

Women's Mobilization for War (Newfoundland)

By [Terry Bishop Stirling](#)

Summary

During the First World War, Newfoundland women provided comforts and nursing services for servicemen. These contributions did not challenge gender norms. However, women's contribution to the war effort raised appreciation for their traditional skills, strengthening the suffrage movement and leading to an expansion of women's voluntary community work in the interwar period.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Mobilizing the Economy](#)
- [3 The Women's Patriotic Association](#)
 - [3.1 Organizing Comforts](#)
 - [3.2 WPA Red Cross Work](#)
 - [3.3 Women and Recruitment](#)
 - [3.4 The Long-Term Impact of the WPA](#)
- [4 Nurses and VADs](#)
- [5 War Work and the Suffrage Movement](#)
- [6 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

[Newfoundland's](#) response to the First World War demonstrated the colony's loyalty to the British [Empire](#) and the same naive assumptions about the war's significance, length, and cost which characterized much of the immediate reaction in [Britain](#) and [Canada](#). Women suffered through the loss and injury of their sons, brothers, friends and sweethearts, while taking on increased burdens to keep their families and communities functioning. Trained [nurses](#), first aid workers, and ambulance drivers served at [home](#) and overseas. For the most part, women's war efforts did not include taking over men's jobs, but built on their traditional skills, such as home nursing, sewing, and knitting. While women had long organized to support their communities and [churches](#), during the war they did so on an unprecedented

scale, and forged connections that bridged traditional class, regional, and religious lines. This resulted in increased political and social action after the war. While the war did not challenge gender roles, it increased women's visibility as community leaders and politicized many women throughout the country.

Mobilizing the Economy

The war's economic impact on Newfoundland was mixed at best. In the long run both men and women bore the cost of war loans used to [finance](#) the war effort. During the conflict, while there was an increased demand for Newfoundland's natural resources, the military's demand for young men made it hard for families to increase production. Many parents, and particularly widowed mothers, depended on the support of sons in an economy overwhelmingly reliant on the physical labour of young men; the loss of this help could be devastating. There is no evidence that significant numbers of women replaced their brothers in the fishing boats, but they may have increased their traditional role in the inshore family-based fishery, drying cod as part of the shore crew. Women and girls likely also took on more of the subsistence chores normally shared with men, such as hauling wood or turning ground for gardens.

Newfoundland's small manufacturing sector focussed on domestic consumer products. No war industry developed, so women did not share a common experience with their counterparts in Canada and Britain who found both patriotic and lucrative war work in munitions factories and shipbuilding yards. While a few more factory, clerical or retail jobs may have opened up, war did not bring significant changes in job opportunities for women; as late as 1935, 36.7 percent of St. John's working women were employed in domestic service.¹

Inflation eroded many of the gains workers made from increased demands for natural resources. This was especially true in St. John's, where fewer people owned their homes or had opportunities to provide their own fuel and food. As inflation increased and evidence emerged that merchants were [profiteering](#) on vital products such as coal and flour, labour unrest grew. Union membership and job action increased, especially among unskilled and semi-skilled labourers. In August 1918 women workers in St. John's formed a ladies branch of the Newfoundland Industrial Workers Association led by government clerk [Julia Salter Earle \(1878-1945\)](#). Although a branch of the larger men's organization, the women's union was controlled by its female executive.² Both male and female labourers fought for increased pay and better working conditions, and while their gains were short lived due to a severe post-war recession, their wartime activity represented increased politicization and assertiveness for working women.

The Women's Patriotic Association

Organizing Comforts

The most common way that Newfoundland women mobilized to support the war effort was through a countrywide voluntary organization. On 31 August 1914 the governor's wife, [Margaret Davidson \(1871-1964\)](#), called a public meeting in St. John's. The 700 women who attended formed the Women's Patriotic Association (WPA), which provided clothing and other comforts for the country's servicemen. The group was associated with Queen Mary's Needlework Guild, founded by the Queen in 1914. The first executive included [Armine Gosling \(1861-1942\)](#), wife of St. John's mayor, and [Julia Horwood \(1869-1959\)](#), wife of the Chief Justice. Other executive members included the wives of St. John's merchants and professional men.³ While WPA work was directed by elite [urban](#) women, the organization spread quickly; by war's end there were 219 WPA branches and over 15,000 members throughout the country.⁴ Pre-existing church and secular women's groups also continued to function, but they added war work to their activities.

