

Session Plan 7

The roles of women on the Home Front

This session explores the different roles of women on the Home Front during the First World War and considers how social attitudes about women and their roles changed as a result of the war. It also builds connections with the suffragette movement and the impacts of their campaign.

The activities are designed to support the National Curriculums in England, Wales and Northern Ireland at Key Stage 2 and are suitable for pupils in Scotland following the broad general education phase of the Curriculum of Excellence. They are relevant for the KS2 'Local History Study' in England and Wales, 'The World Around Us' at KS2 in Northern Ireland, and support experiences and outcomes in Social Studies at Levels 2-4 in the broad general education of the Curriculum for Excellence.

The activities are also tailored for youth groups such as Young Archaeologists' Clubs, Scouts and Guides.

Session aims

- For your group to understand and describe the roles undertaken by women on the Home Front.
- For your group to investigate how these roles supported the war effort.
- For your group to discuss how social attitudes about women's roles changed due to the First World War.
- For your group to think about how the First World War affected the suffragette movement.
- For your group to consider the places where women worked throughout the war and to think about what archaeological evidence for these places might survive today.

Session outcomes

Your class or group will have learned about the significant roles that women played on the Home Front and learned about the jobs they undertook to aid the war effort.



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Resources required

Illustrations:

The Home Front Legacy project commissioned five special illustrations that depict aspects of life on the Home Front 1914-18.

The illustrations show different aspects of the Home Front Landscapes of the United Kingdom during the First World War. They can be downloaded as A3-sized PDFs using the links below:

- Town
 - Air
 - Army Camp
 - Countryside
 - Coast

Home Front role descriptions (below)

These describe some of the roles undertaken by women on the Home Front.

Images of women undertaking roles on the Home Front from the collections of the Imperial War Museum (below)

These photographs can be used for reference and to start discussions between your pupils or group members.

Session plan

You can use this activity to support and extend earlier work undertaken in *Session Plan 2: How were people at home involved in the First World War?*

During the First World War, many women were employed to support the war effort, and they took on much of the work carried out by men in the pre-war period. Their work helped keep the country fed during food shortages, ensured the armed forces were adequately supplied, and generally kept the country running smoothly.

Begin by discussing as a whole class or group why it was necessary for women to take on work previously undertaken by men.

Using the role descriptions (below), challenge your pupils or group members to find women undertaking the job role described somewhere within the Home Front Legacy illustrations.

Writing challenge... Can your pupils or group members choose one of the roles undertaken by women on the Home Front and write a job description for it? They will need to consider what the role entails, as well as the skills or character traits needed in someone undertaking the role.

Jobs undertaken by women on the Home Front did vary significantly in different parts of the country.

- In rural areas, women were employed in agriculture;
 - In towns and cities, they may have worked in factories, the fire service, the postal service and hospitals or driving trains, ambulances and trams;
 - Around the coast, women may have been responsible for transporting goods by sea on traditional barges.

Challenge your pupils or group members to think about what evidence of these roles might survive today and which might be available to record for the Home Front Legacy project.

Time to talk... Encourage your pupils or group members to discuss in small groups what the social impacts of women undertaking these roles might have been. How do they think men would have felt about women taking on their jobs? Do your pupils or group members think there could have been tensions after the war between men and women about their respective roles in society?

You might like to introduce the concept of suffrage. Can your pupils or group members describe what this term means and how the Suffragette movement was affected by the outbreak of the First World War?

The Suffragette movement campaigned to gain women the right to vote. In 1897, Millicent Fawcett established the National Union of Women's Suffrage; at this time, only men were allowed to vote and Millicent Fawcett wanted women to have the same rights as men. Fawcett believed in peaceful protest and didn't condone violent

acts as she saw these as counterproductive. Fawcett's progress was slow, and most male MPs still believed that women should not have the right to vote.

In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst, along with daughters Sylvia and Christabel, established the Women's Social and Political Union. This group became known as the Suffragettes and would use any method possible to secure women the right to vote. The Suffragette movement was responsible for many acts of violence and disruption in the first decade of the 20th century, and their actions became increasingly extreme. They carried out their campaign by chaining themselves to the railings of Buckingham Palace, attacking politicians on their way to work, and even breaking the windows of Number 10 Downing Street, for example. Probably the most remembered act associated with the Suffragettes was at the famous horserace called the Derby in 1913. Suffragette Emily Wilding Davison threw herself under the King's horse, Anmer, as it was racing. Davison was killed, and the Suffragettes had their first martyr.

Suffragettes who were arrested for their violent campaigning and imprisoned frequently went on hunger strike whilst in jail. Prison doctors often brutally force-fed them to stop them from dying while in prison and becoming martyrs for the Suffragette cause. In 1913, however, the government introduced the 'Prisoners, Temporary Discharge for Health Act', which became known as the 'Cat and Mouse Act'. The Act meant that the Suffragettes were allowed to maintain their hunger strikes in jail but were released before they starved to death on health grounds; later, when they regained their strength, they were often rearrested and imprisoned again, whereupon they would start their hunger strikes once again. It was like a game of 'Cat and Mouse', hence the nickname given to the government's act.

