

Women's Military Service in the First World War

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Women's work took many forms during the war as the conflict saw the movement of women into many areas of life which had previously been thought of as male. As men went off to war, women took up work on the land, in munitions factories and other areas of heavy industry, and most dramatically, in the auxiliary military services. However, this movement of women into public life and work was by no means straightforward, and contemporary debates reflected concerns that women were moving into roles defined as masculine. Whilst the wartime state gradually realised that it needed women's labour, women undertaking this labour were often criticised and accused of taking men's jobs whilst they were serving their country. Women and women's organisations fought back, arguing that they, no less than the combatant men, were serving their nation in wartime. The Women's Emergency Corps (WEC), organised by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), acted as a clearing-house for women's paid and unpaid labour. Recruitment literature for the WEC, which is collected together here, illustrates how the NUWSS identified the cause of women, and female suffrage, with the democratic principles which it believed the war was being fought for. One poster 'The Call of the Country', echoed Kitchener's famous appeal to British men in its statement that:

Women! Your country needs you. Today the country needs every woman no less than it needs every man... we call to the women of the country to come and help us. Come quickly! Give of your best in the same spirit in which your brothers have answered the nation's call. [\[Volunteer Corps: 2/11\]](#)

The WEC thus situated women's war work as being of national importance; the female equivalent of fighting for one's nation.

Amongst the most problematic roles that women could take on were those which were associated with the military, and thus perceived as male. Almost from the war's beginning, some women had expressed their desire to take a more active part in the conflict which went further than the 'traditional' female roles of supporting the troops through knitting and needlework as represented by Queen Mary's Needlework Guild [\[Benevolent Organisations 2/2\]](#), or providing relief for war refugees [\[Belgium 1/1-16\]](#) However, efforts to find work which these women regarded as being of national importance were often frustrated. Many letters were published in the newspapers from aggrieved women whose offers of war work had been turned down. Existing female paramilitary organisations,

such as the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), formed in 1908, were told by the War Office that there was no role for them, whilst the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), a volunteer military nursing organisation largely staffed by women, was placed under the auspices of the (male led) Territorial Force [[British Red Cross: 10/1- 15/1](#)]. Given the determination of the War Office to maintain gender divisions and exclude female labour from the military sphere, it is unsurprising that the early days of the war saw the appearance of volunteer female paramilitary organisations such as the Women's Auxiliary Force [[Volunteer Corps: 5/1-17](#)], the Home Service Corps [[Volunteer Corps: 6/1-37](#)] and the British Service Corps [[Volunteer Corps: 9](#)]. The largest and best known of these voluntary organisations was the Women's Volunteer Reserve.

The Women's Volunteer Reserve, (WVR) formed following the bombardment of the East Coast in December 1914, was the most prominent of the voluntary military organisations for women. The declared aims of the WVR were two-fold: to 'free more men for the firing line' and to 'organise more succour for the helpless ones in the community'. [[Volunteer Corps: 2/27](#)] Work and training undertaken by the WVR included running canteens for soldiers, transporting the wounded, camp cooking, first aid, and motoring. More contentiously, its members wore a khaki uniform, a colour associated with the 'sacrifice' of the combatant man, learnt to parade and drill, named their local groups battalions and their members privates and officers, and were sometimes offered the opportunity of training to bear arms. The Reserve's papers collected here demonstrate the criticism which the organisation faced owing to this appropriation of the military symbolism associated with male combatants such as 'the provision of drills in military uniform.' [[Volunteer Corps: 2/27](#)]

In 1915 the volunteer Women's Legion was formed. The Legion was far less overtly militaristic than the WVR; it did not practise drill and the work undertaken by its members, such as cookery and waitressing in military canteens, remained more clearly within an established female sphere than that undertaken by members of the WVR. Perhaps because of this the Women's Legion proved to be more socially acceptable than the WVR. By October 1915, the Annual Report of the WEC, which oversaw both organisations, stated that the WVR was simply one aspect of the Women's Legion. [[Volunteer Corps: 2/3](#)] The Women's Legion was formally recognised by the Army Council in February 1916 when its members began to work directly with the army, acting as substitutes for male soldiers in the areas of cookery and transport and enabling the army to move these men into positions nearer to the front line and the male role of combatant. The work of these women, although it signalled the first official recognition by the British Army of its need for female labour in total war, also helped to reinforce established, gendered patterns of work and status. Their prime function was to replace men destined for the front by performing work considered as being better suited to women.

Although the outbreak of war had seen the appearance of a wave of ‘patriotic’ women’s voluntary organisations, such as the Women’s Emergency Corps, Princess Mary’s Sailors and Soldiers Christmas Fund, and Queen Mary’s Needlework Guild, all of whose papers are included here, it is notable that it was not until 1916 that the War Office and the government formally recognised the need for organised women’s labour. The Army Council’s recognition of the Women’s Legion marks both the first formal utilisation of women’s labour by the armed forces and the way in which, despite women’s movement into new areas of work, the war acted to reinforce established, gendered divisions of labour and status. These women worked as substitutes for men, taking into the military sphere the already established concept of dilution. [Army: 1]