For the first three years of the war, Government House became the centre of women's war work. Two upstairs bedrooms were used four days a week as cutting rooms, which by spring 1917 had turned out 2,150 khaki flannel shirts, 400 pairs of pyjamas, 494 nightshirts, 1,532 mufflers, 1,654 bags for [hospitals](#), and seventy-six pillowcases. The ballroom was filled with tables, sewing machines, and seats for fifty; work groups met there four days a week. WPA leaders called the billiard room their "war office."⁵

WPA work drew on traditional skills such as knitting and sewing. Branches were set up in the outports and company towns by appealing first to teachers and the wives of clergymen, doctors and merchants, but membership crossed class and religious lines. Many WPA branches were attached to or grew out of church groups, labour organizations such as the ladies auxiliary of the Society of United Fishermen, pre-existing patriotic groups such as the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire, sewing circles, bible classes, and literary clubs. [Rural](#) groups raised money through donations and events such as concerts and bake sales. Over the next four years, like similar groups throughout the empire, the WPA distributed items such as socks, pyjamas, bed jackets and cigarettes to servicemen. Women's experience knitting wool socks for fishermen, loggers, and trappers proved invaluable for men in the cold trenches of [Gallipoli](#), [France](#), and [Belgium](#). By war's end, Newfoundland women had sent at least 30,000 pairs of socks to Newfoundland and Allied troops.⁶

WPA Red Cross Work

WPA members also contributed to Allied medical needs by organizing two [Red Cross](#) branches in the capital and seven outside of St. John's. Members worked with the St. John Brigade and were advised by trained nurses. In the capital, more than fifty workers met twice weekly and made dressings. Young girls rolled and piled bandages, which were sterilized by nurses at the General Hospital. Women throughout the country donated cloth for bandages and picked sphagnum moss to be used in dressings.

The Red Cross committee also coordinated nursing work, organizing the transportation of nurses and first aid training for women eager to serve at home and overseas. Eventually WPA Red Cross funds supported a ward of thirty at Étaples and another 246 beds in military hospitals in England and France. WPA members also helped found a tuberculosis rehabilitation camp for returned war veterans and a soldier's convalescent home.⁷

Although WPA headquarters was located in the most prestigious home in the colony, and its executive was drawn from some of its wealthiest women, the organization crossed traditional barriers between religions, town and outport, and class. By war's end Newfoundland's women had raised, in cash and supplies, about \$500,000 (estimated value today of at least \$6,500,000). This accounted for half of all funds raised for the country's war effort.⁸

Women and Recruitment

Women were expected to encourage men to do their duty "for King and Country." While there is at least one newspaper article which mentions white feathering, there is no evidence to suggest that such public shaming of civilian men was common in Newfoundland. On the other hand, women do not appear to have been openly divided by [pacifist](#) movements. While some individuals undoubtedly opposed the war, they did so quietly.

The dominant impression from contemporary sources is of widespread patriotic support for the Empire and the Allied cause. However, admonitions to women to encourage their loved ones to volunteer hint that the private story may have been somewhat different. By 1916 recruitment had slowed, and middle and upper class commentators in St. John's were arguing that outport men were not doing their part. WPA leaders reminded women that *their* attitudes played an important role in redressing this presumed problem.

Recruiting is largely affected by the attitude of the women, and it is noticeable that in Newfoundland the largest number of volunteers come from homes where the women have put selfishness aside and not placed obstacles in the way of the men, doing their duty

conscientiously.⁹

Along with such shaming messages, WPA leaders supported enlistment in more positive ways by trying to maintain the [morale](#) of servicemen and their families. They raised funds for disabled soldiers and sailors and visited families of enlisted men, especially those in hospital, missing, or listed as [prisoners of war](#). Through friends in England they arranged visitors for Newfoundland men in the hospitals, and reported on news about wounded servicemen.

