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**Was the First World War a Watershed for Women in British Society? An Analysis of the Status of British Women Before, During, and After the Great War**

Kaitlyn Hollowell

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**Was the First World War a Watershed for Women in British Society? An Analysis of the Status of British Women Before, During, and After the Great War**

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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## **Introduction: Did The First World War Alter the Social Position of British Women?**

The First World War has generally been regarded by historians and popular memory as a sharp turning point for women in British society. As the United Kingdom's National Archive website states, "Many historians argue that the First World War was a watershed for women in Britain."<sup>1</sup> The financial independence, social freedoms, and expansion of employment during the war years led to a view of the war as having "a dramatic effect on the lives of women."<sup>2</sup> Additionally, it has been argued that women's involvement in the Great War changed the perception of their role in British society<sup>3</sup> and that women had proved that they were capable of doing much more than society believed at the time. It is now a widely held idea that without women's assistance during the war, the conflict could not have been won. For example, David Lloyd George's successor as Minister of Munitions, E.S. Montagu, stated, "Our armies have been saved and victory assured by women in the munitions factories."<sup>4</sup> Even Winston Churchill agreed, believing that it would have been impossible to win the war without women's assistance.<sup>5</sup> Even though women achieved much during the war years, their accomplishments were overshadowed by the war's grim cost.<sup>6</sup> On women's contributions to and rewards for

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<sup>1</sup> "Women and the First World War," *The National Archives*. n.p., n.d. Web. Accessed 28 March 2014.

<sup>2</sup> "Women in the Great War," *National Library of Scotland*. n.p., 2012. Web. Accessed 28 March 2014.

<sup>3</sup> "Suffrage in Wartime," *Parliament*. TSO, n.d. Web. Accessed 28 March 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965), p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> "What Did World War One Really Do For Women?," *BBC iWonder*. BBC, 2014. Web. Accessed 28 March 2014.

their war effort, T.W. Heyck stated, “As for the costs and benefits of the war on the status of women, in general...women’s contributions to the war effort earned them wider opportunity for employment, more personal freedom, and the vote.”<sup>7</sup> Even interpretations of women’s societal position in popular memory assert that “the war altered women’s status in Britain forever.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, many historians believe that because women moved into industries deemed as all male, World War One was an important turning point in their history.<sup>9</sup>

However, after more research into the subject, a competing theory has emerged, stating that the shift in women’s role in society after the Great War was exaggerated. As Scotland’s National Library website states, “Some historians have said that the long term effect of the war on women’s lives has been over-emphasised...When men returned from the front, many women had to give up their wartime jobs, and there was an increased emphasis on the virtues and duties of motherhood.”<sup>10</sup> The United Kingdom National Archive website concurred, stating, “Some writers indeed contend that the emancipatory effects of the Great War have been vastly overstated.”<sup>11</sup> This group of historians argues that women’s expansion into new industries during the war was followed by a push of women back into the home. Heyck, contradicting his earlier statement, states, “Yet the social gains for women were not unambiguous. The feminist movement gave up its

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas William Heyck, *The Peoples of the British Isles*, Volume 3 (Chicago: Lyceum Books, Inc., 2008), p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> K8SUE, “Role of Women,” Online video clip, *YouTube*. YouTube, 6 June 2010. Web. Accessed 28 March 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Levack, Edward Muir, and Meredith Veldman, *The West: Encounters and Transformations*, Volume 2: Since 1550 (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2011), p. 828.

<sup>10</sup> “Women in the Great War.”

<sup>11</sup> “Women and the First World War.”

attempts to abolish separate spheres for men and women, and after the war most ‘respectable’ people believed that women should return to the home and leave the breadwinning to men.”<sup>12</sup> Supporting this view, Levack, Muir, and Veldman stated, “Governments and ordinary citizens recoiled from wartime gender upheaval and worked to reconstruct nineteenth century masculine and feminine ideals.”<sup>13</sup> However, what occurred, as historian Trevor Wilson observed, was that the war left women in Britain as “second-class citizens but had improved the quality of second-class travel.”<sup>14</sup> Essentially, women’s efforts during the emergency provided by war were appreciated, but once the conflict had ended, women were once again relegated to their inferior status in society.

These competing theories make determining women’s status in Britain after the First World War a complex and difficult task. Even so, the question remains, what effect – if any – did the Great War have on women’s role in British society? This thesis will evaluate the effect that war work and the war itself had on women’s position. To do so, I will examine the role of women in British society before, during, and after the First World War to see what, if any, changes in women’s status occurred during and after. I will research whether the war years accelerated changes that were already occurring prior to the Great War, if the war resulted in a sharp turning point for British women, or if the First World War caused leaders in Britain to attempt to dam up the flow of change in society and return to tradition in regards to a woman’s place.

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<sup>12</sup> Heyck, p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> Levack, Brian, Edward Muir, and Meredith Veldman, p. 831.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Heyck, p. 131.

# Chapter I: The Changing Role of the Victorian Woman

## 1.1 Victorian Idealization of Women

When considering women in Victorian Britain, it is easiest to evaluate their roles by looking at the three distinct classes: the aristocracy, the middle class, and the working class. Societal norms prescribed each class a specific function and its members were required to adhere to those rules in order to maintain their social standing. The ideal aristocratic woman was expected to be an adornment on her husband's arm and to conduct herself as a representation of 'proper society'. As K.D. Reynolds notes, "Ladies did not work, because work removed title to be called a lady. Therefore such occupations as filled their days, whether productive of money, domestic comfort, charitable benevolence, or mere decoration, could not be construed as work."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the upper-class British woman was meant to live a life of leisure separated from the notion of work.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the middle-class woman was beginning to absorb the aristocratic notion of a woman's distance from the economic market. However, the idea of the Angel in the Home, which cemented the notion of separate spheres in British middle-class liberal ideology, did give middle-class women power and influence in the moral, religious, and domestic aspects of life. The middle-class wife and mother was not meant to work for a wage; it was the job of her husband to provide for the family. Thus, the woman's natural sphere was the domestic one. Her gentleness and innate morality best suited her for the nurturing of the family – both physically and spiritually. John Ruskin represented this view in his lecture "Of Queen's Gardens" stating,

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<sup>15</sup> K.D. Reynolds, *Aristocratic Women and Political Society in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 21.



The woman's power is for rule, not for battle – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision...She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise – wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the middle-class woman was to be the homemaker, to care for her husband and her children, and to “make a home,” a place of refuge from the competitive outside world. Her duty was to be deferential to her husband and use her inherently docile characteristics to nurture.

However, these representations leave out one vital portion of society, the working-class woman. It was the women of the working class who provided domestic service for the upper- and middle-class wives to run their households, who worked in textile factories to manufacture the linens, cotton, and silk products that made their clothes, and to whom the notion of the Angel in the Home did not fully apply. These women had duties both inside and outside the domestic sphere, but were constantly discriminated against by men of their own class as well as men and women of the middle and upper classes.

### **1.2 The Role of the Aristocratic Woman in Victorian Britain**

The popular and mostly commonly presented view of the Victorian woman in history is that of an aristocratic or gently bred young lady whose main goal in life was to marry well. Marriage could elevate a girl to a higher social standing and was the ultimate achievement in a society lady's life. For example, Wanda Neff stated, “By marriage

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<sup>16</sup> John Ruskin, “Of Queen's Gardens,” *Sesame and Lilies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 68-93. Web.

alone a girl could rise to a higher rank.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the important defining factor for the status of an aristocratic female was the position of her male relatives. Those who did not achieve the success of marriage were deemed spinsters, social failures, and condemned to a lifetime of perpetual childhood.

With marriage as the goal, the young aristocratic woman’s early life was spent in preparation for an advantageous match, which was measured in terms of wealth, comfort, and societal position. The Victorian gentlewoman was educated in societal norms and customs in preparation for her “coming out,” her entrance to the marriage mart, and the Season of the Ton. Thus, in 1843, a writer in *Christian Lady’s Magazine* protested that young ladies were “taught to sing, to play, to dance, to paint, to embroider, but not to think.”<sup>18</sup> In this writer’s view, a young woman would be deemed as unladylike if she acquired too many accomplishments. She was meant to confine herself to society, gossip, or the latest novels.

However, this presentation does not take into account the different roles that the aristocratic woman possessed both within her home and within society. Once again, the status of a woman was determined by that of her male relatives. Even so, this did not mean that the aristocratic woman in Victorian Britain did not have her own influence and duties to her husband or father’s tenants and dependents. Custom and tradition dictated the participation of the aristocratic woman in and around the landed estate of her male relative.

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<sup>17</sup> Wanda F Neff, *Victorian Working Women: An Historical and Literary Study of Women in British Industries and Professions, 1832-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), p. 188.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

### 1.2.1 Landed Estates and Aristocratic Women's Local Duties

The popular historical ideal of the aristocratic woman is one of leisure, where the ideal of separate spheres is dominant. However, this ideology does not completely apply to aristocratic women. For both men and women in the aristocracy, public and private lives converged. The large country homes and estates – as well as townhomes in London – were centers of economic, social, and political life. As mistress of these establishments, the aristocratic woman was active in several different aspects of life.<sup>19</sup>

At her father or husband's landed estate or country home, the aristocratic woman was in charge of making sure that the household ran smoothly. The amount of attention that the woman dedicated to her household duties varied, but she was usually in charge of the servants – headed by the butler. This was one of the rare cases where a woman would have power over a male in British society. However, it was still the husband or father who authorized charges for the household accounts. Some women did take an active part in the management of their estates or that of their husband, though this was usually upon the death of their spouse.<sup>20</sup> Some women – such as the Duchess of Sutherland – were even capable of being just as ruthless as male estate owners. For example, the Duchess of Sutherland was one of the aristocrats instrumental in the process of Highland Clearances in Scotland.<sup>21</sup>

Involvement in the education and spiritual welfare of tenants and dependents was seen as socially acceptable activity for aristocratic women. Religion was one area where women were able to form their own opinions and make their own decisions. These

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<sup>19</sup> Reynolds, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

decisions usually ended up including and influencing the males of their household.

Aristocratic women also frequently took charge of the education of the tenant children on their estates, with responsibilities ranging “from financing schools, selecting teachers, and daily management, to holding classes, to the provision of, and occasional presence at, an annual treat.”<sup>22</sup> Some women were more involved in the founding of schools and educational opportunities on their estates than others. Nonetheless, these women were viewed as responsible for aiding in the education of their tenants’ children.

Upper-class women also had a duty to serve their community through charity. This was a traditional role ascribed to the wife or daughter of the local landowner. The females of the family would visit the poor and distribute baskets with provisions of food, clothing, coal, and other necessities. Occasionally, money would be distributed to the poor, but it was usually given with a specific purpose. Another form of charity was employment, which would benefit the entire needy family. This would usually be supplying the poor with some type of position, such as working in the family’s gardens, or hiring a tenant’s daughter for short-term duties like assisting in cleaning the manor house for an upcoming event.<sup>23</sup> These types of charity operated along the lines of paternalism and were viewed as natural for the aristocracy.

### 1.2.2 Society and the Urban Role of Aristocratic Women

In addition to providing charity to her tenants and dependents, the aristocratic woman was increasingly involved in what K.D. Reynolds calls “impersonal benevolence,” or philanthropy. Upper-class women were often solicited for funds from different charitable organizations. These women were also often the sponsors and hosts

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

of charity balls, fêtes, and bazaars. If the aristocratic woman did not host an event, her attendance would often mean a large donation or purchase, such as buying clothing items at a bazaar, which were of no use to the aristocratic lady. In these cases, the clothing would often be donated to the needy of the aristocratic woman's estate. Gently bred women were also able to use their families and social connections to open new avenues of donation for these charitable societies.

The political and social roles of both men and women of the aristocracy were intertwined. Political ties of the aristocracy tended to rely on tradition and family connections, not on an individual's ideological views. Thus, the women of the aristocracy did not expect to be directly involved in the policy-making of the nation, but did carry an influence over the male policy-makers. According to Reynolds, "Virtually all aristocratic women were engaged to some degree in activities – such as entertaining political connections, exercising patronage, guarding political confidences, and offering advice – which were the particular specialty of the political hostess."<sup>24</sup> Women such as Lady Jersey, Lady Waldegrave, and Lady Palmerstone used their social position and clout to influence the men making the political decisions of Britain. These women, the famous political hostesses of the day, were viewed as different because of their unorthodox social position. For example, Lady Jersey's family money came from banking and she became the senior partner for the bank she owned. It was in the salons of these hostesses that extra-parliamentary affairs were discussed.

Additionally, Reynolds outlined three different types of political events that these hostesses arranged: country house parties, house parties outside the capital over the

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

weekends, and town events when Parliament was in session. The events, held in London during the parliamentary session ranged in size from small dinners – exclusive to one political party – to large balls, where the attendees were more generalized. The timing of these events was crucial, as certain hostesses possessed a monopoly on dates during the Season and to clash would guarantee low attendance for any rival. The large affairs held by London's leading ladies also served to filter newcomers to the British political scene. This was a way to weed out those who would or would not make it in the world of British politics, in which upper-class women provided a vital function.

### **1.3 Overlapping Social and Economic Positions of Aristocratic and Middle-Class**

#### **Women in Victorian Britain**

For those young women fortunate enough to be born with gentle status – the upper class – but unfortunate enough to find themselves without wealth, the position of governess was viewed as a respectable occupation. In an 1848 article in the *Quarterly Review*, Elizabeth Eastlake stated, “The real definition of a governess, in the English sense, is a being who is our equal in birth, manners, and education, but our inferior in worldly wealth.”<sup>25</sup> These gentlewomen were forced by reduced circumstances to take on a position and work for their survival. However, the life of a governess was one of isolation. As M. Jeanne Peterson describes, “She is not a relation, not a guest, not a mistress, not a servant – but something made up of all. No one knows exactly how to treat her.”<sup>26</sup> The governess' ambiguous position often meant she was rarely allowed visitors, even from members of her own family, she had few – if any – friends, and

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in M. Jeanne Peterson (1972). “The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society.” In Martha Vicinus (Ed.), *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (3-19) (New York: Routledge), p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

exercised little control over her pupils. In Peterson's words, "She was best unenvied and at worst the object of mild scorn, and all she sought was survival in genteel obscurity."<sup>27</sup> Both the men and women who surrounded her viewed the governess as uninteresting, but she had no alternative other than to work for her survival.

