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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- ✧ The student will have a general understanding of the economic and social consequences of war for Canadian women.

- ✧ The student will identify the traditional values of family life existing before the war and how the experiences of women involved in the wartime economy affected and changed them.

- ✧ The student will understand the process by which industrialization and service sector unions were created in B.C. and the reasons why working women participated in building them.

- ✧ The student will understand the role of government in mobilizing for the war effort. He/she will be able to compare the official images promoted by government to the experience of individuals during wartime. This can lead to a greater understanding of the role of contemporary advertising and media.

- ✧ The student will be able to dissect the different techniques used in this production, as they relate to the intent of the producer, and will be able to transfer this new understanding to other media productions.

- ✧ The student will be able to question the images of the historical past presented through archival materials.

- ✧ The student will be able to identify the conflicting experiences of women entering the labour force that contributed to the growth of feminism.

INTRODUCTION

Keeping the Home Fires Burning explores the unique experience of Canada's working women during World War II.

The production utilizes personal narrative, archival footage, music and agit-prop dramas to help the viewer in reaching an understanding of the impact of this period of time on individual women's lives as well as the impact of women themselves on the society around them. The complexity, richness and abundance of different media (photography, film, music) contained in this work could lead to an analysis of the responsibility of the media at large and the role of advertising in our society.

USING THIS RESOURCE

This resource guide is divided into distinct and complementary sections that focus on the main themes treated in the video. These are: Women and Work; Women and Unions and History and the Media. Each section contains some background material as well as suggested questions to help stimulate discussion.

For maximum participation, it may be useful to divide a group or class into smaller discussion units and have each one deal with the same or related aspects of a single question.

AUDIENCE

This tape can be used effectively with high school and college students as an introduction to the history of Canadian women and the issues of women in the work force, or for classes discussing issues relating to media and society. The humorous tone and diversity of historical records presented makes this an entertaining as well as educational tape for a more general adult audience as well.

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Women And Work

Introduction

The first part of *Keeping the Home Fires Burning* highlights women's entry into and participation in non-traditional work in the aircraft, shipbuilding and wood industries in B.C. During the period 1939 - 1945 there was a 42% increase in the number of women employed in industrial jobs. This growth was paralleled by an expansion of service sector work and a leap in government occupations available to women.

Women became 30% of the wartime labour force with a big increase in the number of married women working. From 1940 to 1944, the province's working women doubled from 30,538 to 60,410. These women were part of an across-Canada employment trend which showed a jump from 144,000 female industrial workers in 1939 to 510,715 in 1944, a 64% increase since the outset of hostilities. This was the highest record of female employment in Canadian history.

Using archival footage and dramatization, *KEEPING THE HOME FIRES BURNING* helps us to understand the role of the government in mobilizing for the war effort. Government wartime propaganda permitted the use of women workers and lauded their flexibility and skills. The mainstream press worked hand in hand with government in achieving these goals. A regular column: "Women at Work" appeared in the province. Between 1940 and 1943, newspapers featured articles highlighting female shoemakers, truck-drivers, welders, radio announcers, conductresses, roofers, parachutists, messengers and lifeguards, first as anomalies and later as symbols of women's ability to perform all types of work.



The Proudest Women ... Serving at Home =

Government advertisements sought to achieve two ends: the recruitment of women from middle class backgrounds, who unlike their working class sisters, needed to be convinced to eschew their leisure time and join the war effort and the creation of an image of the "heroic" temporary female war worker who the public believed would be willingly displaced at the end of the war.

Discuss:

Why do you think women joined the war effort? Explain.

In the tape, what were the qualities presented in the archival sequences as being heroic? Do you believe these to be true of women then? Today? Why?