The Long-Term Impact of the WPA

As the conflict dragged on, Newfoundland women moved beyond knitting for local men. They raised money for the relief of [Belgian refugees](#) and for the Edith Cavell Rest Home in England for wounded and worn out nurses and VADs. In the winter of 1917-1918 they contributed funds for victims of the devastating Halifax explosion.¹⁰

The WPA also became involved in re-establishment planning and from 1918 began discussing potential post-war work. They supported early plans for an outport nursing service, which by 1921 had become the Newfoundland Outport Nursing and Industrial Association (NONIA). NONIA provided the only health care in many parts of rural Newfoundland until 1934. In February 1919 the WPA debated possible future work and turned to the issue of [child](#) welfare, a not uncommon concern during a war when so many young lives were lost. Through 1919 and 1920 the WPA raised \$11,000 to support this cause.¹¹

WPA leaders had learned about and improved their lobbying, fund-raising, and communication skills, and wanted to harness them for the benefit of their own country and beyond. When the war ended some branches used remaining funds to support returned servicemen or the families of those who had died. Women contributed to local [war memorials](#) and to the national war memorial in St. John's.¹² In May 1921 the WPA executive disbanded the organization and formed the Child Welfare Association (CWA), which provided mothers in St. John's and nearby communities with medical care, advice, and material support in the interwar period. The initial CWA executive was essentially the same as that of the WPA.¹³ While none of these activities challenged pre-war gender norms, the war years led to an expansion of women's traditional community work. After 1918, while parish and community work continued, women were more likely to organize larger country-wide, secular organizations, particularly those aimed at improving health and living standards for women and children.¹⁴

Nurses and VADs

For some women, WPA work was not enough to satisfy their desire to join their brothers, friends and boyfriends in doing their part. As soon as war was declared, they offered to serve overseas as nurses, nurses' aides, or as domestic workers in hospitals and military institutions. At least eighteen trained nurses left Newfoundland to serve in Britain, on hospital ships, in hospitals, and in clearing stations near the [Western](#) and [Eastern](#) Fronts.¹⁵ The limited accounts from these women tend to display a professional distance common in nurses' writing. While acknowledging the horror of what they witnessed, they took professional pride in their growing responsibilities and skills. At Catterick Hospital in England, [Bertha Forsey \(1889-1977\)](#), a recent nursing graduate, was soon in charge of a ward and receiving training in anesthesia.¹⁶

Other woman joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), a joint organization of the British Red Cross and Saint John Ambulance. Originally designed to recruit British women for domestic help in home front hospitals during war, by 1916 VADs were being recruited in Britain and the colonies for work in Britain and the war fronts as domestics, nurses' aides, and ambulance drivers. Driven by patriotism, a desire to soothe the pain of the wounded, and a sense of adventure, at least sixty Newfoundland women, including many from the most elite families, joined the VAD; most worked in hospitals in England, but others served in France, Belgium, Lemnos, Salonika, and [Egypt](#). VADs spent most of their time doing domestic work or helping patients in various ways, such as writing letters or taking wheelchair bound men for walks. They also helped nurses with bandages and other basic medical care. Letters from these formerly sheltered young women sometimes reveal the reality of war more explicitly than do those of servicemen or even trained nurses. In a letter to her parents, VAD [Sybil Johnson \(1887-1973\)](#) described helping with a particularly horrific dressing.

The man had sores all down his back and it was altogether a fearful and repulsive business. I hadn't much to do but hold him steady when I helped roll him over on his side. He was a Scotchman and so game and plucky and kept talking away to me and held my arm and his hand was like a firebrand. ...¹⁷

In 1918, Newfoundland VADs [Bertha Bartlett \(1895-1918\)](#) and Ethel Dickenson (1880-1918) died of [influenza](#) while treating afflicted servicemen. In 1920 a group of St. John's feminists raised a monument in memory of Dickenson and all Newfoundland women who tended the sick and wounded during the war.¹⁸

While some British nursing leaders feared the threat VADs posed to their campaign for

professional status, in Newfoundland there was no hint of this concern. The first school of nursing had only opened in 1902, and both graduate nurses and VADs were from a relatively small middle and upper class. Nurses helped train VADs and worked with them in local civilian and military hospitals.

War Work and the Suffrage Movement

During the war, the small group of suffrage leaders moved their franchise demands to the backburner, but followed the advice of the International Suffrage Association and used women's wartime contribution as evidence that they deserved the vote. WPA leaders widely publicized the organization's activities; throughout the country local newspapers printed accounts of meetings and lists of money and goods donated. By the end of the war, the major St. John's newspapers, some prominent unions, several politicians, and the Great War Veterans' Association all maintained that women deserved the vote. Most arguments favouring suffrage were based on a conservative domestic feminist view: women had *proven* themselves worthy of the vote and would bring *innate motherly traits* to public life.¹⁹

