

Status of Women

1914 to 1945

... During WWI women were brought into the labour force as new jobs were created and as men left their jobs to join the armed forces. Most found familiar jobs as secretaries, clerks, typists and factory workers. For the first time, however, many women worked in heavy industry, particularly the munitions industry where, by 1917 there were 35 000 women employed in munitions factories in Ontario and Montréal. Most of the women who worked during the war were unmarried. Although their wages increased during the war years, they never equalled men's; in the munitions factories women's wages were 50-80% of those paid to men. Despite the movement of women into a few new areas of the economy, domestic service remained the most common female occupation.

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Cutbacks and layoffs of women took place in the years immediately following the war, but by the 1920s women had re-established their wartime levels of labour-force involvement. Some new "female" professions, such as library work, social work (see Charlotte Whitton) and physiotherapy were emerging, but the most rapidly growing occupations were clerical. Domestic service remained the most common paid occupation of women, but for the first time in the century the percentage of women working as domestics fell below 20%. Women were entering universities in large numbers and, by 1930, 23% of all undergraduates and 35% of all graduate students were female. The Great Depression reversed this trend and in the 1930s many women were forced back into domestic service. Federal employment figures show that even in the garment industry, a long time employer of women, they were being laid off at a higher rate than men.

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