

# FIGHTING DAYS:



## WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND THE RIGHT TO WORK IN MANITOBA 1900-1960

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Each year, Women's History Month is celebrated across Canada as a way of publicly recognizing the achievements of women as a vital part of our Canadian heritage. It is also a means of encouraging greater awareness among Canadians concerning the historical contributions of women to our society.

For 2003, the Manitoba Women's Directorate focused its celebration on women's right to work and commissioned an essay, *FIGHTING DAYS: WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND THE RIGHT TO WORK IN MANITOBA, 1900-1960*. It was authored by Dr. Esyllt Jones, who recently completed her PH.D in History at the University of Manitoba. The essay is intended for Manitoba students in Senior 1 through 4.

The essay is a historical overview of some of the women and organizations intent on reform for women in the workplace during the period 1900-1960. The essay also discusses the then prevailing societal attitude that women's primary role was caring for home and family. As such, women were deterred from pursuing paid work.

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### PHOTO CREDITS

Manitoba Telephone System Operators. *University of Manitoba Archives, Winnipeg Tribune Collection, PC18/4504/18-3704-037.*

Mennonite Domestic Servants, 1940s. *Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies.*

Anna Thiessen, c. 1918. *Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies*

Beet Harvesters. *Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Martha Knapp Collection, N17420.*

Garment Workers. *University of Manitoba Archives, Winnipeg Tribune Collection, PC18/6448/18-5.*

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Francis Marion Beynon. *Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N13687.*

Margret Benedictsson, c. 1905. *Western Canada Pictorial Index, A280-09020.*

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## FIGHTING DAYS: WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND THE RIGHT TO WORK IN MANITOBA (1900-1960)

### 1. WOMEN AND WORK IN MANITOBA TO 1960

Women have always worked. They laboured in the home and on the farm, without pay, but their economic contributions to the family economy were rarely acknowledged by society, or counted by census takers. They were rendered invisible by history. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, women working for pay were clustered in a fairly small range of occupations, as maids, office workers, factory workers, teachers, or nurses. Women's occupational opportunities did not significantly expand beyond these categories until the impact of the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s made itself fully felt in workplaces, and social values began to acknowledge the legitimacy of women's claims to greater equality on the job.

Although it took time, women's lives and their participation in the labour force were changing. More women were working outside of the home. According to census data, in 1891, only 9 percent of the female population aged 10 years and over were in the paid labour force in Manitoba. By 1961, this had increased to 31 percent; by 1971, to 42 percent. By comparison, throughout this period about 80 percent of men participated in the labour force. It is important to remember that census data might not tell us everything we would like to know about women's employment. Census takers often missed part-time and seasonal work. So too, was work performed in the home by women for money, such as factory "putting out" or homework, babysitting, taking in laundry, raising livestock or vegetables, or other work that might be sold or bartered. Nevertheless, the data show a remarkable transformation in women's access to employment.

The largest increase in labour force participation by women from 1900 to 1970 was not among young women (although the number of employed women aged 25-44 tripled), but among women aged 45-54. Female participation in this age category increased from 11 percent in 1911 to 50 percent in 1971. These statistics show that a much greater number of married women were returning to work after their children had entered school or were grown. The increasing acceptance of married women working outside of the home was one of the most significant social transformations for women in the last century.

Women traditionally worked at jobs that were versions of their domestic role in the home. Nursing is a good example. In the family, women took care of the sick and the elderly. It was assumed that women had particular nurturing capabilities that men lacked. Domestic work is another clear case. Here, women were performing for pay the same tasks they performed in their own households.

The job market was largely gender segregated. Men and women worked in largely separate spheres. In 1921, some of the other occupations available to women were teacher, saleswoman, dressmaker, agricultural labourer, and laundress. Clerical and office work was also growing as a category of female employment early in the century, as was nursing. Occupations such as nursing, teaching, and office work became female job "ghettoes," where the workforce was overwhelmingly female. For example, in 1910 Manitoba had three times as many females as male teachers. Despite their numbers, female schoolteachers were rarely promoted: school principals were almost always men.

Men and women were in separate spheres when it came to wages, too. In 1911, women earned on average 56 percent of what men did. Women were much more likely to work part-time than were men. But, perhaps more important was the fact that women were confined to positions that consistently paid less than men's jobs, and even when women were working the same jobs as men, they earned substantially less. Teaching is a good example, although women teachers fared better than many other women workers did — they earned 70 percent of what male teachers earned. The wage gap between men and women has remained a persistent issue for women in the workforce. Even today, women earn on average less than 80 percent of what men do.

## CASE STUDY: DOMESTIC SERVICE

**D**uring the early part of the twentieth century, the most commonly available job for a woman was as a domestic servant. Even though new areas of women's employment were emerging in offices, factories, and shops, domestic service was still a common occupation for young women without professional qualifications. In 1900, domestic service made up about forty percent of women's employment in Canada. In Manitoba — particularly in the city of Winnipeg — most of these domestic workers were recent immigrants.<sup>1</sup> From 1870 to 1930, over 250,000 immigrant women came to Canada to work in domestic service. In 1911, 84 percent of domestics in Winnipeg were born outside of Canada. It was extremely common for middle and upper class Manitobans to hire domestic servants to live with them in their household. These women cleaned, shopped, prepared food, and took care of the children of their employers. Women were also hired to work in farm households. Domestic jobs were readily available for working class girls with little education or training, but it was hard work and not always popular with young women. If other jobs could be found, women often took them. As a result, social elites often complained about the lack of "quality help."

British women were the most highly sought after by middle and upper class employers in Winnipeg, but Scandinavian women were also viewed favourably. The Canadian government's immigration policy channeled many young immigrant women into domestic service. So did many private groups and individuals, including Winnipeg's social reform and feminist activists, who debated the "servant problem" but never challenged the barriers to employment facing young working class and immigrant women. Private and public agencies paid women's ship passage to Canada, and commissions were given to shipping companies and chaperons transporting these young workers. Groups like Winnipeg's Local Council of Women established reception homes to provide careful supervision of these young women upon their arrival, and to refer them to potential employers.

