

# Nation States and International Tensions |

## Sample Answer

### **What did you learn about World War 1 from your study of the conduct of war and/or women in the workforce during World War 1?**

Society was completely transformed during World War 1, as men and women from every social class were affected in one way or another. The role of women in the workforce was one of the most significant and important changes during this period. Before WW1 the majority of women in the workforce worked in domestic services such as housekeepers, maids, or nannies. However this would be drastically changed during WW1, and the role of women would never be the same afterwards.

By 1914 over 1 million men had been conscripted by the British Army, and British women began to fill the job vacancies they had left behind. These women worked in munitions factories, on farms, and drove buses or trains. They also began working in the police force and as priests- traditionally male dominated workforces. By 1915 the government was under pressure to expand the workforce in munitions factories, and began replacing the men who had worked there with women. That same year the government passed the Treasury Agreement Act, which aimed to preserve industry production, so allowed untrained workers to fill jobs which formerly required training. As a result, the number of women in the workforce rose from 3 million to 5 million by 1918. Despite this, the wage gap between men and women did not change.

By 1914, women made up 80% of the workforce in munition and engineering industries. By 1916, this female workforce amounted to 200,000 and would increase to 1 million. The encouragement of suffragettes such as Emmeline Pankhurst inspired women to join the workforce, to aid the war effort. Industrial work provided women with regular working hours, and the government also began to provide them with reasonable wages as well. However most of the time the women worked long hours, often in highly dangerous conditions. Their skin would often turn yellow due to prolonged exposure to toxic chemicals, which earned them the nickname

‘canaries.’ They were at extremely high risk of being injured or killed if they were working with TNT explosives or other chemicals, and approximately 400 women under these working conditions. Another 134 women were killed in an industrial explosion accident in Chilwell in 1918. These dangerous and toxic working conditions resulted in injuries and infertility for millions of women who worked in industrial production during WW1.

Despite the circumstances, women of all classes, married and single, joined the workforce in some way or other. They enjoyed the camaraderie of working together in the war effort, and the newfound independence a salary gave them. During this period, the British suffragette leader Emmeline Pankhurst put a temporary stop to her campaign for women’s voting rights. The British government gave her 2, 000 pounds and the release of imprisoned suffragettes in return for her to organise a campaign encouraging women to work. Pankhurst rallied 30,000 women to aid the war effort by joining workforces such as police, state service, and industrial production.

In addition to urban work in industrial production, women also began work in the country-side to aid the war effort. The Women’s Land Army was established, with 260,000 members by 1917. They worked together to maintain farms, bringing in the harvest, and collecting grain and farm produce. Women also worked to aid the soldiers in medical services such as the Voluntary Aid Detachment, (V.A.D) and the Red Cross. Over 74,000 members were in the V.A.D,  $\frac{2}{3}$  of whom were women by 1914. In the beginning of the war, the government did not allow women volunteering in medical services such as these to go to the front. However this would change with the emergence of field hospitals. Millions of women also aided the war effort by knitting or making clothes for the soldiers, volunteer organisations, and supporting vulnerable families. The First World War provided women with the opportunity to work in nearly every type of workforce available, which was unprecedented for its time.

Queen Mary’s Army Auxiliary Corps was established in 1917. This organization aimed to make use of women’s contribution to the war effort alongside the British army. Women did not fight in the front, but were allowed to work in other jobs. These jobs involved working in the army in jobs such as clerks, cooks, and gasmask instructors. They received uniform and wages, earning 45 shillings a week. This was the first time in history women were allowed to serve in uniform alongside the British Army. However, on the Eastern Front there was a 300-strong Russian battalion under the command of Maria Bochkareva. This was a female only battalion, and they

fought with the ordinary Russian Army on the front. They were a highly regarded and feared battalion, which earned them the nickname 'The Women's Battalion of Death.'

Due to more women joining the workforce, women's fashion and clothing began to change as a result. Clothing was made in lighter materials and more simply designed for functionality, and restrictive corsets began to go out of fashion. Women working in industrial production began wearing their hair in short styles for practical reasons. The amount of women who smoked began to increase. Women's independence was much higher after the war, as they had the opportunity to gain skills they would not have otherwise, such as driving.

Because of women's unmistakable contribution to the war effort, the Representation of the People Act gave women over 30 the right to vote in Britain by 1918. Britain was the first country to give women the right to vote, and by 1921 women over 21 were also granted voting rights. Germany granted women the right to vote in 1918, with Russia following in 1917. Canada and the United States followed suit in 1920. France and Italy only granted women the right to vote after the Second World War. The number of women in the workforce decreased when the men returned after the war. However, a number of women would still remain working in shops, hotels, and offices.

The influence of WW1 completely changed the lives of women. It was the first time in history they had the opportunity to access a wide range of workforces-in industry, in the countryside, in hospitals, and in the army. They gained independence in a way they never could before, as they were able to financially support themselves and their families. Female fashion also changed as a reflection of the changing role of women in society. And ultimately, their contribution to the war effort resulted in more women's voting rights worldwide.