Traditionally, it was the aristocracy who utilized the education provided by a governess, a woman of their own class, who would know the norms and expectations of their society. However, a concern for the education of children in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century expanded the employment of governesses to the clergy and then to the middle class. The governess became, as Peterson states, "[a]n indicator of the extent to which a man's wife was truly a lady of leisure."<sup>28</sup> A governess in a middle-class household testified to the economic power that the British middle class possessed. Members of the lower ranks in the middle class also increasingly saw the position of a governess as a way to give their daughters a step up in life. As such, farmers, tradespeople, and early industrialists had their daughters educated as governesses in the hopes of advancing their social status. The governesses of gentle birth saw these women as lowering the standards and traditional position reserved for their class.

Though governesses of lower social standing gained positions in the households of England, they were still regarded by their betters as ill bred and were believed to lower the opportunities and wages of the governesses of gentle birth. Even without the governesses of the middle class lowering the standards, the pay of a governess was notoriously low and ranged from £15 to £100 a year, but averaged around £25 to £45 a year. The minimum amount needed to scrape out a respectable existence was estimated

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

to be approximately £150 to £200 a year. Therefore, most gently bred governesses earned nowhere near the amount needed for the type of existence they were raised upon. Out of her meager pay a governess was responsible for her own laundry, medical treatment, and travel expenses. Additionally, the governess had no annuity or pension to rely on in old age. Many governesses would end up living on charity, in the workhouse, or in an asylum.<sup>29</sup>

#### **1.4 Romanticized and Actual Roles of the Middle-Class Victorian Woman**

The rise of liberalism cemented the notion of separate spheres into the middle-class worldview. The Separate Spheres Ideology proscribed the natural sphere of the woman as the domestic realm and the natural sphere of the man as the economic realm. Women were believed to have inherent capabilities, such as nurturing and piety, which made women perfectly suited to the domestic and spiritual realm of the home. Additionally, as women were the physically weaker – yet spiritually stronger – sex, it was held that women were ill suited to the ruthless world of business. This was the justification for the separation of women from the economic market.

Though women were excluded from the economic realm, they wielded an enormous amount of power in the domestic and religious aspects of life. Women's purity, piety, and moral goodness made them the spiritual leaders of the family. Although the common image of the Victorian woman is that of a leisured lady, as Jan Marsh described, the middle-class Victorian wife was anything but idle. Victorian women "ran the house, undertaking domestic work and childcare themselves, as well as

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.



supervising the servants employed to cook, clean, carry coal and run errands.”<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, women were responsible for making and mending clothing and household linens as well as caring for ill family members.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the Separate Spheres Ideology proscribed a woman’s social function as a wife, a mother, a domestic manager, and a helpmeet to her husband.

The notion of separate spheres strengthened the idea of the model Victorian woman as that of the Angel in the House. As the religious and moral center of the middle-class family, the Angel’s main task in life was to care for the home and the children. In B.L. Hutchins’ formulation, “Women-folk who did not have to work represented the success of the men of the family. The practice of female idleness spread through the middle class until work for women became a misfortune and disgrace.”<sup>32</sup> A socialist and social investigator educated at King’s College and the London School of Economics under Beatrice Webb, the author of approximately twenty books on women’s work, wages, and labor laws between 1901 and 1917, and a co-founder of the Women’s Fabian Group in 1908, Hutchins was hardly a typical commentator.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, historians confirm the importance of the removal of the wife from the economic sphere as a mark of middle-class status. In middle-class ideology, the position of wife and mother

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<sup>30</sup> Jan Marsh, “Gender Ideology and Separate Spheres in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.” *Victoria and Albert Museum*. n.p., n.d. Web. Accessed 18 November 2013.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Hutchins, p. 187.

<sup>33</sup> One of Hutchins’ books became the standard work commonly cited by historians on the subject of factory legislation. Prior to the First World War, Hutchins delivered lectures on women’s work and worked with reformers to improve the working conditions of women. Hutchins retired from writing and her career as a social investigator after writing *Women in Industry After the War* in 1917. See Carolyn Malone. “Hutchins, Elizabeth Leigh (1858-1935).” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, 2004. Web. Accessed 5 March 2014.

was regarded as incompatible with a career. It was the middle-class male who was the breadwinner of the family. According to Gail Braybon,

Middle-class women were withdrawn not only from paid labour, but from many of the domestic tasks which had occupied their mothers and grandmothers. Their role was to devote themselves to their husbands, and, above all, to their children: motherhood was 'the consummation of the world's joy to a true woman.'<sup>34</sup>

The man was involved in the hectic and competitive arena of business and politics and needed a calm and restorative place to relax. It was the job of the middle-class wife to provide this safe haven, which was regarded as a part of her inherent nurturing capabilities.

Though the middle-class woman did not possess the power of the man in the public and economic arenas, she wielded her power in the domestic and spiritual world. However, conflicting opinions about the levels of participation and abilities of the middle-class wife in the domestic sphere, particularly because of the reliance on female innocence and ignorance, led some, such as B.L. Hutchins, to believe that the middle-class wife was not prepared for her domestic duties. Even after marriage she would return to her previous existence of maintaining her feminine accomplishments. In *Women in Modern Industry*, Hutchins stated,

The wife was untrained in household management...The average middle-class matron had not been self-supporting before her marriage and her expenditures had been directed by her parents, she had no idea of the value of money and squandered what her husband gave her, like a heedless child.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War: The British Experience* (London: Croom Helm, Ltd., 1981), p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> Hutchins, p. 206.

The wife was in charge of household management and often had one or more servants to oversee, though (at least according to Hutchins) she often had no concept of how to control them. Even so, it was to these servants that the middle-class wife and mother entrusted the raising and care of her children.

Hutchins, however, exaggerated the role of servants in middle-class households.

Lynn Abrams notes,

It is a fallacy that most middle-class women were able to afford sufficient servants to allow them to spend their lives in idle leisure. Most middle-class households had just one servant – sufficient to give the woman of the house a certain status, but insufficient to allow her to spend days doing embroidery and playing the piano.<sup>36</sup>

Jan Marsh also insists that middle-class women did not live a life of total leisure. She detailed the different tasks – such as childcare, sewing of household linens, and caring for ill and gaining family members – which the middle-class wife and mother performed.<sup>37</sup>

When considered as a whole, these conflicting views present a picture of what the domestic life of a middle-class wife should be. She was to care for the home and children, but was also to represent – through a picture of the leisured lady – the success of her husband.

In addition to managing the house, the middle-class woman expanded her power in the religious area of Victorian life. This is where the notion of the Angel comes into being. In popular paintings of the time, women are represented as docile, nurturing creatures. For example, *The Pretty Baa Lambs* (see Figure 1.1) by Ford Madox Brown represents a mother and her child in the style of the Madonna and Jesus surrounded by

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<sup>36</sup> Lynn Abrams, “Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain.” *BBC History*. British Broadcasting Company, 2001. Web. Accessed 18 November 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Jan Marsh, “Gender Ideology and Separate Spheres in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.”

lambs, commonly viewed as a religious symbol. Another piece of artwork by Augustus Egg represented what would happen to the Victorian home if the wife no longer served as the moral center. The first painting in Egg's *Past and Present* (see Figure 1.2) shows the wife, caught in adultery, lying across the floor while her husband stares off into the distance and the neglected children watch their card house – likely representing the Victorian home – fall apart. Artwork such as this shows that without the upright moral influence of the woman the middle class house would fall apart. Martha Vicinus wrote that Victorians saw these women who broke up the family as a threat to society's fabric.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Vicinus, p. xiv.

**Figure 1.1**



Source: Ford Madox Brown. *The Pretty Baa Lambs*. 1851-1859. Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham. *Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery*. Web. Accessed 12 February 2014.

**Figure 1.2**



Source: Augustus Egg. *Past and Present*, No. 1. Tate Britain, London.  
Tate. Web. Accessed 12 February 2014.

Like her aristocratic counterpart, the middle-class woman also participated in philanthropic activities. As Jane Lewis states, “Philanthropy provided women with an acceptable bridge to the public world of work and citizenship.”<sup>39</sup> Philanthropy was viewed as an acceptable way for middle-class women to participate in the public arena and as an escape from household tasks. However, unlike the aristocratic women’s method of charity, philanthropic causes that middle-class women tended to participate in were viewed as more impersonal. Their efforts were not directed at tenants or dependents on their land or estates, as the aristocracy tended to do. These women were disposed to give donations to a generalized group – such as widows, orphans, or reforming women criminals.

### **1.5 Realities of the Working-Class Woman**

The leisurely life of the middle- and upper-class women relied on the labor of the working-class woman. It was the working-class woman who provided the domestic service that allowed the households of the idle to run smoothly or who produced the textiles that made the latest fashions worn by the wealthy. Ironically, the middle and upper classes viewed the working-class woman as “an affront against nature and the protective instincts of man.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, the labor of the working-class woman outside of the home is where the middle-class notion of separate spheres did not reach. The labor of the working-class woman can be grouped into three broad categories: textiles, service, and sweated, which the middle and upper classes publicly scorned, but nonetheless utilized.

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<sup>39</sup> Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, Ltd., 1998), p. 92.

<sup>40</sup> Neff, p. 37.

The textiles industry was the second largest employer of women in the Victorian era; a job in a textile factory was viewed as one of the better positions for a working-class woman. The largest concentration of women employed in this sector was in the cotton industry. By 1839, women workers constituted from 50 to 70 percent of the workers in the cotton, flax, worsted, and silk industries.<sup>41</sup> This was due in part to the Factory Acts passed between 1833 and 1901, which restricted the labor of children (and women) in certain sections of industry. The Factory Act of 1833 excluded children under 9 from the factory, restricted children ages 9-13 to a nine-hour day and children between 14 and 18 to a twelve-hour day.<sup>42</sup> The Factory Act passed in 1844 banned children under age 8 from factories, restricted children to seven-hour days, and limited women's daily work to twelve hours – though this limitation was not always obeyed on the part of employers.<sup>43</sup>

By the time the 1847 Act was passed, women over 18 and children were restricted to ten-hour days and could not work more than 58 hours a week.<sup>44</sup> Factory Acts in 1850 and 1867 set the hours between which women (and children) could be employed. These were 6 am to 6 pm or 7 am to 7 pm in winter.<sup>45</sup> By 1867 legislation stated that women and children could not work on Sundays and broadened the definition of factory to include a building in which fifty or more persons were employed.<sup>46</sup> The Factory Act of 1870 prescribed that women, girls, and young people – which included boys – could not work in factories during the night.<sup>47</sup> In 1874 legislation was passed providing that no

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> Factory Act, 1833, 3 & 4 Will. 4, c. 103.

<sup>43</sup> Factory Act, 1844, 7 & 8 Vict., c. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Factory Act, 1847, 10 & 11 Vict., c. 29.

<sup>45</sup> Factory Act, 1850, 13 & 14 Vict., c. 54.

<sup>46</sup> Factory Act, 1867 30 & 31 Vict., c. 103.

<sup>47</sup> Factory Act, 1870, 33 & 34 Vict., c. 62.



children under age 9 could be employed in factories, which was then raised to 10 in 1876.<sup>48</sup> In 1878, Parliament set regulations for workshop and factory conditions – such as cleanliness, overcrowding, ventilation, and security of machinery. These regulations still did not apply to trades such as the home workers or laundries.<sup>49</sup> Another Factory Act in 1891 regulated when women could return to work in the factory after giving birth, which was set for four weeks.<sup>50</sup> In 1895, laundries were brought under the factory acts. However, hours for women in the laundry trade was only restricted to 14 hours in a consecutive 24 hour period.<sup>51</sup> By 1901, no child under 12 could be employed in a factory.<sup>52</sup> This was still a very young age for children to be employed.

However, these acts, which restricted hours and limited many women's labor, did not apply to all sections of women's industry. For example, there were over 180,000 laundresses listed in the British census in 1894. Unfortunately, these women did not fall under the early regulations of the Factory and Workshops Acts. Working-class laundry women worked in small, crowded, and unsanitary rooms from 15 to 17 hours a day for wages of 2s. 6d. to 3s per day.<sup>53</sup> Though the Factory Acts had regulated some portions of women's industry it was not a comprehensive solution.

Overall, these acts show that there was a growing concern for working conditions of women and children during the Victorian era. However, the changes made by the British government were rather slow and piecemeal. Many women's trades were not

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<sup>48</sup> Factory Act, 1874, 37 & 38 Vict., c. 44.

<sup>49</sup> Factory Act, 1878, 41 & 42 Vict., c. 16.

<sup>50</sup> Factory Act, 1891, 54 & 55 Vict., c. 75.

<sup>51</sup> Factory Act, 1895, 58 & 59 Vict., c. 37.

<sup>52</sup> Factory Act, 1901, 1 Edw. 7, c. 22.