In 1921, Manitoba sent a woman agent to Britain to recruit domestics for farm homes, offering them paid passage. In 1926, the federal government became involved in providing financial support for domestics to emigrate from Britain. The federal government also authorized the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Canadian National Railway to recruit domestic servants from European countries such as Hungary, Russia, Romania and Poland to work in the Prairie Provinces. These women generally had to pay their own way. This agreement brought many non-British women to the West to domestic employment, in cities and on farms.

One such group was young women from Mennonite families who had immigrated to Canada to escape the Russian Revolution (1917) and the civil war (1918-21). Mennonites who arrived in the 1920s had a difficult time re-establishing livelihoods, and out of financial need sent the unmarried women of their communities to work in middle and upper class homes in Winnipeg to work as live-in maids. The economic depression and crop failures of the 1930s increased this need; the practice continued into the 1950s. Finnish women also commonly worked in domestic service, and were known for

their radicalism. Many advocated for legal rights for domestic workers, and were drawn to socialist politics.

The young women in domestic work had no legal protection, and were not covered by existing Labour laws. They were highly exploited. The writings of reform-minded women journalists exposed some of the poor working conditions facing domestics. The drawbacks of domestic work included low or non-existent wages, overwork, and unhealthy sleeping accommodations. Hours were long, and live-in domestic servants had little time off or personal freedom and privacy. A young English woman writing in the *Manitoba Free Press* in 1909 explained that her workday began at 6:30 a.m. and lasted until 8:00 p.m. These women were often isolated and lonely, because they had little time to meet friends or to socialize. This was especially difficult for immigrants new to a strange

country and community. Loneliness was acute for those working on farms. Abuse, physical or sexual, was also a risk. For these reasons, domestic work compared poorly with office jobs, for example, which allowed girls more independence. When they had a choice, many women chose to leave domestic service for better positions.

Despite the awareness of poor conditions, no significant improvements were made to employment standards in domestic service before World War II. The problems of domestic work were rather 'resolved' by its decreasing popularity as a source of employment for women. During the Second World War, many moved into factory employment, as jobs became available.<sup>2</sup> By the 1950s, domestic service was a much smaller category of employment for women, as they moved on to work that paid them better wages or gave them increased freedom and independence.

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## PROFILE: ANNA THIESSEN

Anna Thiessen was born in 1892, and arrived in Canada in 1903. She was the oldest of thirteen children. As a young religious Mennonite woman, she came to do mission work in Winnipeg in 1915. She was struck by the plight facing German-speaking immigrant families, widows, and orphans, who arrived poor and without employment. She was instrumental in the founding of the Mary Martha Home, a hostel for Mennonite domestic workers located at 437 Mountain Avenue in the city's north end. She successfully lobbied the Mennonite Brethren Church to financially support the project. Anna Thiessen was the matron of the Mary Martha Home from 1925 until the mid-1940s. A second home (the Ebenezer Home) was located on Bannatyne Avenue, and was run by another dedicated Mennonite woman, Helen Epp.



The Mary Martha Home provided shelter, material and emotional support, and help finding employment placements for women. It also set employment standards and demanded that employers answer for how they treated their employees. For example, the matrons refused to place girls in homes where they were not adequately fed, had an unreasonable workload, or had to sleep in damp basements. The Home screened employers, and watched for mistreatment. At this time, there were no laws governing the employment conditions of domestic workers. Anna Thiessen lobbied city officials for a bylaw that would give domestic servants every Thursday afternoon and evening off.

The girls' homes were also a place where young women could socialize and enjoy themselves. They would gather there to eat lunch

together on Thursdays, and participated in Bible studies. Special celebrations were held at holidays like Christmas and Easter. Anna Thiessen saw the Home as fulfilling the girls' spiritual as well as material needs.

Both of the girls' homes were closed in 1959. Relatively few women were now working as domestic servants. In interviews, Mennonite women looked back on the hardships of domestic employment. One remembered, "It wasn't for us to decide, 'What will I do?' There wasn't money to think about that." Another noted: "It didn't do anybody any harm. I think it made people out of us!"<sup>3</sup>

### CASE STUDY: FARM WORK

The first women to perform agricultural labour in what is now Manitoba were the region's aboriginal and Métis women. Women in aboriginal societies were largely responsible for managing the food supply. Ojibwa women processed and preserved the meat hunted by their male counterparts, but they also trapped small game themselves, and fished. They harvested indigenous crops such as prairie turnips, wild rice, berries, and maple syrup. Aboriginal women also planted, hoed, and harvested crops such as corn. Blackfoot and Métis women played an essential role in the buffalo robe trade, cleaning and curing hides, and making pemmican. After the negotiation of treaties and the creation of reserves under the Indian Act (1876), women continued to do agricultural work, seeing their families and communities through what was a very difficult period for aboriginal peoples on the prairies, when many were in fact starving.

Even though work was gender-divided to a considerable extent in aboriginal societies, as it was in white families and communities, women appear to have enjoyed greater recognition for their contribution and corresponding social power. This was quite different from white society, where women's contributions to the family economy were largely invisible or derided as "women's work." Historians have argued that one

of the most detrimental effects of white colonization on aboriginal communities was the undermining of "what were once egalitarian gender relations."<sup>4</sup> But aboriginal women did continue to enjoy markers of their status within the community, including the right to property ownership, religious power, and political and diplomatic roles. These were positions of authority largely denied European and Canadian women at the time.

