Appendix 1:Backgrounder Lesson: Home Front, Work Front

It is important to remember some key facts about women’s participation in the paid labour force in modern Canada. The entry of women into paid industrial and other work in the 20th century was a significant change in Canadian society. “Until the last third of the twentieth century, most adult women were not part of the paid labour force.” In 1901, 86% were not in the paid labour force. In addition, most adult women were married, and until the 1950s women in the paid labour force usually left upon marriage. By the end of the 20th century, most women were working for pay for most of their married life. Even so, in general, most work was ‘traditional women’s work’: child care, domestic labour and related jobs unless in rural labour where work was in the home plus outdoor work.

Immigrant and Indigenous women worked in resource processing (Japanese, Chinese, and indigenous women in fish canneries, for example.) During the Great Depression, work relief programs and camps were closed to women. The only program for women was domestic service training, which was a job that offered long hours, low wages, and a lack of freedom.

Women also had to consider childcare. In some cases, government provided subsidies and childcare spaces as married women increasingly entered the paid labour force. Therefore, jobs for women would need to have adequate pay and like today, would need to recognize that women often provide/arrange childcare. Any job that offered the opposite of domestic labour would likely be considered attractive.

**Experience(s) of women and role(s) of women on the home front**

While much attention is often focused on wartime industries, it is important to note that most women during the war were not working in munitions factories or shipbuilding. Many women would be barred from such work, and more were engaged in traditional paid and unpaid labour. They cared for children, they tended the farms and animals, and they did practical work in the home to feed, clothe, and care for families. “During the First and Second World Wars, women who entered the paid labour force in non-traditional jobs attracted public recognition but by far the largest contribution made by Canadian women to the war effort was through their unpaid labour in the home and their volunteer work”[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Legacy**

While it may be true that the participation of women in wartime industry did not immediately result in a permanent place for women in the paid workforce and that the postwar period was a setback for women’s economic equality, there was an effect on women workers, especially if they were in a unionized environment. This vignette shows how the experience of participation in labour activity led to many women using tools and making change later. It did, in many cases, allow women’s voices to be heard.

1. COOK, SHARON ANNE, LORNA R. McLEAN, and KATE O’ROURKE, eds. *Framing Our Past: Constructing Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century*, p. 327. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)