<sup>53</sup> Evelyn March-Phillipps, "The New Factory Bill: As It Affects Women." *Fortnightly Review*, May 1865-June 1934 55.330 (June 1894): 738-748. *British Periodicals I and II*, pp. 738-739.

included under these acts at all or had numerous exceptions by which the employer could escape the restrictions. Even with the regulations, women in these factories generally worked from 13 to 18 hours a day on piece rates, only earning from 4s a week in the woolen mills to 15s a week for a skilled cotton weaver minding several looms. The wages for the silk and worsted industries averaged between 6s and 7s a week. These women's wages were approximately one-fourth to one-third of a male's wage for the same job.<sup>54</sup> Women in textiles would usually work up until the birth of their first child and would return shortly thereafter. Women would usually continue this process until the third or fourth child, after which they would typically retire from working.

The service industry, specifically domestic service, was the single largest employer of women in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain.<sup>55</sup> However, the position of a domestic servant was not an enviable one. T. W. Heyck noted, "The work was for most of them hard and tedious. The domestics tended the fires, lit the lamps, carried the water, cooked the meals, washed the dishes, cleaned the clothes, and emptied the slops."<sup>56</sup> Domestic servants were expected to rise early, be dutiful, and obey their master and mistress as well as any servant of a higher standing than themselves. For her toil and labor, the average female domestic servant – the housemaid – would earn approximately £10 to £15 a year, while the middle-class male wage ranged from £150 to £500 or more a year, and the aristocracy had access to substantially larger incomes.<sup>57</sup> Even so, this was the most common employment for women, particularly as it eased the financial and domestic

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<sup>54</sup> Neff, pp. 28-29.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas William Heyck, *The Peoples of the British Isles*, Volume 2 (Chicago: Lyceum Books, Inc., 2008), p. 253.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 247, 254.

burden of the large working-class family. These girls would typically enter service at a young age – approximately 14 – and would continue until their marriage.

The sweated industries were by far regarded as the worst form of employment for a woman. The trades in the sweated industry included dressmaking, millinery, mantle-making, upholstery, rope-making, box-making, shirt-making, umbrella-making, brush-making, bookbinding, fur-sewing, corset-making, and laundry.<sup>58</sup> These trades had notoriously low pay and appalling conditions. For example, in the dressmaking and millinery industries, young girls started out with a 3-year apprenticeship were paid approximately £30 for the entire duration. In some cases, the girl's family had to pay a premium – sometimes up to £60 – for the girl to be given a position as an apprentice. These young women worked on average twenty hours a day with no overtime pay, in crowded conditions, and living on a substandard diet. Some girls even died before they finished their apprenticeships and others finished with no concept of their trade.<sup>59</sup> In other sweated trades, such as laundry and shirt making, women often had to travel several miles each day to collect their work and would usually be left waiting for hours by their employer to collect the materials. The women would then spend much of the remainder of their day, usually 10 hours or more, working and for this labor most earned less than 1s. 6d. per day.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Priscilla E Moulder, "The Industrial Position of Women." *Westminster Review*, January 1852-January 1914 151.3 (March 1899): 318-323. *British Periodicals I and II*, p. 319.

<sup>59</sup> Neff, pp. 117-124.

<sup>60</sup> Moulder, p. 319.

## **1.6 The Late Victorian Women's Revolution?**

The late Victorian era saw the beginnings of an expansion in education and occupations for unmarried middle-class women. Universities such as Cambridge, Oxford, and the University of London opened colleges specified for women's education. However, these women were still segregated from the men, but their educational opportunities began to expand nonetheless. Thus, this expansion in middle-class education led to new occupational opportunities for unmarried women. As Heyck stated,

The number of middle-class women who went to work outside the home increased sharply. Not only were more middle-class women (almost all of them single) seeking work, but also the economy was producing more jobs suitable for respectable women. No longer was the middle-class girl in need of income restricted to becoming a governess; the more service-oriented economy opened positions for nurses, teachers, clerks, shop assistants, and secretaries.<sup>61</sup>

These women still expected to marry, but the relatively late age of marriage at the time meant that more middle-class women needed to fill the gap between when they finished school and their marriage. Other occupational opportunities opened to women were in the Civil Service as well as in the telegraphy and postal service industries. Once again, these positions required a thorough education as the women applicants had to pass exams consisting of arithmetic, dictation, handwriting, and grammar.<sup>62</sup> These types of occupations were regarded as beneficial and suitable for females as they did not allow for many possibilities of promotion and extra consideration needed to be taken for women workers in regards to their health and comfort. Even 'ladies' – gently bred women – applied and worked in these jobs; some positions were even opened specifically with

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<sup>61</sup> Heyck, *The Peoples of the British Isles*, Volume 3, pp. 13-14.

<sup>62</sup> Margaret E Harkness, "Women as Civil Servants." *The Leisure Hour*, January 1877-October 1903 10.55 (December 1833): 369-381. *British Periodicals I and II*, p. 370.

ladies in mind. However, these women needed to be just as academically capable as their fellow working women. Unfortunately, one continuity from the previous era was that work after marriage for these ladies was discouraged and in many cases barred by law.

Many of these middle-class women – along with some aristocratic women – also joined causes for women’s rights, specifically that of suffrage for women. According to Abrams, women of the middle and upper class used their philanthropic entrance into the public sphere to demand improvements for the position of women and eventually entrance into politics.<sup>63</sup> Thus, women’s efforts, along with men’s cooperation, resulted in improvements to women’s position in society in the 1870s and 1880s. For example, the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 gave women the right to control their earnings and personal property. The Act of 1870 allowed women who married after the act took effect to have sole control over wages, property, stocks, investments, annuities, dividends, inheritances; these women could take actions in their own name to recover wages, property, money, or other assets.<sup>64</sup> By the Act of 1882, women were capable of holding and retaining their own property. The Act also applied to women who were married before it took effect and women could sue others to protect and secure their property.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, the Education Act of 1870 meant that women could vote and serve on school boards as well as the Poor Law Board by 1875. By 1870, unmarried women householders could vote in municipal elections as well. These women were usually the “wives, widows, daughters and sisters of a town’s civic and social elite,”<sup>66</sup> but

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<sup>63</sup> Lynn Abrams. “Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain.”

<sup>64</sup> Married Women’s Property Act, 1870, 33 & 34 Vict., c. 93.

<sup>65</sup> Married Women’s Property Act, 1882, 45 & 46 Vict., c. 75.

<sup>66</sup> Jan Marsh, ““The Personal is Political”: Gender in Private and Public Life in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.” *Victoria and Albert Museum*. n.p., n.d. Web. Accessed 18 November 2013.

their victory can be regarded as a small step forward in improving the lot of all classes of women in Britain. These women also fought to repeal the Contagious Diseases Act and its double standard for the sexual conduct of men and women. They were successful in accomplishing this task in 1886.

The lot of working-class women was also improved to a small extent during the late Victorian era. In addition to regulating women's hours and terms of employment, the Factory Acts of 1847 and 1850 also set up regulations, resulting in some improvements to the working conditions in Britain's factories. During this time, working-class women also began entering new trades, such as the metal trade. In 1864, there were 10,000 women in the metal trade. By 1901, there were 63,000, which rose to 101,000 in 1911.<sup>67</sup> From 1891 to 1911, women's work in manufacturing and transport increased by 40 percent, from 1,710,313 to 2,398,310.<sup>68</sup> There was also an increase in the numbers of married women entering the manufacturing industry.

Even though married working-class women and working-class women in general found new opportunities for work, there were several consistencies in women's work throughout the entire Victorian period. For example, men still did not support the idea of women working. In an article on the question "Should Women Work for Their Living," Margarita Yates quoted one man who insisted, "'The women prevent me from getting work. They take lower wages than I can do. They get into favour with their employers. Why do they not stay at home and busy themselves with domestic duties?'"<sup>69</sup> There was

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<sup>67</sup> Hutchins, p. 88.

<sup>68</sup> Peter N. Stearns in Vicinus, p. 109.

<sup>69</sup> Margarita Yates, "Should Women Work for Their Living?" *Westminster Review*, January 1852-January 1914 174.4 (October 1910): 424-429. *British Periodicals I and II*, p. 425.

still a sense in 1910 – when the article was published – that a woman’s place was in the home. The ability of a working-class male to earn enough wages for his wife to remain outside of paid employment was viewed as a recent – yet positive – achievement on the part of working-class men. However, like the middle and upper classes, working-class men did not consider that most of these women worked, not for spending money, but out of necessity. Additionally, working-class women were still paid wages significantly lower than their male counterparts – even when they were working on the same process. The average wage for a women worker over 18 in a non-textile industry was 12s. 11d. in 1906, which was still not sufficient to live independently.<sup>70</sup> Thus, at the dawn of World War I, women’s labor in Britain was still heavily criticized and restricted. However, the coming conflict would alter the position of women in British society for the next five years.

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<sup>70</sup> Lewis, p. 8.

## Chapter II: Women, Work, and the First World War

### 2.1 The Outbreak and First Months of the Great War

Britain declared war on Germany on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1914. This was the beginning of a bloody conflict affecting Europe for the next four years and one in which British women played a major role. The standard historical argument for many decades was that upon the announcement of war in Britain, there was an overall sense of excitement and patriotism, which included a huge celebration in Trafalgar Square in London. However, more recent historical research, such as that by Adrian Gregory, author of *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*, argued that it was not a mass sense of patriotism that fueled the British, but the crowds evident in London were simply curious bank holiday spectators,<sup>71</sup> as war was declared shortly after the August bank holiday. Even so, many young men quickly and eagerly volunteered to fight for Britain, and it was widely predicted that the war would be over by Christmas.

Even with the sense of curiosity and patriotism, the outbreak of war meant a wave of mass unemployment for working-class women and some men. Just prior to the start of war, in July 1914, there were an estimated 5,966,000 women in paid employment in Britain.<sup>72</sup> Six months into the war, Janet Courtney stated, “We know for instance, that too much of women’s work was casual; but we did not know that these casual workers would be out of work in their thousands within one week after war was declared.”<sup>73</sup> In a

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<sup>71</sup> Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 14.

<sup>72</sup> Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 17.

<sup>73</sup> Janet E. Courtney, “The War and Women’s Employment,” *Fortnightly Review*, 97.578 (Feb. 1915): 239-248. *British Periodicals I and II*, p. 239.



sense, much of women's work prior to this period can be deemed as casual. Many employers, and much of the British public assumed that women would remove themselves from work upon marriage and as their duration in employment was short, women had no sense of ambition about moving upward in their work. I.O. Andrews, an American writer concerned with women in industry, estimated that by September 1914, approximately one month after the declaration of war, 44 percent of all women workers were unemployed.<sup>74</sup> This period of unemployment for women would continue for the final months of 1914 and into first months of 1915. Many workers in domestic service and the luxury trades – making goods for those with wealth – also lost their positions because the wealthy cut back in a patriotic fervor. Gail Braybon calculated the numbers of unemployed from the first days of the war to February 1915. At the start of war approximately 190,000 women were unemployed. This figure dropped to 139,00 in October 1914 and 75,000 by December 1914. By February 1915, women's unemployment had dropped to 35,000.<sup>75</sup>

Though there was a gradual decline in women's unemployment from the outbreak of war to February 1915, many women with dependents to support had few choices. For example, Queen Mary's Work Fund and Queen Mary's Workrooms were established to provide women with jobs making clothes, mainly knitting, for the troops. However, these organizations operated like sweated trades, as the wages women earned from these occupations were not enough for a living wage. Additionally, traditional women's trades

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Braybon, p. 44.

<sup>75</sup> Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London: Pandora Press, 1987), pp. 32-34.

like cotton, silk, dressmaking, and millinery did not speedily recover after the onset of war.

Middle and upper-class women, customarily distanced from paid employment, aided the war effort through more traditional channels – such as philanthropy. These women founded many of the volunteer charities and organized fundraisers to aid the British Army. Young and unmarried middle and upper class women also remained in traditional women's categories by volunteering as nurses with the Voluntary Aid Detachment. For example, Agatha Christie, the famous mystery novelist, was a volunteer with the VAD during the war. She assisted in the care of soldiers in the Torquay hospital and near the end of the war started in the dispensary making lotions and ointments.<sup>76</sup> The British government and the Red Cross utilized these women at home, but were reluctant to allow women and nurses in the Voluntary Aid Detachment to work on or near the front lines. However, women such as Mairi Chisholm, Mrs. Elsie Knocker, and Eleanora Pemberton proved that women nurses were extremely useful on the front lines.

Chisholm and Knocker originally formed part of Hector Munro's Flying Ambulance Corps, which went to Flanders at the beginning of the war. However, Chisholm and Knocker soon set out on their own and made a base approximately 10km from the front lines in Belgium. These women – with no assistance from male soldiers – carried the wounded back from no man's land to an ambulance, which Chisholm then drove to the nearest field hospital – approximately 15km behind the front lines. Near the end of the war, Knocker and Chisholm were gassed with arsenic and mustard in a German bombing raid. Chisholm returned to their base and "manned" it alone for three

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<sup>76</sup> Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie. Interviewed by Margaret Brooks. *Imperial War Museum*. Imperial War Museum, 1974. Web. Accessed 25 January 2014.

weeks, until she was forced to evacuate. During her time at the front, Chisholm even managed to continue working for two weeks with her arm in a sling – which included carrying soldiers to an ambulance without aid – as she had a case of septicemia.<sup>77</sup>

Another Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse, Eleanora Pemberton had joined the Red Cross in 1913 and was called to France in October 1914. Pemberton, with a few other Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses and cooks, set up a rest station at Abbeville in France for the trains coming from and going to the front lines. In May of 1915, she and three other VAD nurses, with four orderlies, set up a second rest station at Abbeville (see Figure 2.1). In December of 1916, she travelled with a Voluntary Aid Detachment convoy to Étretat, where ambulances transported soldiers from the front to nearby base hospitals.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Mairi Lambert Gooden Chisholm. Interviewed by Jean Liddiard. *Imperial War Museum*. Imperial War Museum, 1976. Web. Accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Eleanora Pemberton. Interviewed by Celia Petty. *Imperial War Museum*. Imperial War Museum, 1978. Web. Accessed 25 January 2014.



