# Outport Girls and Women in Domestic Service

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**By Ellen Power**

## Introduction

The economic history of Newfoundland and Labrador is dominated by prominent merchants, politicians and businessmen. But merchant and fishing households alike could not have operated without the help of "the girl": that is, the domestic servant (fig. 1).

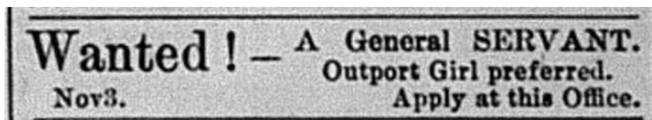

Wanted ! – A General SERVANT. Outport Girl preferred. Apply at this Office.
Nov3.

***Fig. 1: Newspaper advertisement, November 1891. Source: The Evening Herald.***

These girls and young women, usually from rural outports, represented the largest sector of waged women's work from the late 19th century right up to Confederation. Their often invisible labour was essential to the operation of households of all classes. The migratory workforce of outport women in this province was a key part of the Newfoundland and Labrador economy up until the 1950s, and an important part of its social history.

## Entering Domestic Service

The history of domestic service in Newfoundland and Labrador dates back as far as European settlement in the province. Women in the 17th and 18th century, largely from Ireland and England, paid their passage to Newfoundland and Labrador by working as domestic servants on arrival (Botting 2000, 19-20). But by the late 19th century most domestic servants in urban centres were coming not from overseas, but from outports around the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador (fig. 2).

Outport girls would have been no strangers to domestic work when they started in service. As soon as they were old enough to do household tasks, girls would have been expected to help their mothers with the non-stop domestic labour that kept rural fishing households going: cooking, cleaning, mending and childcare within the home and the essential flake-tending and garden work outside.

***Fig. 2: Women and girls in the employ of the Moravian Mission in Hopedale, 1893. Source: The Rooms Archives.***

Many outport girls were forced to leave school at an early age so they could help look after the house and raise their younger siblings. For these girls, going into domestic service was a way to earn wages for their previously unpaid household labour - even if the larger part of their pay was

usually sent home to provide for their families. Having one less mouth to feed at home and one more income source coming in could make the difference between food and hunger for many outport families (Botting 2000, 353).

“I was [sad] but I had no other choice. I had to go ‘cause my dad, you know, was only getting 50 dollars a month,” said one woman who moved to St. John’s from Oderin in Placentia Bay. Working as a housekeeper for clergy in the 1950s, she earned better wages than her father (Lizzie M., as interviewed by Murphy 2016). Domestic service was also one of the few opportunities for outport girls to achieve social and financial independence from their families during the early-to-mid 20th century (fig. 3).

***Fig. 3: Grenfell Mission maids, St. Anthony, 1908. Source: The Rooms Archives.***

As a former domestic from Trinity Bay put it, “I thought it was a big deal to come to the big city. It was something. You weren’t going to stay at home and do nothing” (Forestell 1987, 131). For all these reasons, entering domestic service was an established practice for girls and young women in outports, often starting around the ages of 12 to 14 (Murray 2010, 83). It was so common, in fact, that it was known by the casual name of “shipping out” - echoing the same term used by fishermen and marine tradesmen who sought work contracts aboard ships (Kealey 2014).

Many outport girls shipped out to neighbouring communities to work for an extended family member or acquaintance. They generally served as maids of all work who received low wages or worked for only room and board (fig. 4).

**HELP WANTED.**

**DOMESTIC HELP.**

**WANTED—A Good General Maid,** references required; apply MRS. H. CRAWFORD, Forest Road. oct14,tf

**WANTED—By Oct. 18th, a General Maid** to proceed to Grand Falls; references required; must understand plain cooking; apply between 6 and 7 p.m. to MRS. THOMSON, Waterford Bridge Road, opp. Cross Roads. oct12,3i,m,w,f

**WANTED—Immediately, a Girl** for housework, good wages offered; apply to MRS. H. BROWN, 15 Balsam Street, off Theatre Hill. oct9,3i,eod

**WANTED — A Maid, one** who understands plain cooking, reference required; apply to MRS. W. J. HERDER, 40 Rennies' Mill Road. oct13,tf

**WANTED—Immediately, a General Servant,** references required; apply MRS. HELEN GAUL, 73 New Gower Street. oct12,3i

**WANTED — A General Maid** for small family, reference required; apply between 7 and 9 p.m. to MRS. W. R. FANNING, 43 Patrick Street. oct9,tf

**WANTED — Immediately,** in small family, **a Girl** for general housework, must understand plain cooking; apply MRS. BERNARD NORRIS, Bonaventure Avenue. oct7,tf

***Fig. 4: Newspaper advertisements, October 1925. Source: The Evening Telegram.***

Contrary to our modern assumption that servants were reserved for the wealthy, girls often worked for other outport families in similar economic circumstances. They were likely to be working alongside the mistress of the house (fig. 5); historian Willeen Keough writes that “fishing families hired female servants - or shipped girls, as they called them - not just to help their mistresses with household routines but to free them from child care and housework so that they could perform important productive work in the fishery” (Keough 2012, 539).

