



#### 5.22 Newfoundland Suffragists, c. 1920s

Women in Newfoundland won the right to vote and run for public office in April 1925 after decades of lobbying government officials and promoting their cause on the public stage. This photograph was likely taken in Carbonear between 1921 and 1925.

#### 5.23 The symbol of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)

WCTU members often wore white ribbons to symbolize purity and became known as the "White Ribboned Army."

### TOPIC 5.2

# Women's Suffrage

Suffragists maintained that work done by women in the home was beneficial to society. Is this work valued by society today?

Are women treated as equal partners in society today?

## Introduction

The first campaign for women's **suffrage** in Newfoundland occurred in the 1890s and was organized, as in the United States and Canada, by the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).<sup>\*</sup> The WCTU was a coalition of Protestant church women's groups that sought to rescue women and children from

domestic violence and other negative effects of alcohol. In order to achieve their goal, WCTU members wanted the right to vote in municipal elections so they could vote for the prohibition of alcohol.

On March 18, 1891, approximately 50 women from the

WCTU marched to the Colonial Building in St. John's to present island-wide petitions in support of allowing women to vote in municipal elections. Even though these petitions were restricted to the right to vote at the municipal level, they received widespread criticism. Two debates on suffrage took place in the House of

Assembly in 1892-93, but the suffrage measure was defeated each time. Thereafter, the WCTU's political position deteriorated, and many of its members turned their energies towards independent charitable work. The first phase of the women's suffrage movement in Newfoundland had come to an end.

### "Give Us Prohibition!"

A Song by Jessie Ohman, first secretary of the Newfoundland WCTU

Why sadly mourns our native land?  
Why weep our wives and mothers?  
What dims the eye and shakes the hand,  
And ruins husbands, brothers?  
What clouds the clearest intellects,  
And for its prey our best selects,  
And gentle nature smothers?  
'Tis alcohol turns men to brutes  
And every holy plant uproots.

Go visit where the drunkards dwell,  
You languid, selfish scoffers,  
And know that wine has wrung the knell  
To joys the homestead offers.  
There gaunt starvation loves to hide,  
There strife and hate and grief abide,  
There empty hearts and coffers;  
And children old in want and fear,  
And broken-hearted wives are there.

5.24

**"... we have no word of sympathy or encouragement for those ladies who would voluntarily unsex themselves, and, for sake of obtaining a little temporary notoriety, plunge into the troubled waters of party politics."**

— Excerpt from *The Evening Telegram*, April 20, 1893

## The Ladies' Reading Room, 1909-1914

The second phase of the suffrage movement began in response to the exclusion of women from lectures at a male club in St. John's. Women had been allowed to attend these lectures before 1909. But public controversy about suffrage had resurfaced in Newfoundland following reports of militant suffragette activities in England. Although local women were not associated with these activities, a backlash against suffrage emerged. Banned from lectures at the male club, a group of prominent St. John's women gathered at local suffragette Armine Gosling's home in December 1909 and began The Ladies' Reading Room and Current Events Club.

Members of the Ladies' Reading Room tended to be socially prominent women who were well-travelled,

well-read, and aware of suffrage activities throughout the world. A woman was allowed to join the Reading Room if she was introduced by an existing member and paid a nominal fee of \$3 a year. This provided her access to a selection of British and American suffrage newspapers and magazines. In addition, members could attend the Current Events Club, which served the political interests of the suffragists involved with the Reading Room. As author Margot I. Duley explains, "The Club [marked] a crucial development in the revival of the suffrage movement for within its walls women of influence in St. John's were politicized and converted to the cause. The Club functioned virtually as a self-taught liberal arts college in which members gave papers, developed analytical skills, discussed issues, and gained confidence as public speakers."

# ARMINE NUTTING GOSLING



## 5.25 Armine Nutting Gosling

was one of the leaders of the suffrage campaign in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Armine Nutting Gosling (1861-1942) led the Newfoundland suffrage campaign from 1909 to its successful conclusion in 1925. She was born into "genteel poverty" – that is, a well-educated family with a limited income – in Waterloo, Quebec. Her father was an alcoholic, who was often unable to work, so her mother provided for the family by working as a seamstress. This helped convince Armine from an early age that women's work and contributions to society were undervalued.

In 1884, Armine became principal of the Church of England Girls' School in St. John's. While in Newfoundland, she met and married Gilbert Gosling (who later became Mayor of St. John's). Author Margot I. Duley notes: "Gilbert was a man of advanced views who treated his wife as an intellectual equal, and together they read and discussed public events, in which they were both keenly interested."