In the pioneering era and beyond, women's work formed an important contribution to the rural economy, much of it unpaid and unrecognized. During homesteading, men found it difficult to survive without a woman's labour, some of it backbreaking physical work in the fields, or constructing the family's dwelling. In the pioneer experience, men and women had to work together. As homesteads became more established and technological changes (such as threshing and harvesting machines) were introduced into prairie farming, women and men's roles tended to diverge, and work on the farm became more gender-divided. Women worked less in the fields, and more in the household. Fieldwork became men's work. At harvest time, crews of men were hired to maintain the machinery and provide manual labour. The woman's job was to cook meals for them. Oral histories with farm women tell us that they only worked in the fields when men were unavailable, such as during the wars, or when the family could not afford to hire help.

In 1930, a government survey found that farm families had to purchase only about one-half of their household needs. They raised the rest themselves, and much of this was the work of women. During the Depression, women's ability to raise food allowed some families to stay on the farm, or even to avoid starvation. Women, with the help of children, were generally responsible for growing and harvesting vegetables and fruits. This could bring the opportunity for paid employment as well, as illustrated in this essay's photo of women beet harvesters. Livestock were handled by women, including not only chickens and pigs, but also cows. Poultry were raised and slaughtered by women, and their eggs sold on the market. In the

days before mechanized farming, women brought cash onto the farm with their dairying work, feeding and milking the cows, then selling milk, butter, and cheese in their local communities. One farm wife described animal work as “twenty-four hours a day, 365 days of the year.”<sup>55</sup> The active role of women in animal husbandry began to diminish as commercial farming grew and farms modernized in the 1950s. Women turned their skills toward farm management, and many sought employment off the farm.

At the same time, women became responsible for a higher standard of domesticity in farm homes. This work was done with very few modern amenities long into the twentieth century. Before the 1950s, few farms had running water or electricity. Farm women did not start to use electric refrigerators, washing machines, or vacuum cleaners for at least a generation after women in cities enjoyed these labour-saving devices. Work was manual, and hard. And it was rarely ‘counted.’

## CASE STUDY: GARMENT INDUSTRY

The garment industry has historically been an important source of employment for women in Canada and Manitoba. Winnipeg, along with Montreal and Toronto, was a centre of clothing production. This was one of the few industries in which working class immigrant women could find jobs. Many of those working in Winnipeg’s garment factories were Jewish, Ukrainian, Polish, German and Russian women.

In early factory production, women outnumbered men. Women also did homeworking and were employed in small dressmaking and tailoring shops. Attempts to unionize these workers by unions such as United Garment Workers of America (UGWA) began in the late nineteenth century. The first women’s local of the UGWA in Canada was organized in Winnipeg in 1899. Women in the garment industry were among the most militant of women workers in this period, despite a lack of overall support from male workers and unionists, who tended to see women as a

threat to their jobs and wage levels.

Work in the garment industry was divided by gender and skill. As one historian has noted, “the basis of women’s work in the clothing industry lay in the social view that their ultimate destiny as wives and mothers made them peripheral to the paid work world.”<sup>56</sup> In general, men controlled the more skilled and well paying jobs, and women performed those aspects of the job that were considered less skilled and therefore paid less. The skilled work on men’s coats and suits, such as cutting and pressing, was considered men’s work, while women did tasks such as finishing the garments, making linings, doing buttonholes and sewing on buttons. The production of women’s cloaks and suits was similarly organized.

In factories manufacturing women’s shirtwaists (slips) and dresses, most of the work was done by women on sewing machines. In some cases, hand sewing was still done. These gender divisions in the industry meant that women earned less than men on the job, and were not considered eligible for promotion to the more skilled jobs that would have allowed them to earn higher wages. In 1920, female garment factory workers earned on average \$12.00 per week, while men earned \$24.65. Seasonal unemployment was also common in the trade, so wages had to stretch over a long period when women were laid off.

In the garment industry, workers were often paid for each piece of clothing they completed. This was referred to as piecework. Piecework was most often done by women, and was poorly paid. Employers would often attempt to speed up production in the factory by lowering the piece rate, thereby forcing employees to work faster to earn the same amount of money. Piecework came with a built-in incentive for women to work harder and faster. Because their wages were lower than men’s were, women were especially vulnerable to the pressures of piecework. Male tailors fought against the implementation of piece rate for their work, but women were in a much less powerful position to do so.

Work done in the home by women was usually paid by the piece. Although rates were very low, this was a way for women with children to earn money without leaving the home or finding child-care. Homework clearly placed significant burdens upon women, as they had to fulfill their domestic duties in addition to working many hours sewing. Many working class families needed the extra income, because the male breadwinner's wages were often too low to support the family. The isolation of women from one another characteristic of homework made it unlikely that they would organize together to demand better wages and conditions.

Working conditions in the garment industry were poor. Factories, some of them just converted warehouses, were poorly lit and had inadequate ventilation. This made them unhealthy and excellent breeding grounds for diseases such as influenza and tuberculosis. Sixty-hour weeks were still common in the 1930s. Sewing machines ran steadily all day. The intense pace of work and speed-ups led to nervous exhaustion in women. If they complained, employers threatened to fire them. Managers enforced a strict discipline upon women employees. A Toronto newspaper reported in 1911: "A striking illustration of the habit of swift co-ordinate action may be witnessed in the Eaton's operating rooms where the gong rings to cease work for the day. Instantly the power is shut off, and the girls lay aside their work for the night. Another gong rings and they stand up beside their chairs. A third bell clangs and with a simultaneous crash every chair in the room is upturned on the tables out of the way of the sweepers."<sup>7</sup> Women were also subjected to fines for every infraction of workplace rules. Fines were deducted from their paychecks. For example, operators were fined if empty spools of thread were not returned to the foreman. If work was considered to be of poor quality, it was returned to the worker and she had to fix it for free.