***Fig. 5: Mrs. Clouter and maid, likely on the Bonavista Peninsula circa 1930s-1940s. Source: The Rooms Archives.***

In fact, domestic workers frequently did their own share of the family’s fishery work and subsistence farming. According to a former servant from the Northern Peninsula:

“You'd have to spread fish too. 'Cause they'd have big flakes… And then when it come time to take it up, you'd have to help take it up too. And then if there was hay to make for the sheep, you had to help with that too. Pack up the hay and put it in linnets” (Miller 1981, 41).

Domestic workers in outport Newfoundland and Labrador took on whatever jobs were required by the family and the rural economy.

The biggest market for domestic work was in urban centres like St. John’s, Grand Falls or Corner Brook. Girls on the south coast of Newfoundland might also move to the French-owned islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon for work. Even urban employers usually hired only a single girl per household, with the exception of the city elite. These urban employers preferred outport girls, as they were thought to be loyal and to work harder than city girls for a lower pay (fig. 6).

***Fig. 6: Maid Janet Hoffe Downer of Change Islands holding Diane Crosbie in St. John’s, 1934. Source: Ruby Legge.***

If they were ready to travel abroad, girls could find better wages in “the Boston States”, working in large households in Boston or New York (Forestell 1987, 134). Girls found urban

employment through newspaper advertisements or domestic hiring agencies, but most often by the recommendation of a former employer or a family member already in service.

## The Daily Life of a Domestic Servant

***Fig. 7: Unknown maid and maid Monica Rice Rossiter of Cape Broyle in St. John's, circa 1930s. Source: Rossiter Family.***

Outport or city, work as a domestic servant was gruelling (fig. 7). For a girl shipped out to an outport family, a work day could last long as there were tasks to be done. The average day of one serving girl working in a Fortune Bay outport in the 1920s gives an idea of how much labour was expected of a domestic servant:

"She got the wood and started the fire going [around 6 a.m.] in order to heat the house and cook the breakfast. After breakfast she made the beds, collected the pots from the bedrooms, emptied them in the pail and took the pail to the landwash to be emptied. She then brought the pail back, cleaned it and hung it on the fence to dry out. She would then wash and fill the lamps, bring the water and the firewood… [She] also made bread, which required a lot of heat in the stove. In order to make her bread which was done fairly often, she had to boil her [hops] to make yeast. Scrubbing the floors was no easy task because there was no canvas back then, just painted wood and [she] would have to scrub them with a scrub brush" (Bishop 1992, 69-80).

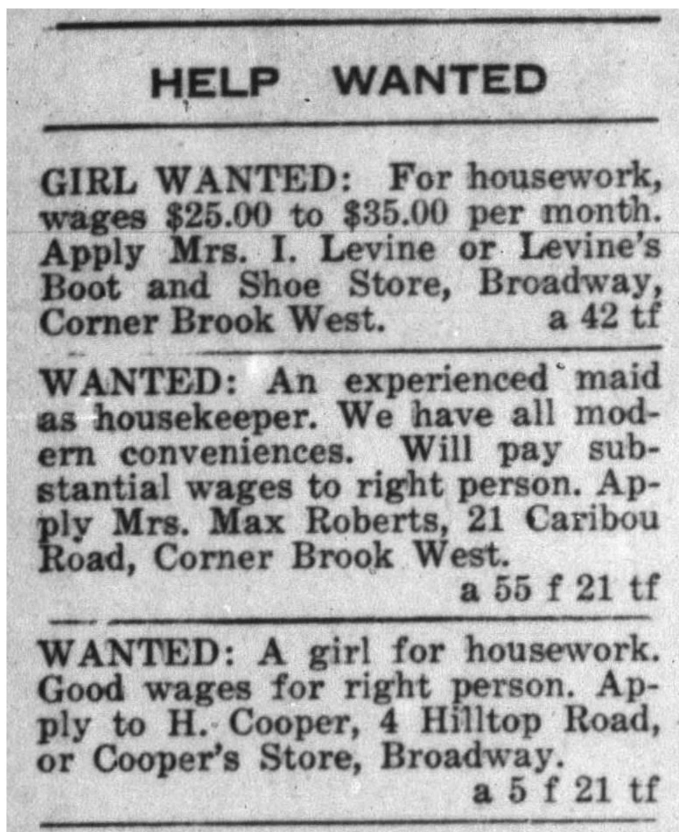
Childcare or senior care was a large part of many maids' schedules. A maid might also be expected to help with some of the household's seasonal outdoor work, such as flake-tending, gardening and berry picking. Her work was compounded on wash day, with the arduous work of scrubbing, boiling, wringing out, hanging and ironing the household clothing. Girls from outports often sought jobs in urban middle-class households for this very reason; many city households sent their clothing and household linens out to commercial laundries (usually run by Chinese immigrants) rather than delegating the task to their domestic servants (Cullum 2014, 96).