Many company hiring procedures sought to ensure a female labour force which would leave at the end of the war while providing the maximum benefit to employers while engaged. In its first hiring, Boeing, for example, refused to employ veteran female industrial workers from W.W.I, believing their skills did not apply to new techniques. The ideal aircraft worker would be unmarried, around 25 years old, and able to be trained on the job. The "frilly type" was out since it was felt that attractive women would distract men from time on the job. Despite their recognized contribution to the war effort, women remained primarily feminine in the eyes of the popular press as **Saturday Night** stated in 1942:

"They have not allowed their utilitarian function which is absolutely invaluable to the war effort, to interfere with their primary inclination for being coy, charming, very feminine individuals whose chief aim in life (at least one of them) is make themselves attractive to men."

Discuss:

From watching the tape, how do you think that women responded to these contradictory attitudes?

Do you feel that such double standards exist today?

The service industries employed the greatest number of women. The vast majority of working women were still performing the traditional tasks allotted to their sex: cooking, cleaning, laundering and domestic service. In industry, women were often given tedious and repetitive tasks which they were perceived to be very good at, and were apparently willing to perform.

Mothers in Overalls

By 1941 a great number of women had entered the war effort. The first engaged were young, single women. However the demands for more workers kept mounting and married women with children soon joined the war effort. Women suddenly found themselves playing a dual role. This placed a strain on many women and their families and contributed significantly to the willingness of many to drop out of the workforce after the war.



"Will they ever get me back to the kitchen after the war? ...Why, I never got out of it. When I am through inspecting gun parts here, I go home and do the housework as I always did."

MacLeans
Magazine

Working women were a wartime fact of life, but their presence was qualified with a reminder to women and reassurances to men and employers that they would likely return home or accept more traditional employment after the war. In spite of the strong campaign to have women return to the home to make room for returning vets, a great number of them were not willing to forego the economic independence they had tasted. Incomes now allowed many to afford modern kitchens and other household conveniences that made it easier for them to remain in the workforce.

Discuss:

What do you think have been the consequences of this new desire on the part of women to remain in the workforce?

How has this changed today's workforce?

What effect has this had on the traditional family?

Women And Unions

Responding to the call of the government for women to contribute to the war effort, women entered the labour force in unprecedented numbers. The government and press glorified women in their new roles, particularly those entering the industrial sector. The official media suggested that women were joining the workforce for patriotic reasons, but the National Selective Service figures established that 59% of women worked to supplement their family income, 32% worked for their own personal economic needs and only 9% joined to serve their country.

KEEPING THE HOME FIRES BURNING reminds us that although women faced the novel possibilities of working in male-dominated industrial jobs, they still continued to do the vast majority of traditional service jobs. Deploying personal memory and humour, the women interviewed describe their sometimes rocky integration into the labour force as well as their changing consciousness towards themselves, other women and work both during and after the war.

Wartime Unionism

Women began their new jobs at a time when the Canadian wave of CIO organizing was peaking. The entry of thousands of unskilled and semi-skilled workers destabilized the job trusts of craft unions. New, more democratic forms of organization were demanded. Under pressure from growing union organization, certification procedures and wartime labour boards were established to decide disputes. At

the same time, employers were organizing their own company unions which created bargaining structures that would foster conflict between union leaders and worker.

The rapid increase of production during the war created a very favourable economic environment for labour organization. In addition the federal government, in an attempt to avoid violent labour unrest, moved to

ensure minimum bargaining rights for labour unions by introducing Order - In- Council, P.C. 1003 in 1944. This helped for the future development of unionism. By the time this legislation came into effect, most major industrial unions (eg. auto, wood, steel) had already won contracts through major waves of labour unrest in 1943.

Women in Unions

Contradictory attitudes were reflected in the fact that while industry was crying for more workers to ensure that production would continue, existing unions and male workers were resisting the entry of women into a traditionally male domain.

Discuss:

Women met a particularly strong resistance to their entry into the industrial and manufacturing workplaces. This was contradictory to the official stance presented in the media. What types of resistance do you think they encountered?