During the Depression years, conditions worsened for women in the garment trade. Struggling factory owners tried to stay solvent by cutting wages while increasing production. More part-time positions were created, so that the industry

could avoid minimum wage laws. With so many women unemployed and on relief, there was always another worker readily available to replace those who tried to resist wage cuts. It might seem surprising, then, that the 1930s saw an increase in labour militancy in the clothing industry in Winnipeg. Between 1930 and 1935, there were more than twenty strikes in the needle trades, involving both men and women. Women did fight to preserve what little economic security they had. During the 1920s, the United Garment Workers (UGW) had organized most of Winnipeg's male garment workers and some of the women, but lost members when it did not effectively counter the wage cuts of the early 1930s. A new more dynamic union emerged, the Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers (IUNTW), part of the Workers' Unity League. This union worked to organize both skilled and unskilled workers together in one union — a model known as industrial unionism — and was more committed to organizing women. Unlike more conservative male-dominated unions such as the UGW, women were encouraged to take up leadership positions in the IUNTW. Despite its organizing successes and radical spirit, however, the union faced strong employer opposition and made few tangible gains for women.

The next industrial style union to achieve success in Winnipeg was the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA). At the end of World War II, it organized over 1200 workers, mostly women, in Winnipeg garment factories. The involvement of women from the early days of ACWA was notable. Of course, this should have been the case, since its membership was predominantly female. In its first set of negotiations with employers, 41 women and 12 men represented the union. In the late 1940s, the union's executive included a number of women. The labour shortages and increased production of the war brought increased bargaining power and ultimately higher wages. Government placed orders for military clothing, and factories struggled to meet the demand. For the first time since the First World War, wages significantly increased. Some women were now earning \$18-19 per week, "almost a man's pay," as one woman recalled.<sup>8</sup>



By the mid-1950s, wages for ACWA members were on par with those of office workers such as clerks and typists.

The women of ACWA made a significant contribution to Manitoba's labour movement. Women like Kay Stifora, who was one of three women to be elected to the executive of the Winnipeg Labour Council in 1978, became active as union representatives in the workplace, and in the broader labour movement. Women were also active in the Union Label League, which fought

non-unionized sweatshop labour by encouraging consumers to purchase clothing with a label indicating that it was made in a unionized shop. Their histories challenge the perception that women were not interested in unions. Some of these women worked in the garment trade for just a few years before marriage. Others, like Kay, stayed for over thirty years. By the 1950s, a majority of women in the garment industry were married. These women combined work, union activism, and marriage.

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## PROFILE: THERESA KORZINSKI

Theresa Korzinski was a garment worker and one of the ACWA's women activists. She came to Winnipeg from Dryden, Ontario during the Depression, looking for a job. Her eldest sister was working as a domestic servant in Winnipeg, and managed through her employer to find a job for Theresa. She did housework and took care of children for \$3-5 per month. After a serious illness, Theresa spent some time at a boarding house for young working women, the Sisters of Service. Like the Mary Martha Home, the Sisters of Service ran an employment office and helped women find placements as domestic workers. Theresa remembers, "We would come to 62 Hargrave for the afternoon and dinner. Good meals were served. We were grateful we had this home away from home to come to. All kinds of activities were planned — concerts, masquerade parties, showers, plays, piano playing, and even our own girls softball team."

Theresa disliked the long hours and hard work of domestic service, and with the help of a fellow boarder at 62 Hargrave found a job at a garment factory. "I started as an examiner, checking garments for threads and so on. ... I made 18 cents per hour. I loved my job. No work after 4 p.m. and my time was my own — no housework, or dishes to wash or meals to cook. This was great....

During the war years we had government army shirt and pant orders. There were 120 buttons to a dozen shirts, and we were paid 8 and 9 cents per hundred buttons. I loved this job too. I took great pride in everything I did."

Wages were low for women garment workers, and working conditions were often unsanitary and very hot. During the hottest summer months, women were working with heavy cloth for winter garments. Discipline was strict on the shop floor. "We dared not talk while working, if we were caught — goodbye — you were fired, so no one dared to speak when the supervisor came around to check." Women's time in the washroom was closely monitored. One of Theresa's co-workers was verbally reprimanded for staying too long in the washroom, and warned that she would be let go. To Theresa's surprise, her co-worker defended herself to the supervisor.

Theresa was supportive of the union when her workplace was organized. She became a shop steward (union representative) and was active in her union throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Then, she was elected secretary of the AGWU local. "I considered this an honour," Theresa recalled. "It was quite an educational experience.... I still have happy memories and I gained a great deal of knowledge and satisfaction in trying to help others."

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## 2. SOCIAL BARRIERS FACING WORKING WOMEN

**W**hy were women faced with such inequality in the working world? Throughout this period, women were battling social expectations and the idealization of women as wives and mothers. Women were not seen as serious about their jobs or careers, and it was assumed that, if women worked at all, they would leave the workforce permanently upon marriage. Women's place was in the home. These attitudes were prevalent, and they crossed the barriers of social class, ethnicity, or race. In 1910, the Premier of Manitoba, Rodmond Roblin, argued that the young women employed in Winnipeg's factories just wanted "pin money." The progressive reformer J.S. Woodsworth deplored the fact that working men and recent immigrants could not earn enough to support their families, forcing women out to work. Women working "means the sacrifice of the best things that home life should yield," he argued.<sup>10</sup>

Woodsworth and Roblin were not alone in believing that women and children were supposed to be financially supported by men. Historians call this the male breadwinner model of the family. It was a powerful social norm in the first half of the twentieth century. Even poorer working families who needed extra income, and had little choice but to send wives and children into the workforce, continued to believe that the male breadwinner should be the sole source of support. Some men were ashamed and demoralized if their wives or daughters had to work to help make ends meet. Others prohibited their wives from working. Married women were strongly criticized for having a job. They were blamed for social problems such as juvenile delinquency, and for health issues such as high infant mortality. If only women stayed in the home, the thinking went, there would be fewer social ills.

