

Women and the war effort in Britain, 1914-1918

1. Source A is the front cover of the June 1917 edition of the 'The War Worker', a magazine published during the First World War.

The picture on the front cover shows a soldier and a woman factory worker, both holding union flags and stepping up together onto a platform. This picture is no doubt aimed at the women of the country, encouraging them to stand up, unite and join the men in their common cause- to contribute towards the British war effort. It shows the equality of men and women, and their duty and ability to contribute towards British victory. Both are standing at the same level, proudly holding the union flag.

However, the equality represented here was not reality- women were paid significantly less than men, and didn't have the same rights (e.g. exclusion from most trade unions etc.) This source is simply an idealisation- one side of the truth.

To call this source useless would be a mistake. It may be biased, one-sided and idealistic, but it is actually a good source. It shows the high level of patriotism that the government were encouraging, and what they encouraged the women of Britain to aspire to. They obviously saw women as important in the short term, even if they weren't willing to make them permanently equal.

2. Source C is an extract from a book (written 1994). It records that a policewoman's experience was that women were prone to striking, i.e. they disliked work, and were very unenthusiastic.

However, Source E's content is very different. The source is an excerpt from the Daily Chronicle (a respected newspaper) at the time in 1915 and describes the women's enthusiasm as 'historic', and their spirit 'unconquerable and undivided'.

Although Source C has the advantage of hindsight, it is personal and specific, and doesn't give a general view.

However, on the contrary Source E is rather generalised and not specific enough. Also, we have to take into account that the paper would have been 'encouraged' by the Ministry of Information to be positive, so as to increase the morale of the populous.

Thus, with all taken into account, we can say that both have their uses, one reliable as a personal source, and the other as a general one.

3. Source D is an extract written by Rex Pope in 1991, almost eighty years after the First World War. It states that women working were greeted with negativity from the 'threatened' males, and were 'victims of hostility and sabotage'. However, Source G is a praise of the

contribution made by women to the war effort, written in War Illustrated magazine during wartime. It calls the woman a comrade and a helper to the man, who can do her share in times of crisis.

I think that these two sources differ so because Source G is written at the time, aimed to encourage the women of Britain to be 'helpers and comrades' and make an effort to contribute towards the effort- propaganda, probably instructed by the British government's Ministry of Information. However, Source D has the advantage of 75 years of hindsight, and there is no need to lie so as to encourage women workers- the war is over.

4. Source E, 'a photograph of a woman conductor on a London bus during the First World War', entitled 'Doing a man's job', was probably a staged as a propaganda picture (taken on order of the government's Ministry of Information) rather than a personal one. We can tell this from the woman conductor's pose, the title (usually not the sort to given to personal photographs) and the fact that there are actually no people on the bus, which is rather suspicious.

The number of women working in transport increased approximately six times between 1914 and 1918. This was as a result of the government encouraging women to work in the public sector and 'do men's jobs'. I believe that this picture is a piece of propaganda aimed at doing precisely that.

5. Source H, a series of silent films made during the Great War, tells us lots about the role of women during the war. It shows women working both at the workplace and at home, emphasising that important contribution to the war effort can be made in both places. This is a typical technique of the Ministry of Information, who produced the films for propaganda purposes. The film illustrates that women were given the equality of men, and made to do manual labour for the first time (i.e. changing tyres etc. in the War Women).

However, this was not strictly the case. Women were not given the same wages, real conditions (e.g. medical care) and rights (e.g. access to trade unions etc.) as men, and suffered as a consequence of doing men's jobs without the same support.

6. War work for women during the First World War proved to be a stepping-stone forward for British women. Women's jobs began to vary more towards manual labour, and other such sectors in which only men would have sought employment in before and would have been deemed 'unsuitable' for women. Fewer women occupied themselves exclusively with household chores, and more headed for the workplace.

This change is illustrated most notably in source H, in particular 'War Women', in which Land Army girls work men's jobs changing tyres etc. and 'A Day in the Life of a Munitions Worker', where a woman demonstrates her job as a worker in a munitions factory. However, in both cases the scenes look staged, especially in 'A Day in the Life of a Munitions Worker'

(in which the camera is set to a single angle, focusing on one single woman in a pretty empty and inactive factory- surely this would not have been the rate of work in a shell factory in Wartime Britain?). Many women also volunteered for jobs in nursing, farming and the armed forces, as demonstrated in 'WRAF', one of the films of Source H, in which women actively take part in the clerical, cleaning and fabric duties of the RAF, as well as handling planes (but obviously not flying them!).

Before the First World War, the range of jobs women could apply for would have been pretty narrow in comparison with today's equal choice. Although a job would have been easily obtainable in a house as a servant or in some kind of workshop, there were many areas closed to women. These included transport, banks, and business firms- the only professions they could adopt were either teaching or nursing. It was the need for more men in the trenches, and the consequent enforcement of conscription, that led to the departure of many men from their jobs, and the subsequent need to replace them.

It was after British victory, and inevitable return of many soldiers to their jobs, that there was a lot of pressure from the press to hand men their jobs back, and so many women had to fall into unemployment again as before, whether they like it or not, despite helping out in the 'sticky' situation. So successful were these campaigns from the press that the employment level in 1921, two years after the war, was significantly lower than it had been ten years before, before the start of the war.

However, it is true that women's rights were most probably improved as a kind of 'reward' for their work during the war. Many more women did get the vote as a result of the 1918 'Representation of the People' Act, although these were women 'over 30, ratepayers or married to ratepayers' - technically now, women were almost equal, but this did not really improve the life of the majority of the women war workers, who were young, single and working-class 'Munitionettes' (as seen in Source H's film 'A Day in the Life of a Munitions Worker'). However, with the struggles of such women as Nancy Aster (1919) and the rebellious sixties, women were given total equality, and in 1979 Margaret Thatcher became the first woman Prime Minister, which signified total equality for women in Britain.

I think that the work done by women in the First World War could have been a significant 'stepping-stone' forward for British women; however, I don't think it was the final leap- it just contributed to the building up of it.