Figure 2.1

A Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse assists a wounded soldier at a dressing station in Abbeville, France.

Source: Lt. Ernest Brooks. 27 June 1917. *Imperial War Museum's Collections: Ministry of Information First World War Official Collection*. Catalogue Number: Q 2470.



Figure 2.2

Mairi Chisholm and Elsie Knocker take cover as a shell explodes on a railway near the front line.

Source: *Imperial War Museum's Collections: Belgian First World War Official Collection*. Catalogue Number: Q 58537.



Figure 2.3

Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm assisting a wounded soldier at their first aid post in Pervyse, Belgium.

Source: Lt. Ernest Brooks. 6 August 1917. *Imperial War Museum's Collections: Ministry of Information First World War Official Collection*. Catalogue Number: Q 2676.

By late 1914 and into the early months of 1915, government contracts – needed to supply the troops with equipment and clothing – reduced women's unemployment numbers. However, even with government contracts, women were still usually employed in non-industrial jobs or were holding the place of their male relative – husband, father, or brother – during the war. Many employers agreed to allow a woman to work in place of her male relative and to hold the job for the male to return to after the war ended. Additionally, in March 1915, the government set up a National Register for women who were interested in work. Also, in July of 1915, suffragist leader Emmaline Pankhurst –

aided with £2000 pounds from Lloyd George and the British government – organized the Women’s Right to Serve March in London. This was to advertise the need for and enthusiasm of women’s work in the war effort. Thus, by the summer of 1915, women – aided by some government intervention – were beginning to enter industry, but in small numbers.

Several agreements in 1914 and 1915 between the British government and male trade unions, as well as between male trade unions and their employers, allowed women to move into jobs traditionally done by skilled men. The Crayford Agreement was made between the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and the Employers’ Federation in November of 1914. The agreement, only enforced locally at the Vickers’ Factory in Crayford, stated that skilled men’s work would not be given to women and “female labour shall be restricted to purely automatic machines used for the production of repetition work.”<sup>79</sup> The Shells and Fuses Agreement of March 1915 allowed women (and young boys) to operate semi- or completely automatic machines in the munitions industry only if the character of the job ensured that women could perform it efficiently. This agreement was national in scope and did not apply to a specific munitions factory, but all government-controlled factories in Britain. The Treasury Agreement of March 1915 provided protection to men’s wages by guaranteeing that their wages would not be adversely affected by women’s labor in the factories. However, the agreement had an

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<sup>79</sup> Barbara Drake, *Women in the Engineering Trades: A Problem, a Solution, and Some Criticisms* (Westminster: Labour Research Department and George Allen and Unwin, Ltd, 1918), p. 14.

adverse effect on women, as it also allowed employers to manipulate wage rates so that women's wages were approximately one-half of men's.<sup>80</sup>

In all three agreements, it was explicitly understood that the regulations were for the duration of the war only. Thus, women were still viewed as "meantime" workers, which in this case meant they were viewed as acceptable as workers, but only for the duration of the emergency situation provided by the war. Additionally, these agreements fit with the traditionally held belief that women were well-suited only to repetitive work. Even with these temporary agreements to allow women into factories, by early 1915, the majority of women were still confined to traditional women's industries or unskilled processes.

## **2.2 Influence of the 1915 Shell Shortage and 1916 Mass Conscription on Women's Work**

Arthur Marwick, historian and author of numerous books on British society, identified two factors that opened up new opportunities for women's war work. In *Women at War*, Marwick stated,

[t]he two crucial phenomena which transformed the opportunities open to women, at least for as long as the war lasted, were, first, the shortage of munitions which led in May 1915 to the setting up of a special Ministry of Munitions, and, second, the shortage of soldiers, which led in January 1916 to the conscription of single men, and in May 1916 to universal male conscription.<sup>81</sup>

Shells for the men on the front lines had been an issue since the early days of the war.

However, the problem of shells for soldiers at the front reached a boiling point in May

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-18.

<sup>81</sup> Arthur Marwick, *Women at War, 1914-1918* (Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks and the Imperial War Museum, 1977), p. 51.



1915 when tales of the shell shortage hit newspapers in Britain. The ensuing scandal resulted not only in the fall of the first coalition government, but also in the creation of the Ministry of Munitions of War, simply known as the Ministry of Munitions. As Marwick stated, this Ministry, headed by David Lloyd George, would be one of the key elements in the movement of women into munitions factories.

After its creation, the Ministry began instituting Circulars, which instructed factories on regulations of labor and pay. One such document from September 1915, Circular 129, dictated to owners of government-controlled establishments that the employment of skilled men would be confined to work that could not efficiently be done by less skilled men or women, that women would be put in all classes of labor for which they were suitable, and that semi-skilled or unskilled men would be put on the work deemed unsuitable for women.<sup>82</sup> In June of 1915, the Ministry introduced the leaving certificate, which restricted workers' mobility. Workers were now required to obtain a certificate from their employer before they would be able to leave their position. If the employee did not have a leaving certificate, he or she could not be employed for six weeks. Any employer in violation was subject to prosecution by the government.

In October of 1915, the Ministry of Munitions introduced a dilution scheme, in which the Ministry hoped to move women into semi-skilled labor. Deborah Thom described dilution as, "The introduction of less skilled workers to undertake the whole, or a part of the work previously done by workers of greater skill or experience, often, but not always, accompanied by simplification of machinery, or the breaking up of a job into

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<sup>82</sup> Drake, 51.

a number of simpler operations.”<sup>83</sup> The focus of the dilution scheme was to replace skilled male labor with semi-skilled or unskilled labor, which included the labor of older men and women. By 1916, the government began a substitution scheme, which allowed women to move onto skilled processes in the factories. The government organized substitution into four categories: first, complete substitution by which one woman took the place of one skilled male worker in the factory; second, indirect substitution, where a woman replaced a semi-skilled or unskilled worker; third, group substitution, in which several women replaced a small number of male workers; and finally, rearrangement substitution, which meant that women were instituted on a process with the aid of new machinery.<sup>84</sup> In addition to these four schemes, Parliament’s institution of conscription in 1916 also worked to open new positions for women.

In January of 1916, Parliament passed the Military Service Act, which stated that all ordinary male residents of Great Britain as of 15 August 1915 who had attained 18 years of age but were under 41 years and who by 2 November 1915 were unmarried or a widower with no children or dependents was thus enlisted in His Majesty’s regular forces or reserves. The Act had several exceptions including: dominion residents in Great Britain for educational or other special purposes; regular, reserve, dominion, and territorial forces deemed not suited for foreign service; ministers or those taking Holy Orders; Naval or Marine servicemen recommended for exception by the Admiralty; those discharged by ill-health or disability; those who received a certificate of exemption from a military tribunal; and those rejected upon medical inspection after 14 August 1915.

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<sup>83</sup> Deborah Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War I* (London: I.B. Tauris and Company, Ltd., 1998), p. 55.

<sup>84</sup> Braybon, p. 61.

Thus, these men were exempt from conscription and military service. The certificate of exemption granted by military tribunals rested on one of four conditions: that the male was so expedient to national interests that he should continue to be employed in his habitual work or education; that it would cause serious hardship for a male with exceptional financial or business obligations or domestic position to be conscripted; someone with ill-health or some type of infirmity; and conscientious objectors. A military tribunal or a governmental department on an absolute, conditional, or temporary basis granted these certificates.<sup>85</sup>

A subsequent Military Service Act in May 1916 changed the marriage condition of the previous act. Thus, married men were now subject to conscription. Additionally, the government made concessions that it would try not to send boys in the armed forces to the front until they had reached 19 years of age.<sup>86</sup> These Acts along with other efforts by the government, factory employers, and male trade unions were a large step in moving women into work which they could capably and efficiently handle.

### 2.2.1 Munitionettes

With these numerous measures by the government, the number of women in National Shell Filling Factories had risen from 0 in 1914 to 18,460 in 1916.<sup>87</sup> Munitionettes, as women munitions workers were called, worked at very difficult and dangerous jobs. Thus, both men and women in the National Filling Factories were strictly regulated and supervised for fear of explosion in the shops (see Figure 2.4). Women were not allowed to have any pins in their hair, wear any type of jewelry, or have

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<sup>85</sup> Military Service Act, 1916, 5 & 6 Geo. 5, c. 54.

<sup>86</sup> Military Service Act, 1916 (Session 2), 6 & 7 Geo. 5, c. 15.

<sup>87</sup> Diane Condell and Jean Liddiard, *Working for Victory? Images of Women in the First World War, 1914-1918* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1987), p.111.

any metal on their clothing. This is one reason why uniforms were utilized in munitions factories. One mistake could cause an explosion and any metal on a person could be burned into their skin. Additionally, women had to wear their hair away from their face. If a woman did not do so, she ran the risk of her hair being caught in the machinery, which could result in a portion of the scalp being ripped off. In many cases, when a female munitions worker was killed on the job or died because of an explosion in the factory, the funeral was organized just as a serviceman's would have been (see Figure 2.5). Sister Munitionettes often wore their factory uniforms as a sign of respect. It was believed that, just like a soldier, the female munitions worker died in service to her country.



Figure 2.4

Damage to the Venesa Factory, a producer of wood veneer packaging for the tea industry, after an 83-ton TNT explosion at the Brunner Mond's Factory explosives factory.

Source: "Industry in Britain During the First World War." 19 January 1917. *Imperial War Museum's Collections: British Fire Prevention Committee*. Catalogue Number: Q 15364.



Figure 2.5

Funeral procession of a female munitions workers killed on the job. Her colleagues wear their uniforms as a sign of respect.

Source: "Women at Work in the First World War." August 1917.  
*Imperial War Museum's Collections: Imperial War Museum Printed Books, Women's Boxes Collection.* Catalogue Number: Q 108454.

When women were initially introduced into the factories, men did not want to teach them how to make munitions. As Elsa Thomas said "it was their livelihood" and women were "going to cut the wages."<sup>88</sup> Thomas was a munitions worker at the Royal Arsenal Factory at Woolwich. She described the process of making cartridges, which took three to four weeks of training. Munitionettes, like Mrs. Thomas, were taught to fill cartridges of varying sizes – up to the 18-inch shell – at the Arsenal Factory. Thomas was even instructed on how to produce cartridges and fill them with cordite, one of the

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<sup>88</sup> Elsa Thomas. Interviewed by Marion Miliband. *Imperial War Museum*. Imperial War Museum, 1975. Web. Accessed 25 January 2014.

main explosives used in munitions during the war (see Figures 2.6 & 2.7). Thomas also explained that as she and the other munitions workers worked for a government-contracted factory, their wages were regulated and they were not on piecework, which meant she and the other factory girls earned between £3-£5 a week<sup>89</sup> – an extremely high wage for women at the time.



Figure 2.6

Munitionettes at a Vickers Limited Factory at work manufacturing heavy artillery shells.

Source: “Women Working in the Munitions Industry During the First World War.” May 1917. *Imperial War Museum’s Collections: Imperial War Museum Printed Books, Women’s Boxes Collection*. Catalogue Number: Q 108474.

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

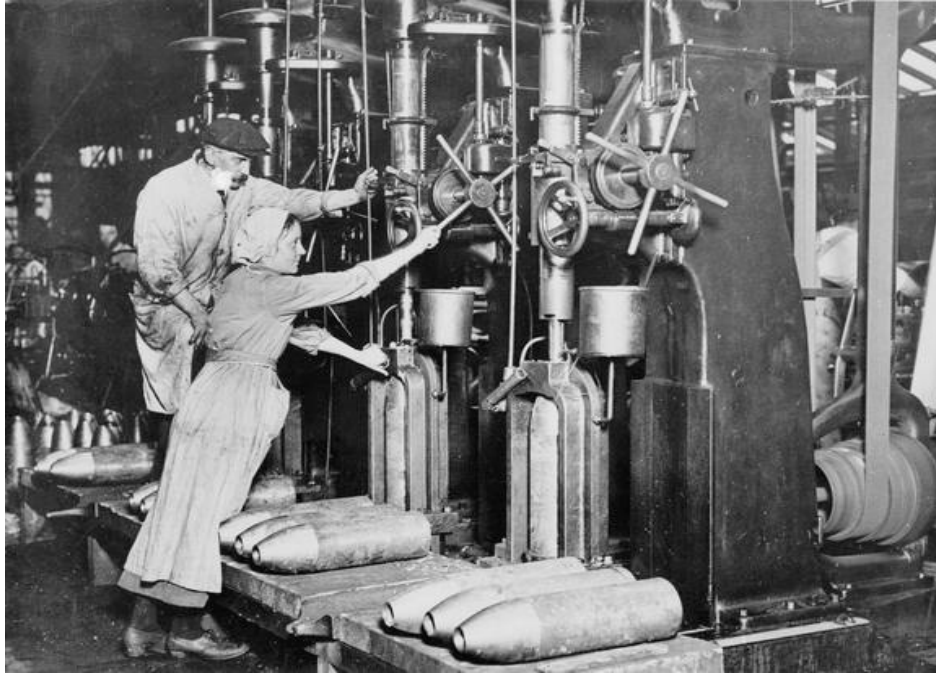


Figure 2.7

A female munitions worker manufactures heavy artillery shells under the supervision of a male worker.

Source: "Women Working in the Munitions Industry During the First World War." May 1917. *Imperial War Museum's Collections: Imperial War Museum Printed Books, Women's Boxes Collection*. Catalogue Number: Q 108424.