Yet, until the Second World War the male breadwinner was a myth, not a reality, for most Canadian families. Middle- and upper class families were able to live on the earnings of the male

head of the family, but many working families could not. By the late 1920s, economic prosperity and better overall health levels brought the ideal closer. If a working man had a good job (preferably unionized), worked steadily all year did not suffer illness or injury, and had three or fewer children to support, he might achieve the "family wage." But the Depression years again saw economic insecurity, unemployment, and low wage levels. Working-class families were accustomed to having to make do in whatever way possible, including having wives and children earn money when necessary. This, however, was not the ideal.

Historians have argued that gender divisions in the workplace were shaped long before workers arrived at the factory gate. Girls also learned their roles from their families and at school. "Within families, decisions were made about who should stay home to look after children and do housework and who should earn wages which had wide reaching impact on the composition of the workforce."<sup>11</sup> Gender norms were impressed upon girls during their childhood and adolescence. From an early age, boys and girls had different responsibilities in the household, and different relationships to paid work. Girls were often needed in the home to help their mothers with household domestic tasks. But, from an early age, boys might be encouraged to work at jobs such as newspaper delivery, or as office messengers. Working class boys over the age of fifteen or sixteen were expected to work and make a financial contribution to the household. Older sons were much more likely to be working outside of the home than daughters were. This made sense to working families. There were fewer jobs for the girls to choose from, and their wages were very low. It made more sense for girls to stay at home, assisting with domestic duties. This was especially true in the early twentieth century, when women were still having large numbers of children, and had a lot of work to do in the home as a result. Families also appear to have been con-

cerned about the possibility that their daughters would be abused in the workplace, including the risk of sexual harassment or assault.

Girls also learned what was expected of them (or not expected) at school. School curriculum usually emphasized education in domestic skills for girls, teaching them how to be good wives and mothers. They might learn cooking or baby care. Classes to prepare young women for the workforce were most likely bookkeeping or typing, reflecting the fact that many young women would find clerical jobs when they left school.

Reform movements had a mixed record when it came to advocating women's right to work. In the first half of the twentieth century, even feminists sometimes thought that married women should not work. For example, in 1920, the University Women's Club — a group of university educated women who were supportive of suffrage and worked to improve working conditions for women — stated that they were opposed to married women working. During their debate on the question, one woman stated that "Good food, close companionships, maternal influence were dependent upon the mother's remaining in the home." Those opposed argued that work should be available to women on an equal basis with men. Without such equality, women would always be financially dependent. In the end, though, the women members of the club voted against supporting married women's right to work.<sup>12</sup>

Other feminists were vocal in their support for workplace equality. In 1928, Nellie McClung wrote in Maclean's magazine: "Can a woman raise a family and have a career? Wholeheartedly, YES!"<sup>13</sup> The well-known anarchist feminist Emma Goldman, who visited Winnipeg early in the twentieth century, believed that women's right to work was one important component of women's liberty. Like others, she saw women's economic dependence upon men as a major barrier to women's freedom.

Women in the trade union and socialist movements also advocated for women's rights in the workplace. They often had to argue against the attitudes of their male counterparts. "Well into the twentieth century, the labour movement generally

accepted the premise that working women posed a problem and a potential threat."<sup>14</sup> Before World War I, organized labour was on record as opposing the industrial employment of women. Women workers were seen as competing with men for jobs, and male workers argued those women's low wages drove down men's wages. Union leaders also saw women workers as passive and conservative, and did not believe it was possible to organize them or get them to go on strike. Women were seen as inherently less militant than men were. As this essay shows, their belief was mistaken. Women were willing to be militant in defense of their workplace rights. But, until at least the 1970s, they had relatively few female role models within the male-dominated labour movement to inspire them. Unions that included women tended to exclude them from leadership positions, and did not make issues of importance to women a priority in collective bargaining.

Manitoba's labour movement was also dominated by Anglo-Canadians. Their anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic prejudices could get in the way of organizing efforts. Many women workers in a variety of settings from domestic service to factory work were recent immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. Like many social elites, workers of Canadian or British ancestry tended to look down upon Ukrainian or Polish people, for example. They did not see European or Asian immigrants as their social equals, and often did not welcome them into their movements for social change. Racism and ethnocentrism within progressive movements in Canada has overlapped with sexism to make doubly difficult the task of fighting for women's workplace rights.

There is no question that employers benefited from women's inequality at work and in the society as a whole. Employers found women to be a cheap, largely compliant, workforce. It made economic sense for firms to only pay premium wages to men for highly skilled aspects of the job, leaving unskilled work for women, recent immigrants, or workers of colour, whose social marginalization only made it easier to pay them less. Over time, however, employers faced increasing criticism for their unequal treatment based upon sex.



Anna Thiessen,  
founder of Mary  
Martha Home, 1918



Garment Workers  
on Strike



Mennonite  
Domestic  
Servants,  
1940's



Manitoba  
Telephone System  
Operators





Garment workers



Francis Marion Beynon



Beet harvesters



Margret Benedictsson, c. 1905

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### 3. CAMPAIGNS FOR WOMEN'S RIGHT TO WORK

The achievement of greater equality for women in the workplace was no accident. It was something women themselves demanded repeatedly over the twentieth century. Campaigns for women's workplace rights were often linked to other aspects of the feminist movement, such as the right to vote, or the right to own property. Although there were usually tensions and divisions between women in their social movements, demands for change encompassed women of all social classes and ethnicities.

Women journalists, who were relatively privileged women, highly educated and from financially secure backgrounds, made a significant contribution to improving women's employment rights by exposing the exploitation of women workers, and demanding better conditions and pay. Themselves forging new ground in a profession dominated by men, women journalists often spoke out passionately for women's economic and social equality.