At the outbreak of war in August 1914, Emmeline Pankhurst instructed the Suffragettes to halt all their activity and support the war effort as best they could. Thousands of women worked in munitions factories to ensure that the soldiers on the frontlines did not run out of vital ammunition and weapons. Women also worked on public transport, driving buses and trams, as well as working in roles in the Post Office and in surface jobs in coal mines. Vital work was also undertaken by women on farms to keep Britain fed.

Women proved their worth to society in roles outside the traditional sphere of the home and family during the First World War. Without women working in factories and farms and elsewhere, Britain would have almost certainly not won the war.

In February 1918, The Representation of the People Act was passed. This allowed women over the age of 30 who owned property to vote. It was largely accepted that the Act was passed as a 'reward' for women's work during the war. Another reason for the Act passing through the House of Commons and the House of Lords, as well as gaining Royal Assent, may have been fear on the part of the politicians of the Suffragettes returning to their pre-war campaign of violence and disruption.

Although a step in the right direction, the act actually excluded most of the women who supported the war effort by working in the factories and fields, as many were under the age of 30 and didn't own property. It wasn't until 1928 that all women received the right to vote when the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act was passed by parliament.

Inspirational idea... using their knowledge of the Suffragette's campaign from the information above and research on the internet, challenge your pupils or group members to write a campaign speech or protest song to advocate votes for women. Can they use women's work to support the war effort on the Home Front to justify why they believe that women should have the right to vote?

You might like to run a protest rally at which your pupils or group members deliver their speeches and songs. Can they design placards and posters to hold up during the rally? You could invite parents and other family members to observe your rally!

For additional resources on the Suffragette movement, visit the [Women and the Vote](#) section of the UK Parliament website.

Summing up... working in small teams or as a whole class/group, can you create three paragraphs that describe attitudes regarding women's roles within society **before** the First World War, **during** the First World War, and **after** the First World War.

Final questions

At the end of this session, your pupils or group members should be able to answer the following questions: ***What roles did women undertake on the Home Front during the First World War? How might this have affected attitudes about women's roles within society after the war? How was the Suffragette movement affected by the outbreak of the First World War, and how might women's work during the war have influenced the ongoing campaign to achieve equal voting rights for women?***

Role descriptions

Challenge your pupils or group members to find women undertaking the following roles within the Home Front Legacy illustrations:

1. As more men were recruited into the army, women were recruited to take on the jobs the men left behind. Many women took up work in the postal service, delivering letters and parcels.
 2. Women started working on farms harvesting crops, milking cows and cutting down trees. They wore a distinctive uniform consisting of a wide-brimmed hat and khaki-coloured trench coat. This work helped feed the country when food shortages started to take hold.
 3. Following the 'Shell Crisis' of 1915, the Ministry of Munitions encouraged factories to recruit women to produce weapons and munitions. The army needed Munitions and weapons to halt attacks by the enemy.
 4. Women worked in the many Voluntary Aid Detachment hospitals that were established during the First World War. Women even drove the ambulances that transported the wounded soldiers to the hospitals.
 5. Some women started work on traditional barges, working alongside their husbands to transport supplies around the coast. The supply of raw materials, including coal, timber and metal ore, was very important during the First World War, and many of these resources were transported by sea.

Images of women on the Home Front (below)

These images are taken from the Imperial War Museum's collection and depict women undertaking different roles on the Home Front throughout the First World War. Use the images to start your discussions or to provide inspiration for creative writing. [More images are available on the Imperial War Museum's website](#).



A female railway worker operating signals in Annesley Sidings cabin near Hucknall, September, 1918. © IWM (Q 28147)



A female member of the Special Constabulary (Special Police Patrol), National Union of Women Workers. Taken in December 1917. © IWM (Q 30337)



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A member of the Women's Land Army, National Service. Taken in December 1917.
© IWM (Q 30351)

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Female workers spraying tar on a London road. © IWM (Q 30875)



Female window cleaners at work. © IWM (Q 30950)



Post woman moving off on a bicycle after clearing the mail from a letter box.



Fire women at work with a hose and hydrant at a national shell filling factory.



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A British Red Cross nurse. © IWM (Q 31011)



A female tram driver, wearing the uniform coat of the London Corporation Transport, at the controls, Lowestoft, Suffolk. © IWM (Q 31033)



A female police patrol warning small boys outside of Euston Station, 1918.

© IWM (Q 31089)



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Mrs Kitchener, a female gravedigger, carries on her husband's business whilst he serves on the front, Aley Green Cemetery, Luton. © IWM (Q 31236)