

Factory Workers in St. John's

Workers at the Ropewalk, 1940

Though women's place was supposedly in the home, in reality 21% (2829) of the total waged workforce in St. John's in 1921 were women, predominantly single (93%) and widowed (7%). They were a vast underpaid workforce. Women's wages were characteristically one-third to one-half of men's, even when performing identical or similar jobs.

A prolonged depression that lasted roughly from 1921 until the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 worsened conditions. Hundreds of businesses folded from a lack of consumer demand. In 1921, there was a march of the unemployed.

Some employers responded to the economic crisis by substituting female labour for male, justifying this by saying women worked for "pin money."

The composition of the female waged workforce was:

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Domestics (34%)

Manufacturing (18%)

Saleswomen (15%)

Stenographers (10%)



Newfoundland Clothing Factory. Coat and Vest Department.

From Warwick Smith's
"Home Industries,"
The Newfoundland Magazine, Nov 1919.

"They say a workday has 12 hours.

That's a lie. My day has twelve coats.

It will end tomorrow."

- A female seamstress & piece-worker

The Ropewalk Lane Factory, from above.



Union Organizing at the Clothing Factory and the Ropewalk

The working conditions of factory girls were the main focus of Julia Salter Earle who founded the Ladies Industrial Workers Association that existed from 1918 to 1921. It worked in cooperation with but was independent of the male Newfoundland Industrial Workers Association.

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Common Workplace Demands in all sectors:

The general issues were:

An eight-hour day with provisions for overtime. Employers commonly required overtime at peak seasons with no regard to any family obligations and no additional pay. Vacation pay was a rarity even at Christmas.

Age limits to child labour and their hours of work.

A minimum wage.

A formal arbitration procedure for disputes.

Regulation of health and safety conditions in industry and a system of government inspection.

At The Ropewalk (Colonial Cordage), health, safety, demands of home life, the lack of time for rest and recreation, sexual harassment, and lack of a living wage were among the issues faced by workers. While it had major controlling shareholders, it also issued stock so other members of the public benefitted from its dividend payments, at least in years when it was profitable. The prolonged economic depression added to the challenges, and there were layoffs leading to extreme distress. There were few social safety nets.

The Newfoundland Clothing Factory (later White's Clothing Factory) had a predominantly female workforce. The *St. John's City Directories* for 1919 and 1924, lists Annie Murphy as a "forelady" and then as an "instructor" at the factory. It would be safe to say her pay was much lower than the male "supervisors," but she was doing essentially the same work with more employees. Tailors were paid more than "tailoresses"; male seamers more than seamstresses; foremen/supervisors more than "foreladies". Men in managerial and highly-skilled jobs were also more likely to be paid an annual wage. The higher paying jobs were barred to women. Layoffs were common.

Women also did piece work at home, assembling and sewing garments. Married women did this to augment low family incomes.