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#### PROFILE: FRANCIS BEYNON

Francis Marion Beynon was born in 1884 in Streetsville, Ontario, the youngest of six children, and came to Manitoba as a child. Her families on both maternal and paternal sides were devout Methodists, and several were ministers. Her mother was active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, a reform organization that sought to ban the sale of alcohol. As an adult, Francis came to reject the stern religiosity of her family, and her strict disciplinarian childhood.



gain women the right to vote. Francis regularly wrote in favour of property and homesteading rights for women, labour saving devices for the home, and women's suffrage.

After the death of their mother, Francis and several of her siblings trained to work as teachers, and taught school in rural Manitoba. But Francis soon moved on from teaching. In 1908, she moved to Winnipeg and found a job in the advertising department of the T. Eaton Company, one of the first women in the West to have a career in advertising. By 1912, she had become the first full-time women's editor of the Grain Grower's Guide. Her sister Lillian was a staff writer for the Free Press. She and Lillian were prominent social reform advocates and active in the movement to

Both women were part of a vibrant culture of women's journalism in Canada in this period, which sought social improvements and demanded equal recognition and respect for women writers. These women were breaking ground in a male-dominated profession. They were excluded from the all-male Canadian Press Club, so they started their own organization — the Canadian Women's Press Club (CWPC), formed in 1906. The CWPC claims the longest continuous existence of any professional women's journalist organization in the world. The CWPC provided its women members with comradeship and mutual support outside of the family, and "cemented a number of long-lasting friendships while consolidating [the women's] self-awareness as professionals."<sup>15</sup> It was also a hotbed of reform activism, in both rural and urban areas. The CWPC's central role in attaining the right to vote

for women has long been acknowledged by historians. They used their professional access to media to generate public debate on issues of importance to women, including the wages and working conditions of women employees in a variety of occupations from domestic service to teaching.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Western Canadian women were a powerful force in the CWPC. Among them was Nellie McClung, Manitoba's most famous feminist, and Emily Murphy, one of McClung's colleagues in fighting the famous Persons Case, which finally acknowledged the legal personhood of women in Canada in 1929.

At the heart of this supportive network, Francis Beynon also exercised her creative talents. She was the author of the novel *Aleta Day*, which is now recognized as an important feminist and

pacifist text from the period. It was published by a reformist British press in 1918, just after the end of the First World War. Despite Beynon's local prominence as a journalist, there was little recognition of the novel from Manitobans when it was published in Canada in 1920. *Aleta Day* is set in Winnipeg. Like Francis, its protagonist is a journalist and feminist who confronts social barriers to women's equality and personal fulfillment. Beynon also wrote passionately against the militarism of the time, opposing the war and the conscription of soldiers. Aleta is sensitized to the horrors and injustices of war through the suffering of her lover, a soldier who is gassed and wounded in the trenches of Europe.

In 1917, Francis moved to New York City, where she joined her sister Lillian and Lillian's husband. We know little of her life after this period.

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## PROFILE: MARGRET BENEDICTSSON

**A**ctivism for improvements to the conditions of women's work and lives extended beyond middle-class Anglo-Canadian women's organizations. It is important, as well, to acknowledge the achievements and commitment of immigrant women like Margret Benedictsson, a writer and political leader in Manitoba's Icelandic community. Margret was born in 1866 in Iceland, immigrating to North Dakota in her childhood. She was self-supporting by the age of thirteen, working to put herself through high school and two years of college. She moved to Winnipeg, and was married to Sigfus Benedictsson in 1892. In 1898, Margret and Sigfus together began publishing Freyja ('woman'), an Icelandic-language pro-suffrage paper. Its first issue in 1898 stated that "matters pertaining to the progress and rights of all women will always be our first and foremost concern."



Margret was its editor, and wrote or translated a great deal of its content. The magazine printed translations of writings by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Olive Schreiner, both prominent authors in the international feminist movement at the turn of the twentieth century.

Freyja commented on women's issues beyond suffrage. The magazine criticized the limits placed upon women's lives and their lack of choice of occupations beyond motherhood and domesticity. Margret believed that women should have improved access to professional and managerial jobs. She also argued that women's work in the home made a valuable (and unrecognized) contribution to the family economy, one on equal footing with the wage earning of men. Freyja also championed the need for social welfare provisions for women living in poverty, arguing that the state

should provide for the needs of the poor. Margret's journalism emphasized the need to improve the lives of working class women, and to better working conditions in jobs such as domestic service.

Margret's personal life reflected many of the tensions facing women who wanted active lives and careers. She juggled roles as publisher and editor with her household responsibilities, which included caring for three children. Her marriage deteriorated and dissolved after Sigfus denied her access to the printing press, which he owned. Freyja stopped publishing in 1910. Margret left the relationship, taking her children to the United States, where she lived until her death in 1956.

One of the most significant reformist efforts to improve women's working lives was the campaign to establish a minimum wage law in Manitoba. Middle-class women's groups such as the University Women's Club urged the provincial government to act; so did working-class organizations like the Women's Labour League. Toward the end of World War I, the provincial government launched an inquiry into the need for a minimum wage for women. (At this time, such protective legislation was not considered necessary for male workers.) The inquiry, which was to establish a "living wage" for women, surveyed over 9,000 women workers. The minimum wage inquiry assumed that women — especially young women under the age of 18 — had other sources of financial support aside from their wages. It was assumed that most young women workers lived at home. The inquiry did not consider the possibility that women might be supporting children or other family members with their wages. These assumptions were consistent with the general view, held by labour organizations, middle-class reformers, employers, and government alike, that the "family wage" (a wage level high enough to support family members) was relevant only to men. Men were considered breadwinners; women were not. The minimum wage inquiry concluded that \$10 per week was the minimum upon which a woman could survive.

