



# Canadian Women and the First World War

## Learning objectives

- Students will learn about the many roles played by Canadian women in the First World War.
- Students will learn how women contributed to the advancement of their status in Canadian society.

## Time required

30-40 minutes

## Grades

7-12

## Materials

- tiled map: *A Nation Takes Shape*
- index cards or sticky notes
- provincial enlistment statistics (Appendix 6)
- article, “The Suffrage Movement” (Appendix 6)
- images of women during the First World War
- video “Daughters of the Empire”; Library and Archives Canada (optional)
- digital projector (optional)

## Set-up

Print out the tiled map. Photocopy or project the enlistment statistics.

## Links to Canadian National Standards for Geography

### Essential element 2:

#### Places and regions

- perceptions of places and regions
- how culture affects places and regions
- changes in places and regions over time

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## Introduction

As a class, brainstorm what Canadian society was like 100 years ago. Assemble the tiled map and have students place their finger on any city or town on the map. Then ask students to consider how society was different in this location a century ago and what their daily lives would be like, taking into consideration the needs of daily life such as food, houses and transportation. Discuss how technology has evolved and altered the daily lives of Canadians.

On the board, make a T-chart with women on one side and men on the other. Have students brainstorm the roles of men and women at the beginning of the First World War. What occupations did each have and how were each expected to act in society? Show students the Library and Archives Canada video, “Daughters of the Empire,” ([collectionscanada.gc.ca/firstworldwar/025005-2100.031-e.html](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/firstworldwar/025005-2100.031-e.html)) to enrich the discussion.

## Development

Project the provincial enlistment numbers from 1914 on the board for each province, and have students label the numbers on the map using sticky notes or an index card. Have students identify which cities had the most men leave for the war.

Explain that with thousands of men gone, many jobs at home were left vacant. This created a need for women to adopt non-traditional roles – societal norms at the time were different from today and single women were encouraged to stay at home or work in sewing factories, as phone operators, primary school teachers and governesses. Women with husbands and children were expected to manage the household.

Discuss some of the activities and jobs in which women could have taken part during the war. Make sure that munitions factory work, nursing, farming and volunteering are well represented and introduce the concept of suffrage and women’s voting rights.

Divide students into groups, each representing a different province, and have them locate women’s jobs during the war on the map.

## Conclusion

After the war, women were strongly encouraged to return to the home, while soldiers returning to Canada went back to their jobs.

Ask your students if they feel this was a fair development. The right to vote in federal elections was granted within a few years, but workplace conditions lagged for decades following the war. Inequality in the workplace is still a problem today?

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**Essential element 4:****Human systems**

- patterns and processes of migration past and present
- types and patterns of human settlement
- processes of cultural diffusion
- types and patterns of economic activity

**Essential element 6:****The uses of geography**

- effects of physical and human geographic features on major historic events
- influences of geographical features on the evolution of significant historic events and movements

As a class, read through the suffragist article (provided) and have different students use index cards or sticky notes to highlight important dates related to women's voting rights in each province. Discuss any patterns or trends that they identify on the map. Based on the information provided in the article, ask students which provinces demonstrated a stronger support for women's rights than others.

### Extend your geographic thinking

Show students images of how women were depicted during the First World War (provided). Have students reflect on the portrayal of women in these images. How accurate do they think these portrayals are?

Have students choose three images and share their impressions of each.



# The Suffrage Movement

**I**n 1915, women in Canada still did not have the right to vote, provincially or federally.

Manitoba was the first province to allow this right in January 1916. Saskatchewan and Alberta followed in March and April respectively. In February of the next year, Ontario women got the vote, followed by British Columbia women in April. Also that year, Louise McKinney of Alberta, a temperance and women's rights advocate, became the first woman elected to a Canadian legislature.

This created pressure for change, but the first time women got the vote was almost an accident. In the months leading up to the 1917 federal election, the government of Sir Robert Borden faced a complicated situation: women in all provinces from British Columbia to Ontario had the vote; women living east of the Ontario-Quebec border did not.

The temporary solution had less to do with women's rights than with a political issue facing Borden's government: conscription. Parliament extended the vote through two new laws in an effort to increase the numbers of pro-conscription voters. The Military Voters Act, which gave the vote to soldiers under the age of 21, benefited women as well. This law made military nurses serving in the war effort the first Canadian women to exercise the right to vote in a federal election.

The second law, the War-Time Elections Act, gave the vote to close female relatives of people serving in the armed forces. This meant that 500,000 additional women could now vote. However, women who did not have a relative in the armed forces still could not vote. This situation would not be tolerated for long.

The following year, Borden's re-elected government moved to correct the situation, introducing a bill to provide for universal female suffrage on March 21, 1918. The bill

was not universally welcomed by strong conservative and religious opponents.

MP Jean-Joseph Denis declared: "I say that the Holy Scripture, theology, ancient philosophy, Christian philosophy, history, anatomy, physiology, political economy and feminine

psychology all seem to indicate that the place of women in this world is not amid the strife of the political arena, but in her home." (*Hansard Debates*, April 11, 1918; 643)

Facing strong opposition, Borden compromised by declaring that women voters would have to meet the same requirements as men—for example, property requirements where they existed. The compromise worked, and the Act to Confer the Electoral Franchise upon Women was passed on May

24, 1918. A 1919 law gave women the right to be candidates in federal elections.

In 1920, legislation provided universal access to the vote, without property ownership or many other requirements except age and citizenship. The general election of 1921 was the first open to almost all Canadians, men and women, age 21 and over. Agnes Macphail, the first female member of Parliament, won a seat at that election.

Unfortunately, this legislation did not mean all women received the right to vote. Women (and men) who were excluded from voting in two provinces, British Columbia and Saskatchewan, "for reasons of race"—that is, mainly people of Japanese, Chinese and Southeast Asian descent—were also excluded from voting federally until the late 1940s. Aboriginal women (along with aboriginal men) did not get the vote until 1960.

—Adapted from Elections Canada  
elections.ca



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MABEL MAY, WOMEN MAKING SHELLS, 1919, © BEAVERBROOK COLLECTION OF WAR ART, CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM, OTTAWA, ONTARIO 19710261-0389



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