Armine's views were also likely shaped by her international connections. Her sister, Adelaide, had become the first professor of nursing in the United States. While visiting her at Columbia University in New York, Armine was exposed to many of the progressive ideas\* of the time. Ultimately, Armine's suffrage beliefs included both maternal and equal rights traditions. On one hand, she emphasized the natural nurturing qualities that women would bring to politics. On the other, she followed the equal rights thinking of philosopher John Stuart Mill, who argued that the emancipation and education of women would have positive benefits for all of humanity.

\*For instance, through her sister, Armine met Lavinia Dock, a leader in American nursing and in the women's suffrage and labour movements.

## THE LADIES' READING ROOM.

WHILE St. John's cannot be said to be very advanced in the matter of women's clubs, it can boast at least one institution devoted solely to the mental refreshment of women, in the shape of a reading-room, containing a well-selected assortment of leading magazines and papers. In December, 1919, some



THE COMMITTEE SOLDIERS' AND SAILORS' CLUB.

Reading from left to right, top row—Mrs. MacDermott, Mrs. T. J. Edens, Miss E. Dickinson.  
Lower row—Mrs. Paterson, Mrs. Chas. Ayre, and Mrs. Herder.

eight or ten ladies met at the residence of Mrs. Gosling, Le Marchant-rd., to discuss the feasibility of some such enterprise. As soon as the project became known, applications for admission came in thick and fast, so that in a few weeks its membership numbered 125. A large and airy room in Lyon's Building, Water-street, was rented, and a prosperous career entered upon. Lady Horwood was elected President, Mrs. J. A. Clift Vice-president, and Mrs. Gosling Secretary-treasurer, and these ladies performed most of the spade work which such an undertaking involves. The machinery has always been of the simplest description. Any woman can join, on the introduction of a member and the payment of \$3.00 per annum. Saturday was chosen for club day, when papers, sometimes of a high literary merit, have been contributed by members and teas served. Lady Davidson, the Hon. President, sets the ball rolling by contributing the first paper, when the yearly season begins, in November.

"This reading-room certainly affords a refutation of the popular theory that women cannot work together in peace and harmony. It has been in existence seven years, and has been conducted without the least friction from its inception until the present time.

ARMINE N. GOSLING.

## 5.26 An article on The Ladies Reading Room from the *Distaff*, 1916

## "Distaff Feminism," 1914-1919

The third phase of the suffrage movement in Newfoundland was defined by "distaff\* feminism." Generally speaking, there were two main arguments for women's suffrage:

1. "Natural rights" – women deserve equal rights with men by the simple virtue of being human.
2. "Maternal rights" – women's maternal qualities have a positive effect on public life and women deserve public recognition for their maternal contributions to society. (This is the main idea of distaff feminism).

While suffrage leaders were inspired by both philosophies, it was the maternal rights argument that seemed to resonate with most women and men in Newfoundland. All classes of women contributed to their homes and communities through traditional domestic activities – especially baking, serving, knitting, and sewing. Elite women in St. John's used their maternal skills to

\*A distaff is a tool used in spinning to hold the un-spun fibres. It also became an adjective to describe the female side of a family.

hold fundraising events for churches and public charities, while working and middle-class women used their maternal skills to supplement the family income. These “distaff” activities became crucial to Newfoundland’s contribution to the First World War.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, women’s war activities were spearheaded by the **Women’s Patriotic Association** (WPA). The WPA had branches across the island and in Battle Harbour, Labrador. These branches were usually formed around women’s church

groups. The work of the WPA was a public extension of women’s roles as mothers in the “private sphere.” Activities involved fundraising, knitting “comforts” (such as socks, mittens, scarves, and hats) for the Newfoundland Regiment, producing hospital and surgical supplies, visiting the relatives of volunteers and naval reservists, and nursing – as both graduate nurses and Volunteer Aid Detachment Nurses (VADs). Women’s participation in the war effort helped change public perception about women’s abilities and the economic value of their work.

*For example, by 1916, the WPA had raised over \$200 000 through their fundraising efforts.*

**5.27 Women’s war efforts helped prove the value of their contributions to society.**

(right) The Cutting Committee of the St. John’s branch of the Women’s Patriotic Association at Government House. The primary task of this committee was to cut out garments and prepare them for workers to sew and complete. Note that a billiard table is being used as the cutting table.

(below) Armine Gosling (daughter of Mrs. Armine Nutting Gosling) was one of at least 38 women from Newfoundland and Labrador who served with the Volunteer Aid Detachment (VAD) during the First World War. Candidates for the VAD trained for three to six months in first aid and home nursing. They supplemented professional nursing services on the front lines and on the home front and learned to drive ambulances throughout Europe in order to fill the gaps between the field ambulances and the base hospitals.



