Impact of war on Australian women

Historians often describe World War I as the first 'total war', because it was the first time that nations had mobilised all of their industries, resources and citizens for the war effort. Before World War I, most people's involvement in wars was usually limited to paying taxes and worrying about friends and family members engaged in fighting overseas. By comparison, 'total war' placed many new pressures on those left at home.

With so many men away at war, there was an expectation that women would take on many duties that had previously been the responsibility of men. Women did a great deal of voluntary work, including fundraising and assisting with recruiting. They also moved into previously male domains in the workforce, such as working in munitions factories. In Britain, women were also able to join the armed forces, but only for home defence.

Most women were supportive of involvement at the start of the war and more than 2000 served, generally as nurses. However, 'total war' placed many new pressures on those left at home.

Women in the paid workforce

Before the war, most women had been homemakers, with a small number working in traditionally female roles such as teaching, nursing, dressmaking or domestic work. However, with around 500000 young men off at war, women wanted to support the war effort at home. There was some resistance by trade unions to hiring women in traditionally male jobs, as it was thought that this might lower wages. However, women were able to take on some traditionally male roles, such as store clerks and bank tellers. The government controlled war-related work and women were rarely able to gain jobs in these areas.

The Australian Women's Service Corps was formed with the aim of training women to take over male jobs in the services at home, to free more men to fight overseas. However, women were told that their services were not necessary.

Women volunteering for the Red Cross attended working bees where they made packages for the men serving overseas. These packages included things like soap, toiletries, food, clothing and medical supplies. The Red Cross also raised money to assist soldiers' families, and established homes for wounded soldiers to recover in.

The Australian Comforts Fund

The Australian Comforts Fund was established in 1916. Their main goal was to raise money, which they used to provide 'comfort boxes' for the soldiers. These boxes contained things like knitted socks, pyjamas and cigarettes.

Women and recruitment

Women were also active in influencing and encouraging men to enlist. Some women refused to speak to men who had not enlisted. Other women sent white feathers, a symbol of cowardice, to men who had not enlisted.

Images of women were regularly used in posters published by the government to encourage recruitment. Women were portrayed as 'helpless and vulnerable victims', in need of Australian soldiers to protect them from the 'evil Germans'.

Other women encouraged men not to enlist. Vida Goldstein, for example, was a Melbourne woman who actively promoted pacifism (opposition to war) and formed the Women's Peace Army in 1915.

Check your learning 8.13

Remember and understand
1 What roles were open to Australian women during World War I?
2 Describe some of the main activities of the volunteer organisations that existed to help the war effort.

Apply and analyse
3 Why do you think the offer of the Australian Women's Service Corps was rejected?

Evaluate and create
4 Put yourself in the role of a business operator during World War I. When one of your male employees enlisted, you employed a young woman who has proved to be excellent. You have spent time and money developing her skills and knowledge. When your former employee returns from the war, he expects to be re-employed. He has lost a leg and is suffering from shell shock. You have to decide what to do. You cannot afford to employ them both.
   a On a sheet of paper, write all the arguments for sacking the woman and re-employing the man. On the other side, list the reasons in favour of keeping the young woman and telling the man to look for work elsewhere.
   b Decide which candidate you should employ to fill the position. Write a letter to the unsuccessful candidate explaining your decision and outlining the reasons for it.