Women in the Filling Factories also worked with dangerous explosives such as TNT, cordite, and dope, a chemical used on the airplane processing. Working with these chemicals often had serious side effects to health. Angela Woollacott stated that symptoms of TNT poisoning were divided into "[i]rritative ones, including nasal and throat problems, headaches, chest pains abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, constipation, diarrhea, and skin rashes; and toxic ones, including continuous "bilious attacks," fainting, swollen hands and feet, drowsiness, depressions, and blurred visions".<sup>90</sup> Cordite was also

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<sup>90</sup> Woollacott, p. 83.



known to cause epilepsy. Additionally, TNT was well known for causing jaundice, or a yellowing of the skin, which is why many women working on TNT were called canary girls. Many women who did not work with TNT did not want to associate with the canary girls. Even so, many Munitionettes working with TNT viewed their yellow skin as a badge of honor – as they were doing their bit for the war effort. When the side effects of TNT were noticed, efforts were made by employers and welfare supervisors to counteract them. It was recommended that women have better ventilation in the factory and a better diet, that they work 8-hour shifts – instead of 12-hour shifts – and that they be assigned to TNT or other explosives for only twelve weeks before rotating to another job in the factory. Employers also provided milk, cocoa, creams, and gloves to counteract the effects. However, these methods were usually not helpful in stopping poisoning or side effects of TNT work.

### 2.2.2 Other Types of Munitions

When the government took over munitions factories at the start of the war, it did not just control those that produced ammunition. The government's definition of munitions was everything pertaining to the needs of the army. This included army equipment, uniforms, chemicals, engineering, and airplanes as well as ammunition and weapons. For example, Maisie Nightingale started off working at Thornycroft factory making parts for the Lewis machine gun and earning £1/19s a week. Eventually, Mrs. Nightingale moved to Pemberton Billings where she cleaned out airplanes working 5 days a week from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. and earning more money than at Thornycroft.<sup>91</sup>

Another munitions workers, Mrs. Dorothy Haigh, had been a domestic servant before the

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<sup>91</sup> Maisie Nightingale. Interviewed by Jean Berry. *Imperial War Museum*. Imperial War Museum, 1983. Web. Accessed 25 January 2014.

war began, but moved to Woolston Rolling Mills and Hamble Aviation Factory during the later years of the war. She began work at the Rolling Mills, like all women at that particular factory, in the metal sorting section. She was asked after a few months if she would like to operate a crane, which was viewed as a dangerous job – as one slip could injure the workers on the factory floor. Mrs. Haigh worked from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m. earning £2 a week. The Rolling Mill was shut down near the end of the war, as many government contracts were cancelled, and Mrs. Haigh moved to the Hamble Aviation Factory where she sewed canvas onto the wings of the airplanes.<sup>92</sup> A third munitions worker, Mrs. Lily Broom, worked at Brice and May in White City and later at their factory in Fulham making tents and other army equipment. Mrs. Broom described the work as heavy, dangerous, and torturous at times, but working from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. she made 26 shillings – just over a pound – a week. Additionally, she estimated that there were approximately 10,000 women working in the factory.<sup>93</sup>

### 2.2.3 Factory Welfare and Supervisors

In December of 1915, the Ministry of Munitions established a Welfare Department because of a governmental concern about the health of munitions workers. Concern for the welfare of workers mainly centered on production and efficiency, as healthy workers were needed to keep production and efficiency high. The department also initiated women as welfare supervisors in the factories. This was viewed as a good position for women because of their inherent nurturing and mothering capabilities. These supervisors were responsible for looking after the well-being of the workers both inside

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<sup>92</sup> Dorothy Ann Haigh. Interviewed by Margaret Brooks. *Imperial War Museum*. Imperial War Museum, 1976. Web. Accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>93</sup> Lily V. Broom. Interviewed by Jan Stovold. *Imperial War Museum*. Imperial War Museum, 1986. Web. Accessed 25 January 2014.

and outside the factory, as well as monitoring their work (see Figure 2.8). Additionally, this was a good position for middle-class women, as after the war, work in welfare became a good profession for middle-class women. This position also provided a convenient way to maintain the class hierarchy in the factory as the middle-class welfare supervisor would be in charge of the working-class factory women. Their workers did not always view welfare supervisors positively. At times, women saw the supervisors as too intrusive, while at other times the workers were very grateful for their interference.

The institution of a welfare department and supervisors in the factory can be viewed as somewhat paradoxical when considering that the government also suspended the Factory Acts for the duration of the war. Women workers in general were exploited; they worked long hours – usually at least 12-hour shifts – in generally bad conditions. Some employers, such as Greenwood and Battley, exploited their workers even more. In 1915, Greenwood and Batley was prosecuted for putting its women workers on shifts of 25 and 30 hours.<sup>94</sup> The firm was not convicted because the production of munitions was more important, but it does show the immense vulnerability of women in wartime industry.

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<sup>94</sup> Braybon, p. 113.



Figure 2.8

Female munitions workers, under the observation of a female supervisor, fill the shells on machine gun belts at the Inspection Building in the Park Royal.

Source: Nicholls, Horace. *Imperial War Museum's Collections: Imperial War Museum Photograph Archive Collection*. Catalogue Number: Q 31314.

#### 2.2.4 Non-Industrial Women's Work

Efforts by the Ministry of Munitions and the institution of mass conscription in 1916 served to flood women into Britain's munitions factories, but 1916 also saw women move into new non-industrial positions. For example, in February 1916, the Women's Land Service Corps was founded, which would later become the Land Army. The organization was very popular among women in the middle class. Two middle-class women interviewed by the Imperial War Museum, Mary Lees and Doris Robinson, discussed their duties on the land, their pay, their hours, and the conditions. Lees discussed her training, which lasted six weeks, and in which she learned to milk cows,

plough fields, and make cheese (see Figure 2.9). Lees signed a contract agreeing to work on the land for nine months in Devon. Her duties in Devon included milking twelve cows twice a day, collecting twigs to light the fires, helping with the horses, cleaning the sheds, and feeding the cows, pigs, and calves. She eventually moved to another job on the land at Pixton Park and then worked on Lord Rhondda's land where she earned the most of any of her jobs during the war at £5 a week.<sup>95</sup> Mrs. Robinson recounted a similar experience working on the land. She trained for two weeks and worked on a farm in Loughton. Her experience was not as good as Mrs. Lees'. Mrs. Robinson cared for 7 jersey cows, 400 hens, ducks, and other animals 7 days a week from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. while earning only £1 a week, much of which went to room and board. Even with that experience, Mrs. Robinson remained in the Land Army for three years.<sup>96</sup> Women in the Land Army also worked in the Forestry Corps under the Timber Supply Department in the Board of Trade. These women helped in the harvesting and transport of timber throughout the country, which included using axes and saws to cut down the trees (see Figure 2.10).

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<sup>95</sup> Mary Lees. Interviewed by Margaret Brooks. *Imperial War Museum*. Imperial War Museum, 1974. Web. Accessed 25 January 2014.

<sup>96</sup> Doris Robinson. Interviewed by Conrad Wood. *Imperial War Museum*. Imperial War Museum, 1992. Web. Accessed 25 January 2014.



Figure 2.9

Members of the Women's Land Army milking a cow.

Source: *Imperial War Museum's Collections: Ministry of Information First World War Official Collection*. Catalogue Number: Q 30664.



Figure 2.10

Women in the Forestry Corps chop and cut down trees.

Source: *Imperial War Museum's Collections: Ministry of Information First World War Official Collection*. Catalogue Number: Q 30706.

February 1916 also saw the London General Omnibus Company begin to employ women. The company began with 100 women and within one year the number had risen to 2,500.<sup>97</sup> Women were employed in other aspects of transportation including as conductresses, drivers, ticket collectors, carriage cleaners, porters, and guards (see Figures 2.11 & 2.12).<sup>98</sup> These women became a symbol of the important shift in women's employment, as citizens normally would not have had contact with factory workers. Additionally, work in transportation was believed to be beyond women both in

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<sup>97</sup> Condell and Liddiard, p. 90.

<sup>98</sup> Braybon, p. 64.

terms of skill and responsibility – but women disproved this – as they drove lorries, worked with the Fire Brigade, and in other varying aspects of the railway industry.<sup>99</sup> Strictly voluntary organizations such as the Voluntary Aid Detachment also made changes in 1916 by instituting a wage. The Voluntary Aid Detachment offered a wage of £20-£30 a year and therefore was open to working-class women, those who traditionally could not afford to pay their way in the organization.



Figure 2.11

A conductress for the London Omnibus Company stands on the external staircase of the bus.

Source: 1918. *Imperial War Museum's Collections: First World War Women's War Work Collection*. Catalogue Number: Q 109768.

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<sup>99</sup> Condell and Liddiard, pp. 93, 165.





Figure 2.12

Women ticket collectors at the Victoria Railway Station in Manchester.

Source: “Women Railway Workers During the First World War.” *Imperial War Museum’s Collections: First World War Women’s War Work Collection*. Catalogue Number: Q 109850.

Women also moved into other areas of employment during the war era, such as at the police force and brewing companies. This police force was known as Women’s Patrols, which regulated entrance into the factory and observed public actions of women. These patrolwomen checked women munitions workers as they entered the factory to make sure they were not carrying – into the secured area – any materials that had been banned (see Figure 2.13). Women’s patrols were also used to monitor women’s morals by observing their actions in the streets and public places. Many of these women were

resented or openly hated. However, by October 1915, there were 2,301 Women's Patrols in 108 factories in Britain.<sup>100</sup> Work at a brewery was another industry that women would have traditionally been excluded from. At the start of the war, Mrs. Sarah Pidgeon worked at Pearces Factory sewing buttons onto soldier's tunics, a traditional position for women. However, after about a year, she and a friend went to Smith Garrett's Brewery where she started washing bottles and then moved to cleaning barrels (see Figures 2.14 and 2.15).<sup>101</sup> The work was strenuous and the women – five working in the yard washing barrels – and took place outside all year long. The women worked five days a week from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. and their wages were based on of the number of barrels they cleaned.

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<sup>100</sup> Woollacott, p. 176.

<sup>101</sup> Sarah Ann Pidgeon. Interviewed by Margaret Brooks. *Imperial War Museum*. Imperial War Museum, 1975. Web. Accessed 25 January 2014.



Figure 2.13

A model recreation of Women Police Service officers searching munitions workers at the entrance to a shell filling factory.

Source: *Imperial War Museum's Collections: Ministry of Information First World War Official Collection*. Catalogue Number: Q 31474.



Figure 2.14

Women workers at a Stratford brewery roll vats of beer into storage.

Source: Lewis, G.P. September 1918. *Imperial War Museum's Collections: Ministry of Information First World War Official Collection*. Catalogue Number: Q 28339.



Figure 2.15

Female workers at a Cheshire brewery wash barrels.

Source: Lewis, G.P. September 1918. *Imperial War Museum's Collections: Ministry of Information First World War Official Collection*.  
Catalogue Number: Q 28333.

As the war progressed, more and more men were conscripted to serve at the front. Thus, by November 1915, there was a shortage of male doctors in Britain. Prior to the war there had been only 200 registered women doctors in Britain.<sup>102</sup> Because of the war shortage, women were able to enter clinical work in hospitals much earlier and somewhat more easily than they were usually allowed to do. For example, Ruth Dingley was able to go straight to the Royal Free Hospital – the only place women doctors could be trained

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<sup>102</sup> “Impact of the Great War.” *Women at Queen Mary Online: A Virtual Exhibition*. Queen Mary, University of London, 2008. Web. Accessed 15 March 2014.

– without paying her fees because of a shortage in doctors.<sup>103</sup> However, there was still much prejudice against women receiving training or volunteering their services as doctors during the war. For instance, Dr. Elsie Inglis approached the Home Office at the start of the war and offered to bring women doctors and nurses to France to aid the war effort. She was told to go home and sit still. Dr. Inglis proved the Home Office wrong as she collected funds for the Scottish Women's Hospital she founded in France. There she and an all-female team conducted battlefield surgeries. Eventually the Red Cross funded the medical training for some women.

Though women could not actively serve with the armed forces, they could join organizations associated with the different branches. For example, women with the WRNS, the Women's Royal Naval Service, worked as electricians and telegraph operators as well as helping with coding and de-coding of messages. Women doctors with the Auxiliary Corps of the RAMC – the Royal Army Medical Corps – fought for and were able to achieve equal pay with their male counterparts. Women in the WRAF – the Women's Royal Air Force – founded near the end of the war worked as mechanics and engineers. They could also receive training in the airplanes, but were not allowed to fly them. Another organization, founded in 1917, was the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), which was renamed Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps (QMAAC). These women were sent to France to cook, clean, drive, or do clerical work for the Army. Essentially, these women freed men – who would have been performing these tasks – for the front lines.

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<sup>103</sup> Ruth Dingley. Interviewed by Lyn E. Smith. *Imperial War Museum*. Imperial War Museum, 1988. Web. Accessed 25 January 2014.

### **2.3 1917 – The Peak and Gradual Decline of Women’s War Work**

In 1917, the employment of women workers reached its zenith for the war era. By 1917, there were 819,00 women in munitions, 55,440 women in government controlled National Filling Factories, and 25,000 in Woolwich Arsenal alone.<sup>104</sup> Overall, there were 4,507,000 women employed – not including those employed in domestic service and dressmaking, and those who were self-employed. According to Andrew Kirkaldy, five factors explain why women’s employment began leveling off in 1917. First, by 1917 the supply of women suited for employment was exhausted. 1916 had seen a flood of women entering employment for the first time. Second, the return of discharged soldiers meant fewer slots for women workers. Men returning from the front were seen as deserving employment over women because of their service to the country. Third, the Ministry of Munitions, in an L2 Circular, set a minimum wage of £1, which quickly became a maximum for women. When the Ministry began enforcing wages, employers’ demands for women workers diminished as employers had preferred women as a cheap source of labor. Fourth, the flooding of new women workers into employment meant that the industries open to women quickly filled. Finally, some women’s work ceased in 1917, as a result of both wider demobilization and the collapse of Russian armaments agreements after the Russian withdrawal from the war at the end of 1917.<sup>105</sup>

Although there was a general leveling off of women’s employment, some sectors of employment saw a rise in women workers. For example, women in banking and finance were up to 63,000 in 1917.<sup>106</sup> There were also increases in women’s employment

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<sup>104</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge*, p. 91; Condell and Liddiard, p. 111; Braybon, p. 47.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Braybon, p. 47.