**Miss Armine Gosling with British Red Cross Motor Ambulance in France, presented by St. John’s, Newfoundland.—Daughter of W. G. Gosling, Esq., Mayor of St. John’s.**

# The Newfoundland Women's Franchise League, 1920-1925

The fourth and final phase of the Newfoundland suffrage movement began after the First World War ended. Building on the public's appreciation of women's contributions during the war, Armine Nutting Gosling led a push for suffrage and launched the **Women's Franchise League (WFL)**. The movement began with a publicity campaign in May 1920. The WFL sent articles and letters to daily papers, canvassed local homes, wrote letters to women in the outports, and even projected suffrage advertising slides at the movie theatres in St. John's.

This activity led up to their 1920 petition drive and its presentation to the Legislature:

*Whereas we regard ourselves as partners in the responsible business of homekeeping which is so vital to the best interests of the Dominion; and Whereas many of us are workers helping to produce the wealth of the Dominion; and Whereas in other parts of the British Empire women enjoy all the rights of the franchise, and assume its responsibilities; and Whereas the women of Newfoundland rose to every call made upon them during the Great War, and showed energy and executive ability in the organization of relief and other work, and that many of them served overseas as Nurses, V.A.D.s and Ambulance Drivers; Your petitioners therefore humbly pray that your Honourable House will, during the present Session, pass a law by which there will be given to the Women of the Dominion the rights of the franchise on conditions similar to those commonly required of men.*

— From the Legislative Council Proceedings, May 9, 1921

5.28 Excerpt from *The Daily News*, May 12, 1920

ST. JOHN'S, MAY 12, 1920.

**WON BY SACRIFICE AND SERVICE.**

It has come elsewhere; it is coming in Newfoundland; and the sooner it comes the better. One thing the war has conclusively proved, that the sphere of woman is far wider than it was in the bygone years. What militant suffragism could never have won, the quiet service and unparalleled devotion of the women of the Empire have accomplished. Seeking not their own the women of the Empire have found it; they have shown their ability and influence in a manner that not the most confirmed misogynist dare dispute. What womankind did in the war, on the field, in the base hospitals, in the nursing and convalescent homes; their gentle ministrations, splendid fearlessness in war-service; their readiness and adaptability of effort in all spheres of toil; the magnificent pluck and praiseworthy determination to keep the home fires, the office fires, and the factory fires burning brightly whilst their men were fighting their battles and the Empire's; their work on the land, and in the munitions factories; the ceaseless efforts to help the boys at the front, and to make the burdens of battle less grievous to be borne,—these and a thousand other modest triumphs have proved their fitness for the franchise

to table the Bill after having definitely pledged themselves to do so.

The women interested would infinitely prefer that the Bill should be made a Government measure during the present session of the Legislature. It is determined to be presented and if it does not meet

To the Hon. R. A. Squires R.C.  
Prime Minister of Newfoundland

Sir —  
The promoters of the Woman's Suffrage movement

respect, the Woman's Party wish to see that it is presented by a member of the Opposition on Friday June 4th

A. M. Squires  
D. Macpherson  
Sant Agos  
Dorothy Kennedy  
Fanning McNeil  
M. P. Quinn  
Agnes M. Ayre  
Helen M. Davis  
Anne M. Mitchell  
Adeline E. Browning

St John's  
June 2nd 1920

5.29 June 2, 1920 letter to Sir Richard Squires in the handwriting of M. Macpherson asking for government support for enfranchisement of women.

The letter reads: Sir - The promoters of the Woman's Suffrage movement beg to draw the attention of the Premier to the incomprehensible attitude of the Government towards the question of the enfranchisement of women, as evidenced in the failure of the two Government members to table the Bill after having pledged themselves to do so. The women interested would infinitely prefer that the Bill should be made a Government measure during the present session of the House; but they are determined that it shall be presented this year and if the Government does not see its way to meeting their views in this respect, the Women's Party will see that it is presented by a member of the opposition on Friday June 4th.

\* Armine Gosling was active in the movement until she retired to Bermuda with her ailing husband in 1927. After her departure, the movement was spearheaded by Fanny McNeil.

Although the WFL succeeded in collecting thousands of signatures from women across the island, the suffrage measure was defeated in the Legislature – at least in part due to the unsympathetic attitude of Premier Richard Squires, who opposed women’s suffrage. Squires’ opposition to suffrage likely reflected his own political situation – he was involved in several political scandals throughout the 1920s and suffrage leaders sought to “clean-up” the political arena. They also supported modifications to **prohibition**, which was unpopular in Catholic districts, and as the member for St. John’s West, Squires depended on the Catholic vote. Efforts of the WFL continued for the next five years under Armine Nutting Gosling’s\* leadership with some financial support from the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance (IWSA).

