

Reporting the War: Women in World War I

During the First World War, many women were recruited into jobs that had previously been reserved for men, which gave them much more financial independence than before. It was also a time when women became visible in politics, championing issues from female suffrage to rent strikes and the peace movement. It was a period of social change, but when the men returned after the war what was the long-term legacy for women?

This resource explores the achievements of women in this period of social upheaval and change and asks pupils to consider the extent to which their efforts affected the lives of future generations.

It is designed to develop literacy, communication and critical thinking skills through role-play interviews, note taking, discussion and debate .

Set the Scene

Women in Medicine

Women did difficult and sometimes dangerous work during the war, caring for the sick and wounded both at home and abroad, in military hospitals and aboard hospital ships. One particularly noteworthy group of female medics operated the Scottish Women's Hospitals. The SWH was organised by Dr Elsie Inglis, an early female medical graduate. Biographies: Elsie Inglis and Marie Chisholm

Women in Work

During WWI, many women entered the workforce for the first time to fill jobs left vacant by men going off to fight. Working class women took up employment in heavy industry, attracted by the better pay and increased personal freedom compared to what they experienced in traditional pre-war employment such as domestic service. Women also stepped into other jobs vacated by men, for example working as police, tram drivers and forestry labourers. One important industry was munitions, as factories across the UK struggled to supply the amount of shells and ammunition needed; one of the most famous munitions factories was HM Factory Gretna in southern Scotland. Most jobs for women quickly disappeared at the end of the war when men returned home.

Biographies: Edith Smith, Lizzie Robinson, Elsie Inglis and Marie Chisholm

Women in Politics

In 1914, women in the UK could not vote. Women had been actively campaigning for the right to vote, but when war broke out they split into two factions:

- the more moderate suffragists of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
- the more radical suffragettes of the Women's Social and Political Union, who adopted a policy of drastic civil disobedience.

Suffragists and suffragettes held regular meetings, led marches and demonstrations and circulated petitions.

When war was declared, suffrage organisations supported the war effort by organising charitable donations, undertaking war work and volunteering. By serving their country, they wanted to show that they played important roles in society and were capable of doing the same work as men - and should have the same rights as they did. The suffragists, by contrast, opposed the war.

In 1918, women's long and hard-fought campaign for voting rights was rewarded with the Representation of the People Act. However, it gave the vote only to women over the age of 30 who owned property (or were married to a property owner). It was not until the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 that women were given the same rights.

Biographies: Emmeline Pankhurst, Helen Crawfurd

The Rent Strikes

In 1915, opportunistic landlords in Glasgow drastically raised rents for working class tenants at a time when many men were away on active service or employed in war work. The women of Glasgow took radical action under the leadership of Mary Barbour, a housewife in Govan, among others. They banded together, refusing to pay the high rents and forcibly resisting evictions. The strikers were called 'Mrs Barbour's Army'.

Biographies: Mary Barbour, Helen Crawfurd

Women's Peace Movement

Many women were pacifists who protested the First World War and especially objected to conscription. Glasgow was a hotbed of anti-war activity: the city's working-class socialists actively campaigned for peace throughout 1914-18. In the summer of 1916, the suffragette Helen Crawfurd organised a gathering of 200 women from different social and political organisations to form the Women's Peace Crusade. The crusaders met, marched and demonstrated in neighbourhoods and public spaces around Glasgow.

The Women's Peace Crusade movement quickly spread to other industrial cities across the UK. It united women who opposed the war not just for political reasons, but because of its impact on their families, homes and jobs. The Crusade attempted to join religious pacifists and socialists into one mass anti-war movement. It came under considerable attack in the press, as well as physical attacks at demonstrations.

Women and Sport

Women's football was established before WWI, although it was not well received. This changed when the Football Association suspended its men's matches at the end of the 1914-15 season. Many women's football teams were formed among the female workforce at munitions factories. At first, the novelty of women playing football was used to raise money for war charities. As teams formed, people started to enjoy the matches for the skill and ability of the players.

Women's football remained popular even after the Armistice, with crowds of up to 60,000 watching women's matches in 1920. However, in 1921 the FA banned women from playing football on any of their club grounds. The ban was not lifted until 1971.

Second and Third Level

Tasks

1. In groups, either give the pupils a biography provided in this pack or ask them to carry out their own research.
2. The group should prepare to conduct an interview with the person presented in their biography or the person that they have researched. To prepare, the pupils should read the biography, decide what the important points are and formulate questions accordingly.
3. They should then allocate the following roles:
 - news anchor who introduces the scene/subject
 - the interviewer(s)
 - the interviewee (the subject of the biography)
4. Staying in character, pupils present their interview to the rest of the class. The class should take notes to help them take part in discussion after the interview.
5. After the interviews, the pupils should have gained some insight into how women's lives changed during and after World War I. Some discussion points are given below to prompt debate.

Some discussion points

- Describe the ways that women's lives changed during WWI
- Describe the types of work women did during the war
- Explain the reasons why many women's lives changed significantly during WWI
- Describe the different campaigns of the suffragettes and suffragists and the methods used by women to campaign for the vote
- What was the impact of the two different campaigns?
- Why did the rent strikes take place?

- Who organised the rent strikes and what actions did they take?
- Did the rent strikers succeed?
- Explain the reasons why women gained the vote in 1919
- What factors were the most important in changing attitudes and in women being allowed to vote?
- What do you believe was the biggest impact that the war had upon women's lives? Were all of the changes permanent?

Curriculum Experiences & Outcomes

Second

When I engage with others, I can make a relevant contribution, encourage others to contribute and acknowledge that they have the right to hold a different opinion. I can respond in ways appropriate to my role and use contributions to reflect on, clarify or adapt thinking. **LIT 3-02a**

Third

When I engage with others I can make a relevant contribution, ensure that everyone has an opportunity to contribute and encourage them to take account of others' points of view or alternative solutions. I can respond in ways appropriate to my role, exploring and expanding on contributions to reflect on, clarify or adapt thinking. **LIT 4-02a**

As I listen or watch, I can make notes and organise these to develop thinking, help retain and recall information, explore issues and create new texts, using my own words as appropriate. **LIT 3-05a / LIT 4-05a**

I can independently select ideas and relevant information for different purposes, organise essential information or ideas and any supporting detail in a logical order, and use suitable vocabulary to communicate effectively with my audience. **LIT 3-06a / LIT 4-06a**

Core Skills

- Thinking
- Communication
- Literacy
- Working with others

Approaches & Methods

- Creative learning

Materials & Resources

Reporting the War Activity Sheet Biographies