Those holding this view could find plenty of supporting evidence in the pages of the WPA official publication, *The Distaff*, produced to publicize women's war effort and to raise funds for the organization's Red Cross work. *The Distaff* published short stories and poems which told of lovers parted and mother's broken hearts, but also of women's pride in their "brave lads" and in their daughters who were in Europe nursing servicemen. *The Distaff* advanced the women's movement, both implicitly and explicitly. The magazine publicized women's community service, such as their work for the Cowan Mission, which operated a convalescent home adjacent to the General Hospital for discharged patients not ready to return home. Through photographs and stories, *The Distaff* highlighted the achievements of young women who were excelling in academia, and lauded the nurses and VADs serving at home and overseas. In the 1916 edition, WPA secretary and suffrage leader Armine Gosling, whose own daughter was overseas driving an ambulance, wrote a piece on women's war work and the advancement of the franchise.²⁰ Unlike the situation in England and parts of Canada, Newfoundland suffragettes were not openly divided by the war. Most seemed able to reconcile their support for the conflict with their feminist values and goals, including [condemnation of violence](#). In the immediate post-war years, women who had worked hard to support the war effort argued that a vote for female suffrage was a vote for peace.²¹

It is impossible to know what women talked about as they sat and knit the interminable piles of socks, but shared worries, grief, and work undoubtedly strengthened bonds. When opponents argued after the war that suffrage leaders were outsiders and *society* women who

did not speak for the *real* women of Newfoundland, the Franchise League used the network established by the WPA to gather 20,000 names on a petition of women demanding the vote.

This petition was signed by women all over the country.²² The war raised feelings of entitlement among Newfoundland women and left them not only willing to work to better their country, but also expecting a voice in how their country's future would be shaped. Unfortunately, a severe post-war economic crisis and the election of a determined anti-suffrage Prime Minister delayed the [suffragettes'](#) victory until 1925.

Approximately 12,000 Newfoundland men served in the Newfoundland Regiment or with various branches of the armed services of Britain, Canada, or other Allied nations. At least 10 percent of these men were killed and another 20 percent wounded; countless others returned with psychological wounds.²³ The greatest impact of the war on women was the pain of losing loved ones and the ongoing struggle to help returned servicemen deal with their physical and emotional trauma. Unfortunately, with few official records and private papers documenting this aspect of the war, it is one of the hardest of the Newfoundland experiences to uncover and it awaits future research.

Conclusion

The First World War did not challenge traditional gender roles in Newfoundland. Women did not work in munitions factories or move into new non-traditional employment, but in other ways their experience was similar to that of Canadian and British women. Women organized countless fundraisers and work parties to supply money and comforts for their own servicemen and those from Allied countries. The money raised, socks knit, and bandages produced increased appreciation for the traditional skills that women had long contributed to their communities. While the leaders were a small group of urban elite women, the majority of Newfoundland women lived in small towns spread along 1,600 miles of coastline; those in Labrador were even farther removed. The effort to coordinate their work must have seemed overwhelming, but it forged new connections and enhanced women's organizational and leadership skills. In the post-war period these lessons would be applied to the suffrage campaign and to new voluntary organizations that attempted to enhance health care and living standards. As Newfoundland's economy sunk into depression in the two decades after the war, these volunteer services would prove more essential than ever.