The formation of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in 1917 was a result of the review of women’s role and women’s wartime labour accompanying the Military Service Act of 1916 and the introduction of male conscription. As men were conscripted, women’s contribution to the war effort became the subject of renewed examination. Throughout the war, demands for women to undertake service alongside men had occasionally been made. One early correspondent to the *Evening Standard* argued that ‘as there seem to be no men in England, why not appeal to the women?’ (*Evening Standard*, 26/8/1914) Women’s war service had been the subject of scrutiny in 1915 when the introduction of a National Register, designed to catalogue the numbers and occupation of men potentially available for military service, led to a debate on women’s role in wartime and a consideration of their dual role as workers and wives and mothers. The introduction of male conscription in 1916 led to a renewed examination of women’s wartime role, and in particular a debate on the possibility of conscripting women for war work in order to ‘free a man for the front’. Despite the influx of conscripts into the forces in 1916, the need for more manpower remained urgent. Following the catastrophic casualty rates of the Battle of the Somme, Lieutenant-General H.M. Lawson was commissioned to carry out a study assessing what use the army could make of women’s labour. Lawson’s suggestion that the army should expand its use of women’s labour, was received sceptically by Field Marshall Haig, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Armies in France. Haig insisted that women be employed as dilutees, proposing a ratio of 200 women to replace 134 men as clerks and in domestic service. [Army: 3/4-3/5] The comments recorded here illustrate Haig’s wider fears regarding the impact of women on the male world of the army, as he argued that the employment of women in Base Depots would result in the ‘likelihood of sex difficulty’ and the disruption of the army’s work in these depots. [Army: 3/4] Both Lawson and Haig were concerned to ensure that women’s work remained separate from that of men working behind the lines, seen in Lawson’s suggestion that if women were to be used by the army they ‘must form part of definitive units provided with their own women officers and NCOs.’ [Army: 3/3] The introduction of women into the army was to be managed in such a way as to not destabilise the existing linkage between masculinity and soldiering.

The WAAC's creation was announced in the press in March 1917, and the first draft of women, all previously members of the Women's Legion, left for France the same month. Attempts to manage and regulate the role of uniformed women can be seen in every aspect of the WAAC's organisation and work. Women worked within five broad categories of employment: domestic, cookery, mechanical, clerical and tending war graves, in all of which they were employed as dilutees. Although members of the Corps wore khaki, the symbolic colour of the combatant man, all other signifiers of military service were carefully policed. A 1917 conference at the War Office decided that 'no army badges could be worn' and the second draft general rules for the WAAC stated that 'uniform will not be modified or added to' [Army: 3/7/5, 3/8/4]. As Susan Grayzel has argued the creation of the WAAC, closely controlled by the War Office and the Army Council, dissipated some of the criticism of women in uniform which had been made in previous years. (Grayzel, 1997: 157) However, it never completely vanished and the woman in military uniform continued to be an object of concern throughout the war, often criticised as both 'mannish' and unfeminine and as sexual predators, preying on the male soldiers of the British army. Indeed, rumours about the sexual activities of the WAAC in France had reached such a level by early 1918 that the government believed they were affecting recruitment to the Corps, and a Commission of Enquiry was formed by the Ministry of Labour to investigate the activities of the WAAC. The Commission's Report was published in March 1918 and found that the majority of rumours had their basis in letters sent home by the troops whom, the Commissioners believed, may have been motivated by 'jealousy and hostility towards the WAAC' if they had been 'dislodged from non-combatant tasks' by the women's arrival. [Army: 3/28]

Although the Report vindicated the WAAC, it was overshadowed by the German offensive of 1918, which began the day after its publication. In this offensive, nine members of the WAAC were killed in a bombing raid at Abbeville, and their funeral, with full military honours, seemed to show that women had earned 'their right to khaki', making them 'one in sympathy and sacrifice with the fighting services'. (*The Times*, 1/6/1918) The WAAC were renamed the Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps (QMAAC) in April 1918, with Queen Mary assuming the honorary position of Commandant in Chief of the Corps [Army 3/14]. Together with public sympathy following the deaths of women in the corps, the Report's findings and the transformation of the WAAC into the QMAAC effectively quashed the derogatory rumours which had been circulating. Towards the end of the war, as women in uniform became a more widely accepted facet of a society in the throes of total war, with all its attendant demands and sacrifices, women not wearing some form of uniform were increasingly criticised for their perceived lack of patriotism.

By the time of the armistice in November 1918, between 80 and 90,000 women had served in the British auxiliary forces. In addition to the largest of these, the WAAC, women had also served in the

Women's Royal Naval Reserve (WRENS), formed in November 1917 [WRNS: 1/1-20/7] and the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF), formed in April 1918 [WRAF: 1/1-2/67]. Although significantly smaller in size than the WAAC and QMAAC, women in these further auxiliary organisations worked in similar roles, filling occupations such as cooks, waitresses, mechanics, clerks, store keepers and drivers. Like the WAAC, the purpose of these further auxiliary organisations was to release men for combatant roles in their various services. As they were less numerous and thus less visible than the WAAC, their members and activities were subject to less criticism but they nonetheless threatened to further undermine the division between male and female war experience, home front and war front.

The quandary faced by the wartime state was that of balancing its need for women's labour and the perceived necessity of preserving existing gender roles. No comprehensive scheme for the demobilization of militarised women existed at the end of the war. As they had enrolled rather than enlisted they officially retained the status of civilians and, unlike their male colleagues, released from service according to the demand for their skills in the workplace, women's role in the home was the key factor determining their demobilisation. Married women and women with children were released first [Army: 3/31]. The QMAAC officially ceased to exist on active service in September 1921, when the last thirty-one active members, who had been working with the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries in France, were sent home. Although the expansion of women's work and, in particular, their uniformed work with the military behind the lines of combat threatened to undermine the division between male and female war experience, the control and regulation of every aspect of women's work meant that these boundaries were largely maintained. With the war's end, they could be rebuilt.

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