<sup>106</sup> Marwick, *The Deluge*, p. 92.

in clerical work within the Civil Service and within transport. Other industries, such as cotton manufacturers, dressmaking, and domestic service, attempted to lure women back; some even attempted to raise wages. However, these efforts were generally unsuccessful.

As demobilization spread in 1917, motherhood became a concern of the Lloyd George government. For example, the report of the Women's Employment Committee in 1918 stated, "The primary function of women in the State must be regarded: it is not enough not to interfere with her service in bearing children, and the care of infant life and health, but she must also be safeguarded as the homemaker of the nation."<sup>107</sup> Britain had lost a large portion of its young men, and the focus now shifted to creating a new generation. Therefore, motherhood and the mothers of the British nation became paramount. The emphasis of motherhood by the Lloyd George government was the beginning of the post-war push of women into the traditional role as wife and mother in the domestic sphere. To the British government, the women of Britain were needed to return to motherhood, to aid in strengthening the nation. Large numbers of women in employment at the end of the war would have been seen as an embarrassment, as their natural role was viewed to be in the home as a wife and mother. Additionally, the government and employers sought to retrain women in the domestic arts. For instance, the Labour Party proposed evening classes for women's education in subjects such as "citizenship and home life, housing, food problems, maternity, education and child welfare."<sup>108</sup> However, these attempts to train women in domestic skills were not usually successful unless they aided women in finding a position after the war.

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<sup>107</sup> Braybon, p. 132.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.



## **2.4 Women and the Home Front**

The lives of women workers outside the factory, particularly their domestic situation, was always of great interest to the British government – under the Coalition governments of both H.H. Asquith and his successor, David Lloyd George – during the war. Before the war, there was a general concern in Britain about the future health of the “British race,” expressed in eugenics and the health of the race debate. This concern heightened during the war years and resulted in an obsession with the home, family and women’s morality. At the start of the war, the government began watching the wives of soldiers and sailors. If any record of immoral or incorrect behavior was found, the woman – and her children – could lose their separation allowance, a significant source of income for many wives. At least 16,000 women had their allowances terminated; according to Gerard DeGroot, “these rulings reflected a prevalent attitude that women on their own with money to spare could not be trusted.”<sup>109</sup> There was still the notion that the wife needed the guidance of a male to control her spending.

The government was also extremely concerned about the health of its soldiers and even had regulations that stated that a woman with a venereal disease could not have sex with a serviceman – even if the man was her own husband. If the woman was caught doing so, she could be arrested. It did not matter if her husband was the one who had given her the disease. Additionally, a section of the Defense of the Realm Act (passed in 1914 and known as DORA) effectively reintroduced the Contagious Diseases Acts for the duration of the war. This section allowed the police to examine any women suspected of having a venereal disease or suspected of being a prostitute. However, as with the

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<sup>109</sup> Gerard J. DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (New York: Addison Wesley and Longman, Ltd., 1996), p. 207.

Contagious Diseases Acts, there was much public backlash about the clear sexual double standard.

The government, under Prime Minister H.H. Asquith and his Coalition government, but particularly stressed under the Coalition Ministry of Prime Minister David Lloyd George, believed that it had a duty to maintain the British race and that women's employment was harming the children. Women workers were constantly praised for their efforts in the war. For example, in 1915, David Lloyd George stated, "Without women victory will tarry and the victory which tarries means a victory whose footprints are footprints of blood."<sup>110</sup> However, women's employment was still challenged. For instance, Lady Margaret Sackville, an English poet, referred to women factory workers as "mothers and murderers of mankind."<sup>111</sup> Additionally, Mary MacArthur, a prominent female trade unionist, argued, "Women have done some wonderful work, but a baby is more wonderful than a machine gun."<sup>112</sup> These women represent the view that though the women are aiding the nation, their ultimate goal should be that of a wife and mother. Several women's organizations and trade unions, such as the Women's Labour League, the Women's Co-operative Guild, the National Federation of Women Workers, and the Trade Union Congress, approached Local Government Boards and National Committees on women's industry – such as the Health of Munitions Workers Committee and the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organizations – to aid in sponsoring motherhood and in showing the harmful effects industrial work was doing to future generations of the British race. Thus, the state was

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<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Marwick, *Women at War*, p. 54.

<sup>111</sup> Claire A Culleton, *Working-Class Culture, Women, and Britain, 1914-1921* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 155.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

persuaded that by sponsoring mothers with young children – via some type of allowance or welfare – those women would be encouraged to leave the market, therefore protecting the future health of the race. This is also why employers towards the end of the war sought to educate their women workers as housewives and not as factory workers.

Another constant theme throughout the war is the glorification of motherhood. For example, the first Mother's Day in England was celebrated on August 8, 1916 and was founded by John Whitehead of the Whitehead Aircraft Company in honor of his mother.<sup>113</sup> The Lloyd George government also sponsored a National Baby Week in July of 1917. These celebrations stressed women's ultimate goal as reproduction and the care of children. The government was even supportive of unmarried mothers and illegitimate children, as the goal of reproduction was seen as paramount. In general, the illegitimacy rate fell during the war era, as most men were abroad. Even so, bastardy and unwed motherhood were not such stigmas during the war years as they had been before. This encouragement of baby-making and domesticity is a bit inconsistent with the fact that the government instituted a scheme in 1917 that would pay 75 percent of the nursery fees for women in munitions factories, thus allowing women to continue working in the factories while ensuring their children were cared for.

In addition to work and child care, women on the home front in the First World War had to deal with bad living conditions, shortages, rations, blackouts, and other regulations under DORA. Further amendments to DORA gave the state huge powers over just about all aspects of civilian life during the war. The Act censored the press, regulated pub hours, controlled licensing for the sale of alcohol, and controlled rationing.

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<sup>113</sup> "Mother's Day," *Whitehead Aircraft, Ltd.* Google Sites, n.d. Web. Accessed 17 March 2014.

For many working-class families, rationing meant an improvement in their standard of living. However, rationing also meant the inevitable problem of the queue (see Figure 2.16). As there were shortages in many British dietary staples – such as meat, butter, bacon, bread, potatoes, and sugar – women were forced to wait in long lines to get their family’s rations. For working mothers, this often meant queuing up early in the morning before work, during their lunch break, or after work in the evening. Many hours could be spent waiting to get rations only to have the shop run out before the woman reached the front of the queue.



Figure 2.16

Women and children in a food queue in Reading.

Source: “The Home Front in Britain During the First World War.”  
*Imperial War Museum’s Collections: Home Office Collection.*  
Catalogue Number: Q 56276.

## **2.5 1918 and the End of War**

In February 1918, the British Parliament passed a third Military Service Act, which moved the conscription age to 51. This was in response to the German spring offensive of early 1918 and the British need for more men on the front lines. As a result, the number of women employed rose to 4,808,000.<sup>114</sup> This surge, however, was short-lived as the government began terminating contracts in 1918. Mass lay-offs for women in government-controlled factories resulted, as many factories switched back to pre-war production and awaited the return of men from the front lines.

By July 1918, there were still nearly three million women employed in British factories. This meant women workers had only increased 1 percent in the industrial workforce over the pre-war figures. Even with the small increase in the number of women employed, women had performed some extraordinary tasks during the war years. In fact, in October and November of 1918, the Ministry of Information and Women's Work Subcommittee hosted the Women's War Work Exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. The exhibition included plaster models of women's war work, technical models showing the different stages of factory production, and different types of ammunition submitted by twenty-six firms. The event was regarded as a huge success with over 82,000 visitors, including the Queen.<sup>115</sup> Even so, many women feared being shut back into the cage – the domestic sphere – after the war. Some even organized a march on Westminster to keep their positions. In fact, Gareth Griffiths stated that when asked in 1916 if they would have preferred to keep their position rather than return to

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<sup>114</sup> Braybon, p. 47.

<sup>115</sup> Julie Wosk, *Women and the Machine: Representations from the Spinning Wheel to the Electronic Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 194.

their pre-war occupation, 2500 of 3000 women answered that they would have preferred to keep their current position.<sup>116</sup> However, many of these women believed that the returning soldiers had the right to take their jobs back.

By the end of 1917, those who had not supported the suffragist cause before the war had converted to the suffragist cause, as women had proved they were capable of assisting the country and the public now saw that those women deserved something in return for their war effort. In February of 1918, the Home Secretary, George Cave, proposed the Representation of the People Act, which was passed by both houses of Parliament. A new franchise act was needed after the war, as many of the servicemen had lost their voting rights while at the front because of the residency qualifications. Therefore, allowing certain women the vote can be regarded as more of a last minute addition, rather than a central focus, of the bill. The Act gave women a parliamentary constituency – meaning they could vote – if they met certain criteria. Women had to be 30 years of age, have no legal incapacity, and hold property of at least £5 to qualify. If a woman was 30 years of age, had no legal incapacity, and was married to a man eligible to vote, then she would also have the franchise. The Act also gave a university constituency to a woman if she was at least 30 years of age, had been admitted to and passed a final exam, and met the university period of residence that was necessary for a male to receive a degree.<sup>117</sup> This meant that most of the women who worked in munitions and other dangerous wartime jobs did not receive the vote. This concession for women was a minor one on behalf of the government as it was believed that these women would be old enough to marry and thus their husbands would influence their vote. In addition, if

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<sup>116</sup> Quoted in Culleton, p. 28.

<sup>117</sup> Representation of the People Act, 1918. 8 & 9 Geo. 5. c. 50.

women of at least 21 years of age had been given the franchise, they would have made up a majority of the voting population, which the government did not want to happen.

## **Chapter III: Post War, Women's Success or Business as Usual?**

### **3.1 Women and the Initial Post-War World in Britain**

Though the First World War did not officially end until the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the cessation of hostilities on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November in 1918 meant peace at last. The Armistice and the realization that peace had come resulted in huge celebrations all over Britain. Just as it had upon the declaration of war, Trafalgar Square in London became a mass of curious and excited celebrators, but this time the celebrations were for the end to four years of bloodshed and sacrifice. However, the Armistice and the coming of peace also meant the return of soldiers and thus, the large-scale unemployment of women working for the war effort.

Just ten days after the Armistice agreement, Parliament began passing several Acts that resulted in some improvements to the lot of women in British society. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of November, Parliament passed the Parliament (Qualification) of Women Act. The Act stated, "A woman shall not be disqualified by sex or marriage for being elected to or sitting or voting as a Member of the Commons House of Parliament."<sup>118</sup> The Parliament (Qualification) of Women Act meant that women could now, in addition to being granted the vote (although with some restrictions), stand as a Member of Parliament. In December of 1919, Parliament passed the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, which stated, "A person shall not be disqualified by sex or marriage from the exercise of any public function, or from being appointed to or holding any civil or judicial office or post,

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<sup>118</sup> Parliament (Qualification) of Women Act, 1918, 8 & 9 Geo. 5, c. 47.



or from entering or assuming or carrying on any civil profession or vocation.”<sup>119</sup> In effect, this Act allowed women to enter into the professions, as long as they met University standards for male students to obtain a degree. The Act also stipulated that the provisions would not apply to women’s entrance into the British Civil Service, meaning legally the Service was not required to admit women into its ranks.

Women’s piecemeal movement into the professions shows that, though Parliament may have stipulated that women be allowed into the professional ranks, it was not simple to break down traditional notions of what qualified as an acceptable feminine occupation. As Neal Ferguson stated, “Actual employment of women in formerly all male professions proceeded at an excruciatingly slow pace.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, even with the legal specifications allowing women into new professions in the early 1920s, societal disapproval was still evident. For example, it was not until the end of 1922 that the first woman qualified as a solicitor in Britain. Three years after the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, only four women passed all exams and earned the necessary qualifications to become solicitors in Britain. The following year, only nine women qualified as solicitors.

Another formerly all-male profession, the British Civil Service, was exempt from the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act passed by Parliament. This, however, did not mean that the service was not under pressure from Parliament to admit women to its ranks. Even so, it was not until 1921 that the Civil Service took on a policy in which women could be recruited into its professional ranks. Still, no one – male or female –

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<sup>119</sup> Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, 1919, 9 & 10 Geo. 5, c. 71.

<sup>120</sup> Neal A. Ferguson, “Employment Opportunities and Economic Roles, 1918-1939,” *A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring 1975): 55-68. *JSTOR*, p. 68.

was recruited into the service's administrative ranks until after 1924. That year twenty-five females sat for the examinations, but three of those women were hired by the Service. From 1926 to 1935, only nine women were accepted into the Civil Service.

The medical profession did show some progress during the interwar era. A survey in the mid-1920s showed that out of 3600 women in thirty professions, 2580 were women doctors. Even so, somewhat inexplicably, hospitals – such as St. George's (1919), St. Mary's (1924), Charing Cross, Westminster, and Kings College (1928) – all ceased admitting women for training. The only hospital to continue training women was University College Hospital. Women could qualify as doctors during this era, but clinical training – the aspect crucial for advancement in the medical field – was severely restricted. For instance, it was not until two years after the war, in 1920, that Mrs. Ruth Dingley – who had worked during the war as a doctor in London – qualified for a residency.<sup>121</sup> The overall number of women applying for medical training and therefore, the number actually being trained as doctors, dropped.<sup>122</sup> In fact, Mrs. Dingley could only recall three women doctors – other than herself – at the time.<sup>123</sup>

These occupations would be – for the most part – limited to middle-class women, as well as the small portion of upper-class women, who wanted or needed employment. Working-class women would have found it extremely difficult to obtain employment in one of these professions without substantial sacrifices because of the fees associated with the required education and other qualifications, such as age and entrance examinations. For working-class women, there was an overall decrease in women's employment in

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<sup>121</sup> Ruth Dingley.