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Notes

1. Cullum, Linda: Below Stairs. Domestic Service in Twentieth Century St. John's, in:

- Cullum, Linda/Porter, Marilyn (eds.): *Creating This Place. Women, Family, and Class in St. John's, 1900-1950*, Montreal/Kingston 2014, p. 91. ↑
2. Woodrow, Helen: *Julia Salter Earle. Seeking Social Justice*, in: Cullum/Porter, *Creating This Place* 2014, pp. 78-79. ↑
3. *Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 1 September 1914, online:
<http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/ref/collection/telegram19/id/2340> (retrieved: 16 September 2015). ↑
4. Duley, Margot I.: *The Unquiet Knitters of Newfoundland. From Mothers of the Regiment to Mothers of the Nation*, in: Glassford, Sarah/Shaw, Amy (eds.): *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service. Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland During the First World War*, Vancouver 2012, p. 61. ↑
5. LeMessurier, Mabel: *A Visit to the Headquarters of the W.P.A.*, in: *The Distaff*, 1917, pp. 4-6, Queen Elizabeth II Library, Memorial University, online:
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6. Duley, *Knitters* 2012, p. 62. ↑
7. Browning, Adeline: *The Red Cross*, in: *The Distaff*, 1916, p. 4, Queen Elizabeth II Library, Memorial University, online:
http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/ref/collection/cns_period/id/2848 (retrieved 15 September 2015); Duley, Margot I.: *Where Once Our Mothers Stood We Stand. Women's Suffrage in Newfoundland 1890-1925*, Charlottetown 1993, pp. 66-67. ↑
8. Duley, *Suffrage* 1993, p. 68. ↑
9. Horwood, Julia: *The Visiting Committee*, in: *The Distaff*, 1916, p. 1. ↑
10. Duley, *Knitters* 2012, p.65. ↑
11. See: Bishop Stirling, Terry: *Volunteerism in the 1920s. The Child Welfare Association and NONIA*, in: Burford, Gale (ed.): *Ties That Bind. An Anthology of Social Work and Social Welfare in Newfoundland and Labrador*, St. John's 1997, pp. 158-174. ↑
12. See Duley, *Knitters* 2012, especially pp. 68-69. ↑
13. Bishop Stirling, *Voluntarism* 1997, p. 165. ↑
14. Cullum, Linda: *"It's Up to the Women". Gender, Class and nation Building in Newfoundland, 1935-1945*, in: Cullum/Porter, *Creating This Place* 2014, pp. 179-201. ↑
15. Bishop Stirling, Terry: *"Such Sights One Will Never Forget". Newfoundland Women and Overseas Nursing in the First World War*, in: Glassford/Shaw, *Sisterhood* 2012, p. 130. The numbers given here are conservative; others estimate numbers as high as 175 but provide no evidence. See: Rompkey, Bill/Riggs, Bert (eds.): *Your Daughter Fanny. The War Letters of Frances Cluett VAD*, St. John's 2006, p. xxiii. While I believe 175 is a high estimate, there were certainly Newfoundland born women working in Canada, the United States, and Britain who joined nursing and VAD services directly through

channels in those countries. ↑

16. Ibid., p. 134. ↑
17. Ibid., p. 137. ↑
18. Bartlett died while nursing at Wandsworth hospital in London. She is buried in the Newfoundland section of Wandsworth military cemetery. War Contingent Association Final Report, 1919, p. 30, Queen Elizabeth II Library, Memorial University, online: <http://buttercup.library.mun.ca/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/cns&CISOPTR=134647&REC=2> (retrieved: 16 September 2015). Exhausted from over two years of service, Dickenson was sent home to rest in summer 1918 but resumed her work when Spanish flu hit St. John's; she died of the disease on 26 October 1918. Bishop Stirling, *Such Sights* 2012, p. 142. ↑
19. Duley, *Suffrage* 1993, p.82. ↑
20. Gosling, *Armine: Woman After the War*, in: *The Distaff* 1916, pp. 17-18. ↑
21. See, for example: "...Against War," cited in Duley, *Suffrage* 1993, p. 145. ↑
22. Ibid., pp. 89, 93. ↑
23. Newfoundland Historical Society: *A Short History of Newfoundland and Labrador*, St. John's 2008, p. 105. While all agree that Newfoundland casualty rates were very high, there is debate on exact numbers. See: Cadigan, Sean: *Death on Two Fronts. National Tragedies and the Fate of Democracy in Newfoundland, 1914-43*, Toronto 2013, p. xv. ↑

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[71-88.](#)

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External Links

- [Lemessurier, Mabel W. \(ed.\): *The Distaff, 1916, St. John's 1916* \(Memorial University of Newfoundland\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Ruby Ayre Scrapbook \(Image\)](#)
- [The Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Website, section on First World War \(Database\)](#)

- [Women's Patriotic Association \(Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Website\) \(Article\)](#)

Metadata

Regional Section(s)

[North America](#) > [Newfoundland](#)

Thematic Section(s)

[Home Front](#)

Subjects

[Economy](#) > [Labour](#) > [Trade unions](#)

[Economy](#) > [Labour](#) > [Women's labour](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Industry, other](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Raw materials](#)

[Economy](#) > [War finance](#) > [Inflation](#)

[Memory and historiography](#) > [Commemoration, cult of the fallen](#) > [War monuments, war memorials](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Domestic policy](#) > [Suffrage](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Political and social movements](#) > [Women's movements](#)

[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Relief organisations](#)

[Society](#) > [Social conflict](#) > [Strikes, society](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Trauma and medical care](#) > [Medical services, military](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Trauma and medical care](#) > [Mental trauma](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Trauma and medical care](#) > [Nurses](#)

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