The inquiry revealed the terrible inadequacy of women's wages in Manitoba. In the Winnipeg

factories surveyed, only 38 percent of women made \$10 or more per week; the majority made less.<sup>16</sup> Many earned considerably less. One 15-year-old girl working in a paper box factory earned \$5.50 per week. The eldest of five children, she lived at home and contributed her wages to the family. By her own account, her luxury was to spend \$2.60 per year on movies. A 22-year-old woman also working in a paper box factory earned \$8 per week. She did not live at home, but paid room and board of \$18 per month. She told the interviewer that she hoped that winter to be able to purchase woolen underwear for the first time. Many others interviewed, working in candy factories, garment factories or other manufacturing concerns, faced similar circumstances. Their wages barely covered what was needed for subsistence, with nothing left over for 'extras' such as new clothing, or entertainment.

In 1918, the provincial government in Manitoba created a Minimum Wage Board, with two labour representatives, two employer representatives, and a chairperson. There were two women on the board. The board established a minimum wage of \$11-\$12 per week, depending upon the industry, with a lower wage schedule for trainees and minors. Employees were not entitled to the minimum until they had worked at least 18 months in their place of employment. These rules did not satisfy everyone who had campaigned for the minimum wage. Helen Armstrong of the Women's Labour League argued strongly against a differential minimum based upon age.

The board also attempted to implement improvements in other areas of women's work. It required that women should have a day off every week, and ten-minute rest breaks. The board supported a 48-hour workweek for women, and implemented a detailed schedule of maximum hours by sector. The board also mandated that wages be paid to workers weekly, rather than every two weeks or monthly. It hoped to give women greater job stability by persuading industries to give notice of dismissal.<sup>17</sup>

Although these rules were progress, enforcement of the minimum wage laws was another



matter. During the Depression, there were women working in Manitoba's needle trades for less than \$9 per week. In oral history interviews, women recall earning as little as \$5 to \$7 per week. A woman who started work at the age of sixteen in 1937 remembers: "The most I ever made on piecework was \$5 a week ... During the work day in winter, it was so cold working at our sewing machines that we girls had to wear our boots and

sometimes coats to work in ... as a body we would go to the boss for heat. He would call us all a bunch of Bolsheviks and tell us if we didn't return to our machines, we would all be fired."<sup>18</sup> In the garment industry, wages and conditions had barely improved by the 1950s, especially in non-unionized factories, where recent immigrants were employed.

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## PROFILE: HELEN ARMSTRONG

**H**elen Armstrong is one of the most well known female labour activists in Winnipeg's history. As a woman, she was the exception in a male-dominated labour movement. She had a key role in the Winnipeg General Strike (1919), as one of only two women on the 53-member strike committee. Helen was also the president of the Women's Labour League, a union organizer, a minimum wage campaigner, and a member of the Political Equality League, Winnipeg's suffrage coalition. During World War I, she (along with others in organized labour) opposed the conscription of workers into the military, and defended the rights of interned 'enemy aliens.' She lobbied governments for better pensions for soldiers' wives and children. Helen was also a vocal and effective public spokeswoman for the causes of women workers and working families. Her activism led to her arrest on several occasions. Being a woman did not exempt Helen from rough treatment by the police. Helen's life is just one indication that working class women themselves were far from passive victims of their working conditions or economic circumstances. They came together in organizations such as the Women's Labour League to fight for social change and to better their working lives.

Helen and her husband, George Armstrong, lived in Winnipeg for a fairly short number of years, but made an important impact upon the labour and socialist movements there. George was also a key figure in the Winnipeg General Strike, and was among the leaders of the strike who were

arrested and served time in prison. Helen was born in Ontario, the daughter of Alfred Jury, a tailor and a prominent member of the Knights of Labour, a working class organization that campaigned for the nine-hour day and other improvements to the lives of workers. In her father's tailoring shop, she met George Armstrong. After a period living in the United States, together they came to Winnipeg.

At a time when the labour movement was focused upon unionizing male workers and securing for men the "family wage," Helen and the organization she helped found — the Women's Labour League — saw the need to organize women who were struggling to support themselves or to help sustain their families. Helen was involved in the campaign to unionize women working in Winnipeg's department stores, and led a strike against Woolworths in 1917. Women employees at Woolworths earned as little as \$6 per week, and worked long and exhausting hours. They demanded an \$8 per week minimum, union recognition, and a half-day holiday. They went on strike from May 26 to June 11, 1917, to back up their demands. The women had the support of the broader labour movement, which helped to raise funds for strike pay. The strike had mixed results. Woolworths agreed to improved wages and days off, but refused to recognize the union. Most of the women strikers lost their jobs, because the company hired replacement workers during the strike.

Helen Armstrong and the Women's Labour League were to take a central role in organizing women strikers in Winnipeg's historic General Strike in May and June of 1919. The General Strike began as a struggle by the Metal Trades Council to be recognized as a legitimate collective bargaining agent for metal workers in Winnipeg. Employers in the city refused to recognize the council, or the Building Trades Council. They would not meet with the workers' representatives to discuss demands for a "living wage." The General Strike was fought not just for the right to improved wages and working conditions, but also over the right to collective bargaining and union representation itself.

Not all of the strikers were men. In fact, the first workers to go out on strike in support of the metal and building trades were the female telephone operators — five hundred of them. A day after the strike started, the *Toronto Globe* reported two thousand women strikers among the 30,000 on strike in Winnipeg. There were retail clerks, garment workers, waitresses, bookbinders and confectionery workers off the job. Helen Armstrong urged unionized and non-unionized women to support the strike. She played a critical role organizing women workers, and worked through the Women's Labour League to help support those who were losing pay. It held fundraising events, and ran a dining hall, which gave free meals to women who were hungry. Men who used the hall were expected to make a cash contribution, in recognition that women workers earned less, and therefore had less to fall back upon. The Women's Labour League also formed a relief committee, which provided cash donations to women in need, helping women on strike to pay their rent and other expenses.