At times the responses were extreme as these examples illustrate:

- In Chemainus, a town where the wood mill had long been established and where women had traditionally been homemakers, not wage earners, men unionized in order to bar women from entering mill production jobs.
- In the shipyards, the traditional craft unions like welders tried to exclude women from entering the shipyards. They met however with employers determined to hire women and women determined to work. The union, faced with the fact of women's employment, accepted them as members with voice but no vote with the understanding that these jobs were a transient product of the war effort.

Many of the advances made by women during this time were tempered by the notion that women were only there for the “duration” of the war. In spite of the resistance they met, women gave unions little choice but to accept them.

From 1939 to 1941, women trade union members almost doubled their numbers. During the same time, men’s participation was increased by only 10%. Women participated in all aspects of wartime unionism. They signed up members in union organizing drives, became shop stewards for women in their industries and later, for both men and women, wrote for and edited union papers, sat down with other workers to demand rest breaks or improvements in safety conditions, fought for equal pay for women and a relaxation of dress codes governing female workers.

For women who had previously worked in the home or in relative isolation as domestics, there was now an opportunity to work together with others and gain a new sense of collective identity as a worker.

Discuss:

From watching the video, why do you think that women needed and wanted to belong to unions?

What do you think were the particular working conditions that affected women most?

Working Conditions for Women

Sex stereotyping

Women were still channelled into traditional tasks allotted to their particular sex such as cooking, cleaning, laundering and restaurant work. Within the industrial sector women were invariably given the lowest paying jobs. The traditional craft hierarchy was reinforced by authority vested along sex lines. In new industries such as aircraft manufacturing, where men and women entered at the same time, women sometimes became foremen, but in mills, lumberyards and factories rarely were they able to gain positions of authority.

Part-time Workers

As industry and services sector demands increased, a significant trend occurred where more married women entered the work force. There were unique problems associated with their participation. Childcare was a major issue for married women entering new jobs for the first time. Part-time work was considered an alternative to this work dilemma, but it left women open to exploitation - they had no job security and they were hired to work during times of peak activity when they were often forced to work harder than other workers.

Equal Pay for Equal Work

Even in new industries like the aircraft plants, where women had gained some recognition for their skills, they still earned an average of 3¢ less per hour than their male counterparts. As pointed out in a ***Saturday Night*** article, even trade union contracts would legislate inequities such as a 20% wage differential for men and women working side by side on the same jobs. (p.151 ***Shoulder to Shoulder***). When unions did begin to push for equal pay legislation, it was because they realized that women’s low wages were undercutting those of the male labour force, or because their female members pressed the issue.



Daycares were introduced by the government and given a great deal of attention in the media.

The programme was limited to Ontario and Quebec and there were spaces for only 3,000 children. These were inadequate since there were over 300,000 married women entering the workforce.

Discuss:

Based on the kinds of conditions that women were striving to improve through their participation in unions, what kinds of progress do you feel has been made up to today?

Back to the Kitchen

By 1943, the spiral of industrial lay-offs began with women being the first victims. Women lost their jobs with other low-priority unskilled workers whose tasks were related to war production.

In spite of the tremendous skills and experience which women had gained during the war, they were unable to establish their right to a job in all sectors of the economy. In the few years (2-3) that women were in industry, they were unable to forge a movement amongst working women and others capable of fighting the tremendous force of post-war lay offs and backlash. The B.C. Labour movement was not effective in resisting the generalized layoffs let alone the women's loss of jobs.

Discuss:

Do you think that labour leaders were right to negotiate or compromise their right to strike and agree to freeze wages during wartime in order to ensure a bargaining platform? (Consider that during 1939 - 1949 executive salaries increased by 65% while workers wages rose by less than half that amount).

Do you think the support by the unions of the no-strike pledge affected their ability to stem the trend of post-war layoffs? Why or why not?

History Through Media

Our sense of historic "truth" or realism comes from an almost unconscious absorption of the pervasive images of our culture.

In our attempts to understand an historic tape such as ***KEEPING THE HOME FIRES BURNING***, we must take into account not only the content, but the medium itself; the images it uses; how it has been compiled, and its points of view.