<sup>122</sup> Ferguson, pp. 50-51.

<sup>123</sup> Ruth Dingley.

traditional jobs after the war period. For example, the clothing trades, which suffered during the war years, were extremely slow to recover in the post-war era. From 1911 to 1921, the percentage of the female workforce employed in the clothing trades fell from 14.6 to 9.9. However, traditional jobs still dominated women's employment even though by 1923 domestic service was thought to be of lower status than unskilled factory work. Though the numbers of women in domestic service had been declining for forty years, it still constituted approximately one-quarter of the female workforce in 1921.<sup>124</sup>

In fact, Mrs. Lily Broom, who made military equipment during the war, and Mrs. Maisie Nightingale, who worked in the munitions and aircraft industries during the war, were both in domestic service before the war began and returned to service after the war ended. Mrs. Broom, though sad to leave her position at White City, returned to domestic service at the end of the war because the work was easy to find. Mrs. Broom worked as a housekeeper but also cared for her husband and two children.<sup>125</sup> Mrs. Nightingale had worked in domestic service after leaving school, at age 14, and then at a bakery until her marriage. After the war, she received 1s a week from the Labour Exchange and worked in the Maypole Factory making butter until the women's workshop was shut down. She then took a position in domestic service looking after an older lady, but left after a short time.<sup>126</sup> The return of women to domestic service after the war and the encouragement by Labour Exchanges for women to enter service account for the small drop in domestic servants from 1911 to 1921, which was a decline from 1,272,000 to 1,270,000.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Janet McCalman, "The Impact of the First World War on Female Employment in England," *Labour History*, No. 21 (November 1971): 36-47. *JSTOR*, p. 41.

<sup>125</sup> Lily V. Broom.

<sup>126</sup> Maisie Nightingale.

<sup>127</sup> Ferguson, p. 59.

British women did not have nearly as much difficulty in obtaining jobs in traditionally feminine domains, such as teaching and nursing. However, just as before the war years, there were no real opportunities for advancement in these career paths. A nurse's status was still considered to be substantially below that of a doctor. Women teachers were also put back into a traditional role after the war. These women tended to be limited to teaching at primary educational levels, which were paid the lowest salary. In addition, these women often had a very small chance of advancement or of gaining positions in secondary or university education.<sup>128</sup> Like many employed women, female teachers were also encouraged – if not required – to resign upon marriage.

Part of the societal prejudice against women in employment can be traced back to the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act passed by Parliament in August of 1919. The Act directed that any industry that had altered its practices during the war must restore or permit restoration within two months of the Act and maintain such restoration for a period of one year. Additionally, any new trade, which had commenced operation during the war, must – for a period of one year – adopt the practices of a similar trade.<sup>129</sup> Essentially, these provisions meant the employment of men in industry, not women.

The War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry also released its report in 1919, which it had been charged with creating in August of 1917. It was the job of the committee “to investigate and report on the relation which should be maintained between wages of women and men having regard to the interests of both as well as the value of

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<sup>128</sup> Ferguson, pp. 59-60.

<sup>129</sup> Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act, 1919, 9 & 10 Geo. 5, c. 42.

their work.”<sup>130</sup> The Committee initially introduced radical concepts on the employment of women in industry. However, this position was eventually backtracked, with the majority of the Committee maintaining that men’s wages were more important. The Committee majority did protest against returning women’s wages to pre-war levels, but held that a woman’s subsistence wage should be based on a single woman’s needs and should therefore be less than a man’s, who it was assumed would have several dependents to support. Beatrice Webb disagreed with the Committee majority on this and issued her own recommendations in a minority report.<sup>131</sup> Even so, the majority report essentially returned industry to its pre-war status quo, ensuring that women’s employment would be “decided by weight of tradition, social prejudices, and expediency in the narrow sense.”<sup>132</sup> As Gail Braybon argues, “The potential which had shown itself during the war was ignored, and women were still valued for their cheapness, dexterity, tolerance of boredom and lack of ambition.”<sup>133</sup> By January of 1919 all pretense of women moving into other areas of industry was abandoned.<sup>134</sup> This view would persist for much of the interwar years.

Thus, by 1919, most of the jobs in industry during the war offered to working-class women were being given to returning soldiers. Those women who did not want to give up their positions and newfound independence quickly found themselves under attack from those who – a short while before – had offered working women nothing but

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<sup>130</sup> Edith Abbott, “Report of the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry. Vol. I; Vol. II,” *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June 1920): 358-362. *JSTOR*, p. 358.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>133</sup> Braybon, p. 226.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

praise. As Meta Zimmick noted in her study of strategies controlling women's employment in the British Civil Service:

Within a short time after the armistice women were sacked and dumped on to an increasingly restricted labour market. They were also deserted by public opinion which, encouraged from above, switched from approval of 'our girls', who had helped to win the war, to disapproval of 'painted hussies' who, by working for pin money and their own amusements, kept 'warriors' and 'breadwinners' out of jobs.<sup>135</sup>

There were a few cases where women did maintain their position after the war, such as Mrs. Dorothy Haigh, or, in the case of Mrs. Sarah Ann Pidgeon, moved to another section in the factory. Mrs. Haigh worked at Hamble Aviation Works until 1919. She was able to do so because her husband was still away and her mother watched her child. Mrs. Pidgeon had worked for Smith Garrett's Brewery washing barrels during the war. She stated that she and the other women workers told the returning men that they had held their places during the war and that she was not sorry to give up her job as the men deserved it. Mrs. Pidgeon was able to move to another position in the factory, working on the new bottling machines and was even able to return to the job after her marriage. The factory was very good to its women workers after the war, paying their expenses as well as £1 a week in wages.<sup>136</sup>

Even so, the encouragement by the government to push women out of work resulted in women making up three-quarters of those on the dole by May of 1919 and 90 percent of women being discharged from national factories by June of 1919.<sup>137</sup> The

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<sup>135</sup> Meta Zimmeck, "Strategies and Strategems for the Employment of Women in the British Civil Service, 1919-1939," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (December 1984): 901-924. *JSTOR*, p. 902.

<sup>136</sup> Sarah Ann Pidgeon.

<sup>137</sup> Braybon, p. 179; Thom, p. 190.

number of women unemployed in March of 1919 stood at 494,000, two-thirds of whom were still registered as such two months later. By November, the unemployed number of women had been reduced to 29,000. The women who turned to local Labour Exchanges to find work were given the choice to enter a traditional women's trade or give up paid work entirely.<sup>138</sup> These choices tended to be limited to some type of domestic service. For example, in 1919, Labour Exchanges placed 195,000 women in domestic service alone.<sup>139</sup> Additionally, the minimum wage needed for survival in 1919 was estimated to be £2 a week. Women were being offered between 6s and 18s a week, substantially below a living wage.<sup>140</sup>

In 1920, the beginnings of an economic slump appeared, resulting in layoffs – even for traditional women's trades. Thus, by 1921, only 30.8 percent of women were listed as gainfully employed, versus 32.3 percent in 1911. The features of women's work quickly reverted back to the pre-war status quo as well. Women's work tended to be low-paid and confined to a few trades. "Skilled" trades were not available to women, and women were still encouraged to leave work upon marriage.<sup>141</sup> Jane Lewis argued that if married women, mainly the suburban housewife, moved into employment during the interwar years, it was to escape the dreary routine of household tasks, but that it was mostly young and unmarried middle-class women who worked outside of the home.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Braybon and Summerfield, p. 121.

<sup>139</sup> Ferguson, p. 58

<sup>140</sup> Braybon and Summerfield, p. 125.

<sup>141</sup> Braybon, p. 218.

<sup>142</sup> Lewis, p. 219.

The post-war period saw also backlash against women's work in the media resulting in a sense of general mistrust, and sometimes hatred, of women. Ray Strachey summed up the media assault this way:

If women went on working it was from a sort of deliberate wickedness. The tone of the press swung, all in a moment, from extravagant praise to the opposite extreme, and the very same people who had been heroines and the saviours of their country...were not parasites, blacklegs, and limpets. Employers were implored to turn them out as passionately as they had been implored to employ them.<sup>143</sup>

Women went from being heroines and saviors to murders of men. Returning soldiers saw women as sending them off to war without a care, while the women benefitted from the changes on the home front. One of Britain's most famous war poets, Siegfried Sassoon, wrote against women after the war in his poem, "Glory of Women,"

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,  
Or wounded in a mentionable place.  
You worship decorations; you believe  
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.  
You make us shells. You listen with delight,  
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.  
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,  
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.  
You can't believe that British troops "retire"  
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,  
Trampling the terrible corpses – blind with blood.  
O German mother dreaming by the fire,  
While you are knitting socks to send your son  
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.<sup>144</sup>

Sassoon is saying that women turn men into shells, possibly alluding to their war work in the munitions factories, and that women delighted in the tales of men's experiences in the mud and dirt of the trenches. "Glory of Women" highlights the gap between the war

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<sup>143</sup> Quoted in Ferguson, p. 57.

<sup>144</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, "Glory of Women," *Counter Attack and Other Poems* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1918), p. 32.



experiences on the home front and that of the men at the front lines and the resentment returning soldiers held towards those who were not experiencing those horrors just as they did.

### **3.2 Did the War Change British Women's Status?**

Arthur Marwick has stated, "The laments for the dead world of 1914 were essentially products of the sick world of 1921."<sup>145</sup> Marwick argues that the re-imposition of the pre-war status quo resulted from Britons' need for some type of stability, which they believed Britain to be lacking in 1921. The return to status quo in the immediate post-war world meant being shut back into the cage for many British women.

The number of women employed rose from 5,424,000 to 6,265,000 between 1911 and 1931, but of course population figures rose as well. The *percentage* of women in total employment dropped from 32 percent to 31 percent between 1911 and 1931.<sup>146</sup>

Ferguson provides some context:

Between 1911 and 1921 the total female employment increased by about five percent while the total number of women above the age of ten rose by roughly ten percent. In this decade, then, employment did not keep up with female population increase. Between 1921 and 1931, both the number of women and their employment increased ten percent. Looking at it from another angle, roughly one-third of all employable women had jobs in 1911. This proportion remained constant in 1921 and 1931.<sup>147</sup>

Though a few new employment opportunities were open to women – mainly for the educated and, thus, middle and (to a smaller extent) upper class women – there was no real increase in women's employment during the first decade of the post-war era.

Women were still encouraged to take dead-end and repetitive jobs and were certainly

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<sup>145</sup> Marwick, *The Deluge*, p. 9.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>147</sup> Ferguson, pp. 57-58.

expected to leave upon marriage. In fact, between 1921 and 1934 only two women retained their positions in the British Civil Service after marriage, which was fairly standard for professional and slightly better paid women's positions. It was not until 1934, that when women could retain their position in the Civil Service after marriage, but only if the head of their department approved the request.<sup>148</sup> This was also the case for women as teachers. It was not until 1935 that women teachers in London did not automatically lose their position upon marriage.<sup>149</sup> However, the cases in which women were allowed to keep their positions upon marriage proved to be the exceptions to the rule up to the start of the Second World War.

Thus, marriage as woman's ultimate goal continued into the post-war period. Penny Summerfield has stated, "Even though she might get help, however, it was highly exceptional for the responsibility for domestic management to lie anywhere other than with the wife in the 1930s, whatever class she belonged to, and households abounded in which husbands' and wives' roles were rigidly separated."<sup>150</sup> Because 90 percent of married women did not work full time outside of the home in 1931, many feminists argued that women were too dependent on their husbands for allowances to run the home. These feminists recommended a state wage or family allowance for the well being of the wife and children. For many wives, particularly those in the working class who were not employed, this meant finding ways to supplement the husband's wages. These methods would often include pawning, taking in washing or lodgers, or going out charring.<sup>151</sup> Mrs. Ena Knight, who wrote for the Mass Observation project in Britain during the late

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>150</sup> Braybon and Summerfield, p. 144.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145-146.

1930s, talked about her daily woman, Mrs. Davies, whose husband had been unemployed for ten years because of arthritis and who did not qualify for the dole. Because of her husband's unemployment, Mrs. Davies – a 57-year-old woman – had to support the family by working for the Knights and by taking in washing for her married sons and daughters and their families.<sup>152</sup>

The 10 percent of married women who were employed outside of the home during the 1930s needed a nanny or family member to mind their children. These would be women like Mrs. V.E. Collings, who was a journalist and did secretarial work and often worked until 8 p.m. Mrs. Collings had two children, and as she worked long hours and did not live near her place of employment, she would have needed assistance with her children. Mrs. Collings lived with her mother and thus had help with her children while she worked.<sup>153</sup>

Some additional legal changes for the status of women in British society, which were implemented in the 1920s, included the Matrimonial Causes Act, another Representation of the People Act, and the inclusion of the first female cabinet minister. In 1923, Parliament passed the Matrimonial Causes Act, which provided that either a husband or a wife could petition for divorce on the sole grounds of adultery.<sup>154</sup> Previously, a court would not grant a divorce to a wife unless she could prove that her husband was guilty of adultery, but also another matrimonial offense, such as cruelty or desertion. This Act essentially removed the double standard on divorce in Britain.

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<sup>152</sup> Mrs. Ena Mary Knight, "Day Survey, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1937," *Day Surveys, 1937-1938. Mass Observation*. Web. Accessed 25 March 2014.