Armstrong was also out on the picket lines during the strike, and was arrested several times during its course. She organized meetings and tried to unionize new groups of women workers. Helen used the General Strike as an opportunity to further her attempts to unionize retail clerks, particularly those working in smaller stores. She was successful in convincing many clerks to join the strike. Waitresses were also a key group of women strikers. Wages and working conditions for women in restaurants were appalling, despite the new Minimum Wage Board rules. Hours of work ranged from nine to fourteen and one-half hours, with one to three days off per month. Some earned as little as \$15 per month, and had deductions taken off these paltry wages for uniforms and tips to bus boys, leaving women with \$9 per month as take home pay. According to the Minimum Wage Board, these workers should have been earning at least \$12.50 per week. Striking restaurant workers stayed out for over a month attempting to win a \$10 minimum for women and \$15 for the men.

Helen Armstrong and the League continued their activism after the General Strike had been effectively defeated by the government's use of force and the arrest of strike leaders. On Labour Day, 1919, a parade of seven thousand protesters filled the streets of Winnipeg. The League had two floats in this parade. Armstrong herself traveled across Canada making public appearances to raise funds for a legal defense fund for the incarcerated men. She also ran twice for city council, both times unsuccessfully.

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## 4. BARRIERS AND PROGRESS TO 1960

The voices of women like Helen Armstrong helped to transform the working world for women, but it was a slow process. Many of those who advocated greater workplace equality likely saw few improvements during their lifetime. Others were a part of exciting and rapid changes. The First and Second World Wars were important watersheds for women on the job. With the men away at the front, women's labour was essential for wartime industries such as the manufacturing of airplanes, munitions, food, and uniforms. Suddenly, it seemed that women were far more capable than men had previously realized! First young single women, then married women, flooded into new occupations, performing jobs from which they had previously been excluded, such as machining, welding, or engineering. They took on greater management responsibilities. The demand for women's labour during World War II was so high that the federal government established daycares across the country to care for women's children while they went to work. These were the first publicly funded childcare centres in Canada. After the war was over, funding was withdrawn, and most of these daycares were forced to close.

The irony was that most of the voices arguing in favour of women's work during wartime became silent when war ended. Women took two steps forward and perhaps almost two back. During the 1920s, for example, young single women did enjoy a greater choice of occupations and sometimes better conditions and pay. Partly this was the result of the spirit of change for women that swept Canada during and immediately after World War I. But when the Depression struck in 1929, women suddenly found themselves being scapegoats for male unemployment.

Opponents of women's right to work argued that preference should be given to married men who had families to support. It was assumed that women's wages did not support other family members. Manitoba's provincial government, which employed an increasing number of women, refused to hire married women in the 1930s, arguing that they did not need to work. The federal government also discriminated against women in the 1920s and 1930s. Female teachers on the prairies were pressured to leave their positions so that men could have their jobs. Women, of course, vocally resisted these pressures, although their protests were often ignored. The truth was that women did support others. Women's wages were, at times, the only thing standing between families and relief. With no reliable social assistance programs in place in Canada during this period, widows often had no public support, and had to provide for their children by taking whatever work was available.

Attitudes toward women's employment during Depression years showed "how much many Canadians, both female and male, had invested in ideas about family, home, and women's place."<sup>19</sup> For these individuals, employment was not a human right, but a privilege based upon gender. But these years also show that women were not prepared to retreat to the home, and that women's employment was here to stay. The Second World War and its aftermath only confirmed this. The image of the 1950s in popular culture, of suburban dreams and nuclear families with mom at home, is only partly true. After the war, married women said 'no' to staying in the home forever. The seeds of the rapid changes of the 1960s and 1970s were planted.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Marilyn Barber, "The Servant Problem in Manitoba, 1896-1930," in Mary Kinnear, ed., *First Days, Fighting Days: Women in Manitoba History* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1987), p. 100.
- <sup>2</sup> Frieda Esau Klippenstein, "Scattered But Not Lost: Mennonite Domestic Servants in Winnipeg, 1920s-50s," in Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne, eds. *Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women's History* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000), p. 203.
- <sup>3</sup> Klippenstein, p. 225-226.
- <sup>4</sup> Sarah Carter, *Aboriginal People and Colonizers of Western Canada to 1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 89.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in Mary Kinnear, *A Female Economy: Women's Work in a Prairie Province, 1870-1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), p. 91.
- <sup>6</sup> Mercedes Steedman, "Skill and Gender in the Canadian Clothing Industry, 1890-1940," in C. Heron and R. Storey, eds. *On the Job* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), p. 160.
- <sup>7</sup> Quoted in Steedman, p. 166.
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted in Debra Lindsay, *The Clothes Off Our Back: A History of ACTWU 459* (Winnipeg: ACTWU 459, Manitoba Labour History Series, 1995), p. 30.
- <sup>9</sup> Quotes taken from Lindsay, p. 27.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted in Kinnear, p. 28.
- <sup>11</sup> Bettina Bradbury, "Gender At Work At Home: Family Decisions, the Labour Market and Girls' Contributions to the Family Economy," in Bettina Bradbury, ed., *Canadian Family History: Selected Readings* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1992), p. 177-178.
- <sup>12</sup> Kinnear, *A Female Economy*, p. 33-34.
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted in Kinnear, *A Female Economy*, p. 25.
- <sup>14</sup> Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women For the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 5.
- <sup>15</sup> Susan Jackel, "First Days, Fighting Days: Prairie Presswomen and Suffrage Activism, 1906-1916," in Mary Kinnear, ed., *First Days, Fighting Days: Women in Manitoba History* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1987) p. 57.
- <sup>16</sup> Kinnear, *A Female Economy*, p. 123.
- <sup>17</sup> "The Minimum Wage for Women and Girls in Manitoba" (Winnipeg: Province of Manitoba, c. 1920).
- <sup>18</sup> Kinnear, *A Female Economy*, p. 125.
- <sup>19</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), p. 47.