may account for the fact that, as of 31 March 1950, less than 3 per cent of female veterans (compared with 15 per cent of male veterans) had applied for out-of-work allowances. Almost 90 per cent of the $6.25 million in reestablishment credits claimed by women veterans was spent on home furnishings and equipment; this was evidence to the Deputy Minister of Veterans' Affairs that ex-servicewomen were "fulfilling their function as home makers."

Under the Veterans' Land Act, it was possible to get generous long-term financial assistance in buying a farm or rural land. But ex-service personnel had to qualify, and it was assumed that not many women would. To buy a farm, one had to have experience in farming or be willing to prove one's suitability by working with a farmer until the act's administrators were convinced. Very few women were able to benefit.

With the end of the war, there were fewer employment opportunities for women. For various reasons, they found themselves once more in positions subservient to men or pressed into the homemaker role. The amount of subsidized daycare shrank and the "marriage bar" was slid back into place in the Civil Service, among other occupations. At the same time, the few women who had learned skills in non-traditional trades were eased out of work, to make room for the men returning from overseas.

Given these facts and the ideological pressures exerted from press and pulpit, it is difficult to know exactly how many of the women who had taken jobs during the war freely chose to quit at war's end. Dr Russell questioned two CWAC officers on the subject in 1944, both married women. One said, "I want to go home as fast as I can and make a home for my husband and have a family;" the other thought women should look after their own children, but she was sure she would eventually get restless at home and want an outside job as well. A 1944 Labour Department survey showed that 28 per cent of the women, as compared with 2 per cent of the men, intended to quit work after the war, but that meant that 72 per cent of the women wanted to stay in the work force.

An ex-servicewoman from Winnipeg, writing for the Canadian Home Journal in April 1945, said that sending women back home was "like
putting a chick back in the shell — it cannot be done without destroying spirit, heart or mind.” She exploded in anger at the idea that women during the war had been turned into competent, skilled workers only to be cast aside at war’s end. On the other hand, the winner of the National Home Monthly’s contest in 1945 for the best letter on the subject, “If there’s a job in industry for you after the war, do you want it?”, expressed a definite preference for domesticity. “One thing I would like to make clear,” she wrote, “I do not feel I am sacrificing myself for housekeeping. The thing I wanted most was a husband and home of my own.” The postwar restrictions on women working outside the home took effect. Women’s participation in the paid work force began to slide in 1945 and plummeted in 1946 to a quarter of the work force. The rate continued to decline until the mid-fifties. Only in 1966 did it climb back up to the 1945 level.

One trend that the postwar world did not erase was the one concerning the marital status of employed women. In 1931 only one in ten working women was married and, at the beginning of the war, not many more. During the war, however, the proportion of working women who were married rose to one in three (35 per cent) by 1944. By 1951 it had dropped only to 30 per cent. But one needs to remember that there was also a rising marriage rate for women, and that they were marrying younger, after the war. A larger proportion of working women were married but, even so, only about one in ten married women worked outside the home, for women's proportion of the labour force as a whole had sunk to prewar levels.

Conclusions

Did the war “emancipate” women or raise their status? If “emancipation” means a genuinely equal sharing of power and responsibilities between men and women in both the public and the private spheres, the answer is no. Women’s increased job opportunities during the war were not a recognition of their right to work, but rather because women were a convenient source of labour both for private industry and public service. Women were still used mainly for tasks already designated as female, and hence not in competition with men. Where women entered the military or took on traditionally male jobs in the civilian world, such as heavy machine operating or mining, there were many limits set to what they could do. The male monopoly on bearing arms went unchallenged.

At the same time, many people feared that the differences between men and women were breaking down, and that women were becoming masculine. Both private industry and government, in particular the Department of National Defence, tried hard to allay those fears and reassure the public that the woman in bandana and overalls, or in a khaki
or blue uniform, was still feminine and chaste. Indeed, the largest number of women working in support of the war were those doing unpaid volunteer work — a traditionally female domain. Women volunteers found considerable scope for their great organizational and administrative abilities. Within the public sphere, however, no matter how high a woman’s position, there was always a man, or a hierarchy of men, above her. Although women’s labour was indispensable, the running of the war remained in the hands of a male elite.

To a large extent, the mobilization of women for the war effort was a clear case of state management of “human resources.” There was propaganda for recruitment, there were tax incentives for working wives, and there was child care provided by government to mothers in war industries. But despite the fact that female labour in the public sphere was useful and cheap, the dominant message was that women’s chief function was to bear and rear the next generation, as well as to create a home for a male worker. Only for the sake of the war was the state willing to accommodate the domestic responsibilities of women with jobs outside the home. After the war, government and industry halted those programmes or cut them back severely. Barriers to married women’s employment dropped back into place.

With the evaporation of the labour shortage, preference for jobs was given to ex-servicemen. This situation, as well as the postwar baby boom and the end of state-supported child care, all encouraged married women to devote themselves to childbearing and housekeeping. A huge surge of advertising pushed the consumption of domestic commodities and romanticized the domestic woman. The family allowance system was designed to reduce a mother’s need to work outside the home. These circumstances also persuaded young, single women to seek a husband, rather than to train for a career or a life of full-time, skilled wage work. The postwar dream of domesticity came true for many women — but not for all. The war had robbed many of their husbands and fiancés. As well, almost fifty thousand Canadian servicemen had married overseas. Many of these unmarried and widowed women, as well as poor married women, now had to search for jobs in an economic climate unfavourable to women.

The massive mobilization of women during the war years thus failed to secure them a genuinely equal place in the postwar public world. The single older woman, the deserted wife or mother, or the woman whose husband earned too little or had no job remained in precarious positions. Unemployment insurance, introduced in Canada in 1940, would protect some women in the paid work force and certain women would be able to use veterans’ educational benefits to launch themselves on promising careers. But in the main, working women continued to be segregated into
subordinate, poorly-paid job ghettos. The wartime situation had left intact, if it had not strengthened, the norm of the male as head of household and primary provider, for society's feeling of indebtedness to the returning soldier forced women out of non-traditional jobs and reinforced the economic primacy of males. The sexual division of labour reemerged stronger than ever.

Feminists who were active in Canada during the war had been hopeful about wartime developments. They could point to the fact that Quebec women were finally granted the provincial vote in 1940. But in most other areas of public life, the postwar world disappointed these feminist hopes. While some women had gained a new confidence and a new self-image through wartime service, many of them saw their expectations dashed. Traditional attitudes about women's role held sway once more and the contribution that women had made to the war effort was allowed to fade quietly from public memory.
Suggested Readings


Ross, Sinclair. *As For Me and My House*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1941.


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