Success came at last for the Newfoundland women’s suffrage movement in March 1925 with the support of a new government led by Walter S. Monroe. The suffrage bill passed unanimously through the Legislature, giving Newfoundland women the right to vote and to run for political office. Women on the island of Newfoundland participated in their first general election\*\* on October 29, 1928, when 52 343 women cast ballots. This represented approximately 90 per cent of the women who were eligible to vote. In 1930, Lady Helena Squires, wife of Sir Richard Squires, became the first woman elected to political office in Newfoundland when she won the Liberal seat in Lewisporte.



5.30 Fannie McNeil with her family, c. 1910

Fannie McNeil was a leading member of the Newfoundland suffragist movement. In 1925, she became one of the country’s first women to run for political office, when she nearly won a seat on the St. John’s city council.

\*\* Women in St. John’s actually received the right to vote at the municipal level in 1921, when Mayor Gilbert Gosling (husband of suffragist Armine Nutting Gosling) drafted a new city charter.

## Questions:

1. What were the four phases of the women’s suffrage movement in Newfoundland? What were the similarities and differences between these phases?
2. One of the purposes of enfranchisement was to help ensure that there was a better representation to address issues affecting women.
  - a. What percentage of current members of the House of Assembly (or the House of Commons) is female?
  - b. What issues significantly affect women in our province today? Conduct a survey of women in your community to help identify the most important issues.
3. The right to vote is restricted to those age 18 and older.
  - a. What arguments can be used to support this age limit?
  - b. What arguments can be used to support lowering the voting age?
  - c. Which argument is the most compelling?

# **DIMENSIONS** **OF THINKING**

## *CONTINUITY AND CHANGE*

### — The Empowerment of Women —

*During the course of human history, societies have advanced various ideas about the roles of women and men. Gender significantly influences a person's “place” in society. Throughout much of the last thousand years, women in the western world were not afforded the same rights and freedoms that were available to most men. As with many aspects of culture, this idea was accepted by many (both men and women) as appropriate. In fact, for most there was no expectation that women should have the same rights as men.*

However, as ideas around politics and individual liberty were more vigorously explored from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, many changes in our assumptions occurred. These changes included the notion of elected representative government and the right of individuals

to enjoy certain liberties, such as freedom of speech. Over time, these ideas came to challenge many **cultural norms**, including the belief that women were not to be afforded the same rights as men.



**5.31 Women voters in Kuwait waiting to vote for the first time, June 2006**

Women in Kuwait did not win the right to vote until 2005. As of 2010, there are still a few countries, such as Saudi Arabia, where women are not eligible to vote.

Today we view gender equality as the norm. However, this expectation is relatively new. In fact, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which is at the heart of many aspects of gender equality in Canada, only became law in 1982. Prior to that time, some forms of gender-based discrimination were not legally considered wrong. For example, in Newfoundland and Labrador in 1970:

- A divorced woman was not entitled to any assets acquired in the family home during her marriage.
- A female teacher at Memorial University lost her

permanent position when she got married.

- The minimum wage for a man was 25 cents per hour higher than for a woman.
- Women were not eligible to sit on juries.

Even in today's world, all people do not enjoy the same freedoms – for instance, women in Saudi Arabia do not have the right to vote in elections. However, if we continue to discuss and debate issues related to culture and society, there is a feeling among some individuals that change will come about to ensure that we live in a just society.

*“Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.”*

– From the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*

Country	Year
New Zealand	1893
Australia	1902
Finland	1906
Norway	1913
Denmark	1915
Iceland	1915
Canada	1917
Russia	1917
Germany	1918
Ireland	1918
Sweden	1919
United States	1920
<b>Newfoundland</b>	<b>1925</b>
South Africa (white women)	1930
Brazil	1931
Portugal	1931
Spain	1931
France	1944
Japan	1945
Italy	1946
India	1947
Greece	1952
Switzerland	1971
Iraq	1980
South Africa (black women)	1994
Qatar	1997

#### 5.32 Women's suffrage victories in select countries, 1893-1997\*

\* These dates represent suffrage at the federal level. In many countries, women could vote in municipal elections long before they could in federal elections.

## Questions:

1. Today, if an individual is treated unfairly this action may be a violation of human rights under the *Canadian Charter of Human Rights*. What areas of the Charter protect people from discrimination?
2. Who are some of the pioneers in advocating for greater participation by women in the political life

of our province? What issues did they face? See: [www.teachaboutwomen.ca](http://www.teachaboutwomen.ca)

3. Although the rights of women are protected in various legislation, such as the Charter and the *Newfoundland and Labrador Human Rights Code*, what parts of our culture still pose problems for women?