

LESSON FIVE: BACK HOME

Context

This scene shows the way women were integral to the war effort and although not able to fight on the front line often felt immense pressure to support those who were. Munitions work in particular could be hard, with long hours and hazardous working conditions. Newspapers and letters were censored so it was not possible to grasp what was really going on (though casualty figures were printed). If someone did go missing there were often long periods of not knowing if loved ones were alive or dead which caused great distress.

Look at the additional historical information sections **On the Home Front** and **Munitions Work**.

Play DVD: *Section 5 – Back Home*

The following drama exercises are intended to stimulate discussion and debate about the role of women back home.



Exercise One: Whispers

Misinformation or lack of information was one of the most frustrating elements of being back at home. 'Whispers' is a fun way to demonstrate misinformation. Begin by splitting the group into two lines, Team A and Team B. The lines below, from the scene just watched, should be whispered into the ear of the first person in each line, then to their neighbour and so on until the message is sent to the end of the line. The person at the end of the line should then feed back to the group what they think they have heard.

Invariably the line will change completely which will help to demonstrate the half truths and misinformation common in times of war. Asking students to come up with their own lines can build on this exercise.

Team A: *'I know my Harry's alive, I know it...'*

Team B: *'She's lost three sons in the war...'*



Exercise Two: I'm Falling

Often relationships were heightened at home as the women bonded in their common hatred of the enemy and support of the war effort or the fear of losing loved ones. Relying on your friends was imperative be it when short of food or simply needing someone to share things with. This next exercise demonstrates trust in a practical way.

Begin by splitting the group into pairs who then allocate themselves either A or B. On your count of three As must fall backwards shouting, 'I'm Falling!' as they do so. Bs must catch them. The best way to do this is by asking As to fall with their arms outstretched so that Bs can slot their arms under As armpits.

Exercise Three: Letters

Put the group into smaller groups of between four and six. Each of the groups is then given a piece of paper and a pen. Each group has a short amount of time to write a letter either from the front line or back home. Ideally it should be something dramatic so it should be from a personal perspective. You should then gather all the letters together and mix them up making sure each group does not get their own letter back. Once done you should randomly hand the letters back and ask each of the groups to begin dramatising their letter but only using actions and no sound.

This exercise should be built on by asking the whole group to walk around the space ensuring they are not all walking in the same direction. Once this is working well tell the group that at any point someone can shout, 'I'm Falling!' The group must then work together to ensure whoever is falling is caught before they hit the ground. At first the whole group will start calling out which should be discouraged as the idea is to work as a team.

Once sufficient time has been given you should gather the group back into an audience and see each of the scenes performed. The rest of the group now has five questions to guess what has been said in the letter. The scenes can be developed to include improvised dialogue or sections from the letters.

Remember during the First World War letters would have been censored so any information that could potentially have been of use to the enemy such as location, numbers, tactics, plans and also lack of support for the war would have been crossed out and made illegible.

MUNITIONS WORK

After the Munitions Scare of 1915 when it looked as though the British Army would run out of shells the Ministry of Munitions was created with Lloyd George at its head. Certain new regulations came into place including an increased willingness to employ women. The Ministry took over certain existing arms factories, built new ones and introduced controls on employment especially regarding women which were to set standards for other employers.

Over 750,000 women were employed and this kind of work showed that women could work in a disciplined way with complicated machinery for long hours. It brought a degree of respect and more personal freedom and for the working class girl the pay was much better than that of domestic service.

Key Points

① Women doing men's work were to be paid not less than 6d per hour (equivalent today about £3.60) with a minimum of 24 shillings per week (equivalent today about £144) rising to 35 shillings (equivalent today about £210) by 1918. Pay increased depending upon training and skill and how dangerous the materials were. Women did not usually get the highest wages that fully skilled male workers would have got as they did not always set up the equipment and were sometimes kept deliberately in a position of tutelage where they were still undergoing training which meant employers did not have to pay the full rate.

② Shifts usually lasted 12 hours eg day shift, 7am–7pm or night shift 7pm–7am.

③ Rules and regulations were strict. If you were late by 20 minutes you lost a quarter of the daily rate and if you stopped before the hooter sounded, ending the shift, you could be fined 2s 6d (equivalent today about £7).

④ Wages for munitions work were good for working class women especially compared to other war work and domestic service. It brought a certain level of economic independence and even a few luxuries. There were even complaints of what we would call today 'ladette' culture, of young women drinking too much and having too much independence.

⑤ The work could be dangerous, at least 71 women died in explosions and another 81 died in fatal accidents. It could also adversely affect health eg prolonged exposure to TNT, an important ingredient in explosives, caused toxic jaundice which caused exposed skin and hair to turn yellow and also caused sickness, nausea, vomiting, giddiness and coughing up thick yellow phlegm. 61 women died of poisoning. Women working with TNT were nicknamed 'canaries' because of their yellow skin.