<sup>153</sup> Mrs. V.E. Collings, "Day Survey, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1937," *Day Surveys, 1937-1938. Mass Observation*. Web. Accessed 25 March 2014.

<sup>154</sup> Matrimonial Causes Act, 1923, 13 & 14 Geo. 5, c. 19.

However, the requirement for either party to prove adultery remained. In 1928, Parliament passed another Representation of the People Act, which granted equal franchise to all British citizens – including women – of at least twenty-one years of age. The Act also made women’s property qualification equal to men’s.<sup>155</sup> Because of the equal franchise, women became the majority in the electorate, which was one of the reasons women’s suffrage was first set at thirty years of age. The number of women qualified to vote after the Act was passed increased to 14,500,000 while qualified men totaled 12,250,000. There was a general expectation that as women would make up the majority of the electorate, much controversy and opposition would surround the bill. However, this proved to be untrue.<sup>156</sup> In 1929 the first woman, Margaret Bondfield, became a cabinet minister, making a significant achievement for women in the closed male world of politics. These improvements would indicate that some societal prejudice against women during the post-war era was receding, but the process of change would be extremely slow and very piecemeal, with a substantial portion of the improvement not occurring until after World War II.

Though drastic changes in women’s status did not occur until the post-World War II era, female employment did improve during the 1930s. Though the percentage of female participation remained constant – at approximately 38 percent for women between the ages of 15 and 59<sup>157</sup> – the types of employment women participated in altered. For example, in 1901, domestic service, the clothing industry, and textile manufacturing

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<sup>155</sup> Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act, 1928, 18 & 19 Geo. 5, c. 12.

<sup>156</sup> “Franchise Bill Today.” *British Library*. British Library Board, n.d. Web. Accessed 30 March 2014.

<sup>157</sup> T.J. Hatton and R.E. Bailey, “Female Labour Force Participation in Interwar Britain,” *Oxford Economic Papers*, New Series, Vol. 40, No. 4 (December 1988): 695-718. *JSTOR*, p. 165.

made up approximately 60 percent of the female workforce. By 1931, however, these three sections of employment had fallen to approximately 41 percent of the workforce, due in part to the decline of these industries during the war years. By this time, 21 percent of the female workforce was composed of clerks, shop assistants, typists, and managers.<sup>158</sup> T.J. Hatton and R.E. Bailey argue that much of the growth in employment during the 1930s was in newer and rapidly growing industries in the South. They highlight the difference in female employment figures from around England and Wales in the 1931 Census (see Table 1).

*Regional Female Participation Rates from the 1931 Census (percentages)*

North 1 (Northumberland and Durham)	23.1	Midland 1 (West)	36.0	Greater London	39.9
North 2 (North Yorks and Cumberland)	27.5	Midland 2 (East)	34.9	South West	27.4
North 3 (East and West Ridings)	35.4	East	26.4	Wales 1 (South)	19.5
North 4 (Lancashire and Cheshire)	41.9	South East	36.1	Wales 2 (North)	28.8

Table 1

Source: T.J. Hatton and R.E. Bailey, "Female Labour Force Participation in Interwar Britain," *Oxford Economic Papers*, New Series, Vol. 40, No. 4 (December 1988): 695-718. *JSTOR*, p. 179.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166-167.

There is a visible increase in female participation from south to north. The exception in the south participation rates is in Greater London, which is due to London's industrial capacity. The divide between the industrial north and agricultural south from the 19<sup>th</sup> century clearly carries over into the interwar years. Wales, one of Britain's great centers of coal mining, shows some of the lowest female employment figures – at 19.5 percent in South Wales. Women had long been excluded from mine work, except for certain surface jobs, and the lack of major industries like those in the north, would explain the lower employment participation rate for females in that geographic area.

Mrs. May Ford detailed the factors of employment in Coventry during the 1930s. Coventry is located in the Midlands of England, and according to Table 3.1, would have hovered around the national average – 38 percent – for female employment during the 1930s. Mrs. Ford described how the Slump of the 1930s affected Coventry's industry and employment. She argued that the vast majority of workers – both men and women – lost their employment. Mrs. Ford said it was not until approximately two years before the Second World War, when a new factory was opened just outside of the town that industry, and therefore employment, picked back up in Coventry. In fact, Mr. Ford had difficulties finding employment for seven years during the 1930s, drawing eighteen months of unemployment during the timespan. Mrs. Ford went on to say that wages in Coventry, which had traditionally been among the highest in the country, were not high during the interwar period.<sup>159</sup> The repetition and assembly line methods used in many new factories, particularly used in women's employment as repetition work was classified as unskilled or semi-skilled, contributed to 55 percent of the female workforce

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<sup>159</sup> May Ford. Interviewed by Ciaran O'Gallagher. *Imperial War Museum*. Imperial War Museum, 1973. Web. Accessed 25 January 2014.

being employed in manufacturing work by 1938.<sup>160</sup> This would explain why more women found it easier to find employment during this period. The work, classified as unskilled, could then be paid lower wages, thus attracting women.

The Slump in Britain during the 1930s turned jobs into “privileges to be reserved for potential bread-winners and fathers of families. Women were commanded to go back to the home.”<sup>161</sup> The women who did accept lower paying jobs during this time were blamed for men’s unemployment, which by 1933 was over three million.<sup>162</sup> This resulted in a cycle of bitterness and resentment between men and women, which continued throughout the interwar era. Additionally, there was a constant push throughout the interwar years to get women back into the home and into their rightful place raising children. Thus, even with some changes in the types of women’s employment during the interwar years, it would not be until after the Second World War that radical progress in women’s employment occurred.

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<sup>160</sup> Vicky Long, “Industrial Homes, Domestic Factories: The Convergence of Public and Private Space in Interwar Britain,” *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (April 2011): 434-464, *JSTOR*, p. 436.

<sup>161</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilization* (New York: Longman’s, Green, and Co., 1935), pp. 111-116.

<sup>162</sup> Braybon and Summerfield, p. 141.

## **Conclusion: Was the First World War a Watershed for Women in British Society?**

Several arguments have emerged on what effect the Great War had on British society and women's position within society. Historian Arthur Marwick has argued that the First World War acted as a deluge, bringing with it striking changes to British society. Janet McCalman summarized this argument, stating,

The Great War is generally regarded as a watershed in the emancipation of English women. Noting the changes in manners and morals in the 'twenties, historians have argued that the war experience, in particular the role played by women workers in the War-economy accelerated the Edwardian revolt against the rigid code of feminine respectability.<sup>163</sup>

Marwick, supported by McCalman's summary, argued for an interpretation of the Great War as an experience bringing great and sudden changes to British society, particularly women's role within society. As women moved into more public roles during the war, many of the rigid Victorian and Edwardian norms of society were tossed out of the window.

Another argument, presented by Gerard De Groot, was that the war – instead of acting as a deluge bringing change to society – was more of a river swelling in a winter storm, sweeping through changes that were already in progress prior to the war years. This argument would support the view that the suffragists' cause had been won prior to the war and the granting of the vote to women over thirty after the war had been secured prior to its start. Additionally, this argument would support the evolution in women's education as well as changes to women's employment. Before the First World War,

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<sup>163</sup> McCalman, p. 36.



starting in the late 1870s, women were allowed to attend lectures and take examinations at universities in Britain. However, these female students were not allowed to receive degrees. It was not until after the war that some universities, such as Oxford in late 1920, fully admitted women as degree seeking students. Cambridge, on the other hand, did not grant degrees to women until 1948.

Even so, it was also during this time that the opportunities for employment for women, particular those of the middle and upper classes, expanded. For example, middle and upper class women were allowed into the lower grades of the Civil Service, mainly on repetition work, and were allowed to train in the medical field, though there was prejudice on the part of male doctors and female nurses, who preferred to work with a male. After the war, women were allowed in limited numbers into new grades – such as administration – of the Civil Service. Some women in the medical field, such as Mrs. Ruth Dingley, who worked as a doctor during the war, finally received their acceptance into clinical training after the war.<sup>164</sup> However, these advances were not without restrictions. For instance, women in the Civil Service were required to leave their position upon marriage until the mid-1930s, at which time the permission of their superior was required for the women to retain their posts.<sup>165</sup> For women in the medical field, such as Mrs. Dingley, it was difficult to obtain clinical training, as many hospitals closed their programs to women. In fact, the only hospital in London open to women for clinical training during the interwar period was University College Hospital.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Ruth Dingley.

<sup>165</sup> Ferguson, p. 67.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

A third argument frequently presented by historians is that the war experience served as a dam in which the attempted changes in British society were blocked and the status quo of the pre-war years was re-established. The metaphor of the dam as post-war British society agrees with the belief held by Beatrice Webb, co-founder of the London School of Economics. According to McCalman, Webb “refused to be deluded by the gush of patriotic gratitude for the ‘women’s war effort’ and insisted that women’s economic status had not changed and therefore neither had their sexual status.”<sup>167</sup> McCalman herself agreed with this historical argument, believing that the war did little for women’s emancipation, did not strengthen women’s status as workers, and thus reinforced women’s inequality.<sup>168</sup> This argument is supported by the fact that after the war there was a push to get women back into the home caring for their husbands and children. Just as before the war, there was a concern with the future of the British race, and it was the job of British women to produce and care for Britain’s next generation.

A more comprehensive argument in terms of women’s status in British society after the First World War involves combining the three theories commonly held by historians. Women’s position, particularly those in the middle and upper classes, in society before the Great War was like a slowly ebbing stream, with occasional breakthroughs concerning women occurring. For example, Married Women’s Property Acts in the 1880s meant that women could retain their property after marriage, had legal claim to their wages or income, and could sue to keep their property.<sup>169</sup> It was also during the late Victorian era that women were allowed to sit on local Education Boards

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>169</sup> Married Women’s Property Act, 1870, 33 & 34 Vict., c. 93 and Married Women’s Property Act, 1882, 45 & 46 Vict., c. 75.

and vote in local elections. These changes were beneficial to women of the middle and upper classes. Changes for the working-class women in Victorian Britain were slow and very piecemeal. For example, Factory Acts passed by Parliament between 1844 and 1901 limited women's hours, aimed to set a minimum wage, and attempted to improve working conditions in the factories. The requirements had many loopholes, and many traditional women's industries – such as laundries – were not covered under the Acts, which meant the majority of working-class women's labor was abused.

Women's status during the war, however, was drastically altered, much like a deluge. Women in Britain threw themselves into the war effort with zeal taking on jobs, which many believed women incapable of. For instance, during the war women moved into the transportation industry, working as ticket collectors, conductresses, porters, and cleaners.<sup>170</sup> Women in the Land Army and the Forestry Corps cared for the nation's livestock, tilled and planted crops, as well as cut and hauled away trees. These were women like Mrs. Mary Lees, who cared for twelve cows, lit the fires, cared for the horses, fed the cows, pigs, and calves, and cleaned the sheds.<sup>171</sup> The most visible and publicized women workers during the war by far were those in munitions, or Munitionettes as they came to be called. These women, such as Mrs. Elsa Thomas, who after three to four weeks of training working with explosives produced the ammunition needed by the men on the front lines as well as any other equipment needed by the Army.<sup>172</sup> Women also moved into other areas of industry such as the police force, where women were responsible for making sure munitions workers did not bring banned

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<sup>170</sup> Braybon, p. 64.

<sup>171</sup> Mary Lees.

<sup>172</sup> Elsa Thomas.

materials, like metal, into the factories as well as monitoring women's public behavior for any immoral conduct.<sup>173</sup> Additionally, women like Mrs. Sarah Pidgeon moved into the brewery industry washing out and moving the barrels and casks in which ale was stored.<sup>174</sup>

The horrors of the war, however, resulted in a general attempt to return British society back to the pre-war status quo once hostilities had ceased. This resulted in British society becoming a dam, blocking change, particularly in the case of women. Women were encouraged to move back into more traditional industries, particularly that of domestic service, which had been suffering a shortage during the war years. Mrs. Lily Broom was one of these women. She had been a domestic servant before the war, and after she was no longer needed at White City making equipment for the Army, she returned to domestic service as a housekeeper because the job was easy to find.<sup>175</sup> More accurately, women's status in British society after the war can be compared to that of a swollen river pushing against a leaking dam, in which sporadic progress for women was pushed through the holes of the dam. Legal changes, in the form of statutes passed by Parliament, allowed women to move into different aspects of society. For example, the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act removed the legal barriers keeping women from qualifying in the professions.<sup>176</sup> In addition, the Parliament (Qualification) of Women Act removed the legal barrier preventing women from standing as Members of Parliament.<sup>177</sup> In 1918, women over thirty, meeting certain property qualifications, were

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<sup>173</sup> Woollacott, p. 176.

<sup>174</sup> Pidgeon, Sarah Ann.

<sup>175</sup> Lily V. Broom.

<sup>176</sup> Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, 1919, 9 & 10 Geo. 5, c. 71.

<sup>177</sup> Parliament (Qualification) of Women Act, 1918, 8 & 9 Geo. 5, c. 47.

allowed to vote.<sup>178</sup> In 1928, an equal franchise act lowered this age to twenty-one and made women the majority of the electorate.<sup>179</sup> These legal changes, as well as others, were several large steps forward for women's equality during the interwar years.

Early changes in women's social position was very much aimed at the educated, influential, and wealthy women of Britain. This meant progress for the upper and middle classes of British women. A few smaller changes, such as establishing set wages in certain women's industries, meant improvements for Britain's working class women. Even so, the majority of progress for women's social position before and after the Great War benefitted the women with higher standing on Britain's social scale. It would not be until after the Second World War that drastic changes in women's position in society occurred.

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<sup>178</sup> Representation of the People Act, 1918. 8 & 9 Geo. 5. c. 50.

<sup>179</sup> Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act, 1928, 18 & 19 Geo. 5, c. 12.

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