

Box 14. Silence of Surplus Women



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1. White wedding veil
2. Black mourning veil
3. Poem: *The Superfluous Woman* by Vera Brittain
4. School log book entries (*Archifau Morgannwg / Glamorgan Archives*)
5. 'Trousers' signed photo to this box (*Archifau Morgannwg / Glamorgan Archives*)
6. 2 documents about women teaching (*Archifau Morgannwg / Glamorgan Archives*)

Key information

- Change was already afoot before the outbreak of WW1 with the growth of the suffragette and suffragist movements. Women were no longer prepared to accept the status quo and demanded change. The reality of marriage was very often far from 'the dream'. After the confetti settled, women had little to look forward to beyond a life of drudgery of cooking, sewing and childcare, with no escape.
- During the war there were new opportunities for women to experience careers bringing them out of domestic service. Work such as munitions factories and transport had strict uniforms that were practical. Women wore trousers for the first time and these uniforms started to inform the clothing design for women.
- Many women who married before or during the war soon were made widows. Others lost their sweethearts to the battle fields. And for those yet to meet a partner, the lost generation of men meant they were considered as having little hope. Over, 750,000 British men were killed during WW1, 9% of the male population under the age of 45.
- 1920's the newspapers headlined 'Surplus Women', 2 million women who would never find a husband, due to the lack of men. Some think that this started 'panic' with women on the 'husband hunt' and left the men many options, which started to erode the morality of society.
- For some women there was a sense of liberation: they could choose not to marry and instead pursue careers. War had given them the chance to experience a different type of life and they did not want to "go back". However, this was often class defined, as the opportunities tended to be for middle and upper classes. Working-class women who had enjoyed a taste of financial independence by doing the jobs left vacant by men found themselves without the same opportunities after demobilisation. Without some independent financial standing these working-class women found it difficult to pursue the career path.
- Some women remained single by choice or because they had to be single to keep their job. Opportunities opened up into professions such as teaching or medicine, but only if the woman remained single. Many women were frustrated, as even though they now had job opportunities they still were not granted the same employment conditions as men.
- **Female Teachers:** Female teachers were engaged on temporary term-time contracts on the understanding that they were covering the position for the return of the male teacher from military service. Married female teachers who had previously given up their teaching career, now had the opportunity to return to the profession on these temporary contracts. As soon as the war ended these female teachers' contracts were terminated.

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- Female teachers and women such as workers in munitions factories where production was dramatically reduced after the war, became “surplus” to requirements.

14. Silence of Surplus Women: questions



1. What do you think this box was used for?
2. What do you think is inside?

3. What is happening in the photograph?
4. What is inside the parcels?



5. What occasions would these be worn?
6. How would it have felt to wear these?
7. What do you think the story is behind these veils and the photograph?

Suggested box combinations

- Box 2 Silence of Mourning
- Box 12 Silence of Women
- Box 15 Silence of Those Who Contributed in Different Ways

Suggested activities

- Write a pros and cons list, for and against marriage for the women at the end of the war. Consider the new opportunities open to them and also what they could potentially lose.
- How different is it for women today – compare and contrast.

Caring for the box after use

- Please wrap the veils and place back in the box.
- Carefully place everything back in the box, with the photograph and the poem.