

Women's roles

Source A

"I decided to join the Women's Land Army. It seemed to offer a healthy outdoor life which appealed to me. We were taken daily by a lorry in all kinds of weather, complete with our beetroot sandwiches (which I came to hate) to work on different farms in the area. We did potato picking, hedge trimming and corn threshing, which was very dirty and horribly uncomfortable work. Over the days, I became very unhappy, leading a life far from that shared on the recruiting posters."

Simplified extract of Mabel Ogilvie's experience, 1943, People's War archive.

Source B

In the interwar years, the idea of 'equal pay' and 'equal rights' began to take shape, especially with the vote granted to all women above the age of 21 in 1928. However, women's work was generally low-paid and involved long hours of work. They were usually excluded from manager roles even if they were skilled enough because men normally took these roles.

From articles and essays by the historian Mary Davis.

Source C

"The men were coming back and the men automatically took over our jobs. We weren't wanted. And this was the worst possible posting they could give me because it was clerical [office work]. I had loved being a wireless op and I was furious."

Joan Tagg, a wireless operator who lost her job and was posted to Gloucester to work in the Records Office in 1945.

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Source D

"She talked enthusiastically about the War. It was the best time of her life - she joined the forces, she left home. She was with large numbers of women, many of them from different walks of society, so it was a kind of education for her."

The novelist Pat Barker's description of her mother working with the WRNS.

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Source E

By the 1930s, about a third of women over the age of 15 worked outside the home, mainly in poorly paid roles like caring and cooking. The economic depression made people think that well-paid jobs should go to men and that women's proper place was at home, working without pay. It was time-consuming, especially without the invention of electrical appliances like washing machines. Where women did paid work, their pay was much lower than men's. The civil service, schools and nursing had a 'marriage bar', so women had to stop working when they got married. Even those who challenged these unofficial rules found that it was impossible to continue working once they had children. Single women were often called 'spinsters', which was an insult.

Simplified extract from an article about women in Britain in the interwar years.

Source F

"When our turn came [to demobilise at the end of the war] I didn't know whether to be glad or sad. I had made some good friends in the ATS. I returned home in February 1946 and took up my old job as a hairdresser - older and wiser."

Mary Lathan, 1946, People's War archive.

Source G

Victorian censuses show that many working-class women had no choice but to work to support their families. They worked in factories, in domestic service for richer households or in family businesses. At home, their work included cooking, cleaning and child care. They often kept small animals and grew vegetables and fruit to help feed their families. Most wealthy women did not undertake paid work except for 'respectable' activities like being a governess or a nurse.

Simplified extract from Anitha, S. and Pearson, R. (2013) Striking Women. Lincoln: University of Lincoln. [Online] Available from: www.striking-women.org [Accessed: 10 February 2025]

Source H

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"Well, I'd been very happy right up to the last days of my service. I thought I would miss nursing but in fact, I didn't. Actually, not being there was absolute bliss. During that time, people were just getting back to what life was like in the old days. I was very happy to be an army wife. Peter always came first for me and I was happy to be told what to do instead of having to think things for myself. I never had a job again after I was married."

Patience Chadwyck-Healy, a wealthy woman who married a rifle soldier in 1946.