Women and the first world war: a taste of freedom

Armistice 100 First world war
For many women on the home front, the war years became a springboard to liberation. But with peace came the backlash

Sheila Rowbotham

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A female worker gauges shells in a munitions factory during the first world war. Composite: Hulton Deutsch/Corbis via Getty Images

Between 1914 and 1918, the lives of millions of women in Britain were overturned by the first world war. Its impact reached into every aspect of existence, from the dramatic to the humdrum.

Former domestic servants became window cleaners, gas fitters and crane drivers. They moved into the munitions factories, where their faces turned yellow and their hair green from the chemicals. They braved explosions and poisonous substances to serve their country – and to earn higher pay.

Well over 100,000 volunteered for the Women’s Land Army, ruffling the gender norms of rural Britain. Others enlisted in the Women’s Royal Naval Service, the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps or the Women’s Royal Air Force as mechanics and drivers, cleaning, working in canteens or doing clerical work.

As the decade came to an end, much of what women had done in the war had faded from immediate memory

As wartime food shortages, rising prices and rents brought distress to poor families, the government marched into the kitchen with advice on bean fritters and barley rissoles. Manufacturers came up with a technological fix for middle-class housewives, tussling with
“the servant problem”. In an advertisement in the *Times* in 1917, the Suction Cleaner Company said: “Electric Housemaid: Simply connect to Electric Lamp Socket”.

In 1915 the newly formed Women’s Institutes were introduced to Britain from Canada. They urged women to study home economics and aimed to strengthen class harmony. A more radical approach to domestic dislocation was tried in east London. The socialist feminist, Sylvia Pankhurst, who denounced the first world war, set up a cost-price restaurant and a mother-and-baby clinic in a former pub, which she renamed The Mother’s Arms. The dangers of being a baby were stressed on all political fronts, an awareness that would lead to the formation of local authority maternity and child welfare committees.

The wartime state was prepared to concede under duress. In 1915 the Glasgow Women’s Housing Association took direct action to prevent the eviction of a soldier’s family unable to pay the rent. Armed with peasemeal flour, women mounted angry pickets, with street after street joining the rent strike. As discontent spread beyond Glasgow, the government introduced the Rent Restriction Act.

When women appeared doing “men’s jobs”, skilled men were inclined to view them as interlopers, likely to enable employers to break down craft differentials. And this was indeed what happened in some factories. But the new recruits would also assert themselves in the workplace. In July 1918, male and female munitions workers in Coventry took strike action together.

In that last year of the war, when women bus and train workers went on strike, the slogan, “Same work, same money” appeared. When the strikes spread from Hastings to Bristol, to Birmingham and South Wales, the authorities intervened with a five-shilling bonus, though not equal pay.

At 11 o’clock on 11 November 1918, sirens signalled the armistice. The *Manchester Guardian* reported how a sombre crowd watched in the “yellow autumn sunshine” as two flags were raised in remembrance on the town hall in Albert Square. The mood gave way to gaiety when female munitions workers surged forth from the factories, breaking out into a wild foxtrot. By evening, the trams had stopped: “Women guards and trolley girls left their posts.”

Among the minority who had opposed the war, rejoicing was also muted. They included men and women who regarded killing as morally wrong and those who identified militarism as an offshoot of capitalism. One woman’s case became not just national but international news. Alice Wheeldon, a Derby socialist and feminist, had been given 10 years’ hard labour early in 1917. Arrested on the unreliable testimony of an agent paid by the Ministry of Munitions’ intelligence unit, she had been charged with conspiring to kill the prime minister, David Lloyd George with a poisoned arrow while he was playing golf.
A campaign was mounted in Wheeldon’s defence; she went on hunger strike and her health suffered. That December, Lloyd George who had changed political tack, secured her release. In 1919, she died in the devastating influenza epidemic, but the calumny surrounding her arrest continued to resonate through subsequent generations in her family.

There had been mutterings in letter columns during the war about a decline in sexual morality. Young women were being labelled as “flaming flappers” well before the 1920s. William Le Queux, the popular writer of spy novels, added a touch of titillation. In *Beryl of the Biplane* (1917), the heroine combines counter-espionage with flying fiancé Ronnie’s powerful plane: “The way in which she manipulates the joy-stick often astonishes Ronnie himself.” Readers and Ronnie himself were no doubt reassured to find that patriotic Beryl retained her pretty fluffy femininity, despite such strenuous multitasking.

When the war ended, adventurous Beryls found themselves grounded. With no extenuating wartime emergency, admiration and gratitude rapidly melted away. “Is the Modern Woman a Hussy?” enquired the *Illustrated Sunday Herald* in 1919. For cultural conservatives, keen to return to a prewar idyll, this seemed to be an assertion rather than a question. Still, the American socialist Mary Heaton Vorse, who toured Britain after the armistice, was impressed by the “stir among working women”. There was talk of equal pay and a living wage. Proposals for economic and social policy were appearing from below.