KEEPING THE HOME FIRES BURNING, through archival footage, interviews, newspaper clippings, and dramatic re-creations, tries to re-present and interpret the history of women and work during W.W.II, an aspect of history which has been much neglected. As well it is a history of representation - of "the ways that the images and texts of both past and present help to organize our sense of the meaning, even the reality of our own and others' lives."

(Study Guide for "For Love or Money: A History of Women and Work in Australia"p.3)

“Reality” through Documentary --- ---

Discuss (Before the tape):

What do we already know about women and work during W.W.II? Where have we gotten this information?

To study this tape and the time period it represents, it is useful to examine all the elements and the processes involved in putting it together.

Much of the wartime footage used has been drawn from the NFB as well as other government departments such as Department of National Defence and the Department of Supply and Services, all of which produced propaganda for the Canadian Armed Forces.

John Grierson was the father of what we know today as the documentary form. He founded the National Film Board and was committed to the production of films that were designed to instruct, provide national education and inspire discussion about important national and social issues. The government, as major funder of the Film Board, recognized the potential of film to both inform and influence public attitudes and they quickly mobilized film production to enhance Canadian war efforts.

Discuss:

Who do you think was the intended audience of the War-time archival sequences? How did such propaganda try to inform and influence attitudes? How is the “reality” presented influenced by the source and originator of the images?

KEEPING THE HOME FIRES BURNING is a compilation documentary. The archival footage has been given a different context by being edited into montage sequences with other interview, still, or dramatized visual footage. The soundtrack too has been deliberately edited to give the visuals a new and challenging interpretation.

Discuss:

How has the editing process affected the way we interpret the archival sequences?

Is the sound synchronous with the image or does it provide a counterpoint? What effect does this have?

Alternative Historic Sources

The interviews with the women who were involved as workers and during the war provide a different perspective of working women. The juxtaposition of their often humorous reminiscences alongside the documentary propaganda footage challenges our sense of the “heroic” efforts of women in the war.

Other historic evidence is presented in the compilation through the dramatized sequences. These show another representation of women workers’ experience that has not been presented in official propaganda. This type of workers’ theatre is based on a tradition of “Agit-Prop” that came out of the pre- and post-revolutionary theatre movements in the USSR. Workers combined demands for immediate improvements with a long-term plan for social change in a cultural form.

In Canada, such theatre was based on earlier cultural movements of the 1930s which centred on the workers’ theatre (Progressive Arts Players) movement. This included the unemployed and workers of varying political stripes who produced both U.S. progressive theatre, Canadian originals like “Eight Men Speak”, and agit-prop pieces about current issues.

During W.W.II the Labour Arts Guild founded by John Gass provided cultural activities for and by a working class audience. The Guild provided painting, and writing seminars for factory workers. Lunch hour theatre, music and film provided education about the war effort and promoted the sale of war bonds and proposed unionism.

For example, revues such as “Pins and Needles”, a hit in New York City, were adapted to the shipyards and promoted union organization.



Discuss

The Workers’ Theatre Movement was very much a product of the social and political conditions of a particular historical period. What theatrical or cultural productions are you aware of that reflect similar concerns about current social or political conditions?

Additional Discussion Activities - Media

FOR SMALL GROUPS:

✧ There are many critical decisions involved in planning, shooting and editing a film or video documentary. Each small group can choose a particular aspect of women and work today that they might do a documentary about and can discuss:

- o How they would define the subject and perspective they are taking
- o What decisions they would make with regard to:
 - who they would include in the film
 - material they would not include
 - details that they would not include because of limited length
 - production decisions eg. camera angles, camera position
 - what the tone of the film would be and how they would achieve it
- o How can the elements they use in the soundtrack (eg. narration, dialogue, sound effects, etc) alter the message of the film.
- o How objective or neutral can you be when making a film? Is this possible?



Discuss:

In another 20 years, if people analyze the media of 1988 to understand the reality of women's lives, what do you think would be the image they would have?

Can media present a "true" image of who we are, or do we rather identify with the images portrayed?