In October 1919, a Derby member of the Women’s Co-operative Guild, Florence Farrow, came up with a state allowance for every child, better pay for teachers, along with municipal milk, housing, heating, lighting, baths and cinemas. The Labour MP, Herbert Morrison, responded to pressure from women in a 1923 pamphlet, *Better Times for the Housewife: Labour’s Policy for the Homemaker*, with the suggestion that local authorities should send a man or a woman on a motorbike with a sidecar full of municipal vacuum cleaners and washing machines to help with cleaning.

Achieving innovations proved to be much harder than imagining them. A major obstacle was postwar unemployment. Already in 1921, women in London, Lancashire and Yorkshire were beginning to form unemployed groups. Not only were many women forced back into domestic service or sweated, low-paid jobs, but the trade unions were also weakened by a series of defeats. A minority of female clerical workers did retain their jobs, but in surroundings of fear that encouraged deference rather than militancy.

Some limited political gains were achieved. In June 1918, the franchise had been extended, and women aged over 30 gained the vote, though it was to be 10 more years before all
women were enfranchised. Then, in December 1919, the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act allowed women access to the legal profession and accountancy.

In practice, however, women’s voting rights did not transform the parliamentary system as suffrage campaigners had hoped. The armistice was followed by a general election when, for the first time, female candidates could stand. Paradoxically, the only woman to be elected was Countess Markievicz, a member of Sinn Féin, imprisoned for her part in the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland.

The first female MP to take her seat in the House of Commons was a Conservative, the American-born Christian Scientist, Nancy Astor. In 1920, she made her maiden speech after her wealthy husband, Waldorf, had been excluded upon inheriting the title of Viscount. A maverick moral reformer who was pro-temperance, she would go on to support moderate welfare reforms.

Among socialist women, there was tension over how to approach the state. Labour women supporters of the first world war had been partially drawn into the machinery of government and believed that the state could be redirected towards reform. Those who had been in opposition were inclined to be more sceptical about trusting the existing state. So Sylvia Pankhurst, inspired by the Russian Revolution in 1917, had proposed councils of workers, soldiers and housewives to ensure democracy from below. Instead, postwar Labour, Liberal and Conservative women sought election to already existing local councils pressing for different measures to alleviate daily needs. A left minority joined the Communist party.

Feminists were divided, too. Before the war, though splits had existed in the suffrage movement, the struggle for the vote had exerted pressure for unity. After the war, disagreements surfaced. The Liberal peer Margaret Haig Mackworth – Viscountess Rhondda – who had been arrested in 1913 for setting a pillar box alight as a suffragette, established the feminist journal, *Time and Tide*, in 1920, and the Six Point Group in 1921. Her demands aimed at achieving equality with men. However, other feminist groups, campaigning for family allowances, birth control and maternity welfare, focused on women’s biological and social differences from men.

Nevertheless, during the 1920s, women of differing political views struggled to reach a consensus. The American journalist, Crystal Eastman, one of the intellectual socialist feminists who wrote for *Time and Tide*, was impressed by a Labour women’s conference she attended in 1925. Noting their assertion of equality, and their resolution that birth control advice should be available in health centres, she observed how they were extending a “women’s emphasis” into wider debates on national and global social and economic policies.

Yet it proved exceedingly difficult in the inter-war period both to defend women’s rights and needs and to further female participation in the wider economic, social and political debates. Only a few women broke through into the realm of public discourse, while women’s issues shuffled down agendas.

A rebellious minority struggled to bring women’s suppressed sexual desires as lesbians, as well as heterosexuals, into the open, but the extensive reach of male cultural power in women’s lives tended to be explored mainly by novelists. Personal experience was separate from the public world.

Like Eastman, the young socialist feminist Dora Russell had been enthused by the campaigns for birth control and the discussions about greater sexual frankness. In 1926, the year of the defeat of the general strike, she sat in a hut in Cornwall looking out at the beach below and wrote *The Right to Be Happy*. Published in the autumn of 1927, it argued that women were
held back not simply by political, social and economic obstacles but by unconscious psychological “stops and inhibitions planted in childhood”. She related these to a male-defined culture: “It is as if a pianist were trying to perform in gloves or an actor to give an intimate and delicate performance in a mask.” It was a perception ahead of its time.

As the decade came to an end, much of what women had done in the war faded from immediate memory. In the years to come, unemployment, humiliating poverty, the rise of fascism and another war were to muffle the postwar dreams of freedom, fulfilment and equality for women.