***Fig. 8: Maid Ellen Oldford Walker from Salvage and unknown maid in St. John's, circa 1910s. Source: Janet Costigan.***

In places like St. John's or Grand Falls, the work day of a domestic servant in a household ranged from 12 to 15 hours (fig. 8). Many maids had only a

single day or half-day off each week. Their work was similar to the fire-lighting, cooking and scrubbing done by their outport sisters. One woman who grew up in a middle-class household in the 1930s and 1940s said that she:

“[couldn’t] think of anything [domestics] didn't do. They got the coal, cleaned and washed and got the big copper pot boiling to wash the sheets with lye. There was minimal electricity, minimal appliances, and it was very labour intensive...They had a regular routine for the housekeeping and cooking” (Story 2007, 19).



HELP WANTED

GIRL WANTED: For housework, wages $25.00 to $35.00 per month. Apply Mrs. I. Levine or Levine's Boot and Shoe Store, Broadway, Corner Brook West. a 42 tf

WANTED: An experienced maid as housekeeper. We have all modern conveniences. Will pay substantial wages to right person. Apply Mrs. Max Roberts, 21 Caribou Road, Corner Brook West. a 55 f 21 tf

WANTED: A girl for housework. Good wages for right person. Apply to H. Cooper, 4 Hilltop Road, or Cooper's Store, Broadway. a 5 f 21 tf

***Fig. 9: Newspaper advertisements, March 1947. Source: The Western Star.***

“[Y]ou were like a slave to the people you worked for,” remembered another woman who had been a domestic around the same time. “I had to clean shoes, polish silverware, and wash up the floors down in the basement…The woman I worked for had a wooden table in her kitchen that had to be as clean as a hound’s tooth” (Gregory, as quoted in in Cullum 2014, 106).

***Fig. 10: Newfoundland Suffragists, circa 1920s. Source: Archives and Special Collections, Queen Elizabeth II Library, MUN.***

A domestic servant (likely in uniform) might also be expected to nanny children, answer doors or serve at dinner parties (fig. 9). The domestic labour of these urban servants gave their employers - from tradespeople to high-ranking clergy to the Lieutenant Governor - the leisure time to pursue jobs and charitable work. This included the wide-ranging work of the Women’s Patriotic Association during World War One, for example, or the suffrage campaigning of the early 1920s (fig. 10). None of it would have been possible without the servants whose hidden household work freed their middle-class employers to pursue social activism.

## Social Networks and Supports

While in service, living conditions for girls varied. Some girls and women remembered their employers fondly and stayed in touch with them after they left. “They were the nicest people that ever I met in my life, apart from my own family…they were a second family to me,” said one woman, who remembered her St. John’s employer in the 1950s taking the time to drop her

and her friend off at the movies (R. King, as interviewed by Murphy 2016).

If not always treated like one of the family, many domestic servants still felt that their work and welfare was valued. On the other end of the spectrum were the unlucky girls who were underpaid, slept in sub-par conditions and faced violence from their employers (Kealey 2014, 87-88). Most situations fell somewhere between these two extremes. At the very least, most girls felt lonely and isolated from their faraway families. With few days off - and often a curfew on those days - some resented giving up their freedom to their employer.

A few charitable support networks like the Anglican "Girls' Friendly Society" existed to support girls in their transition to service life and provide 'respectable' social activities (Cullum 2014, 105). Despite being paid less than domestic servants in nearby Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador's domestic workers did not form unions like their Canadian counterparts (fig. 11). Some maids in St. John's joined the Ladies' Branch of the Newfoundland Industrial Worker's Association upon its formation in 1919, but the branch focused on labour conditions in factories, rather than in private households. The Ladies' Branch folded in the early 1920s.

***Fig. 11: Maids Ella Gibbons and Ella Sweetland in the union-built town Port Union, circa 1920. Source: The Rooms Archives.***

There was certainly communication and solidarity between these girls, many of whom were unafraid to speak their minds about the injustices they faced. In 1938, the Evening Telegram published a letter from a maid who asked "[W]hy not organize a union for the maids to see that they get shorter hours and better wages. We just want fair play and to be treated as human beings and not machines" (Forestell 1987, 174-175).

A year later, a domestic in Grand Falls wrote to her local newspaper to protest the way middle-class women snubbed domestic servants when they encountered them at town social events (Botting, 2000, 315).

## Women's Roles in the Workforce

***Fig. 12: Cook and maids in North West River, 1930. Source: The Rooms Archives.***

Most women and girls in service were in their teens and early twenties, although girls as young as 9 are known to have worked in service, as did some women in their forties and fifties (fig. 12). A waged domestic job was generally viewed as a temporary stage in a young woman's life. Women were expected to stop working once they were married, as was the case in most other jobs for women at the time. However, it was not uncommon for a married woman to drift in and out of paid domestic jobs when required, to supplement her husband's income or to support the whole family if her husband was unable to work (Forestell 1989, 148). Newfoundland was one of the few countries at that time where domestic service remained the dominant employer for women until the 1950s - unlike Canada, the United States and Britain, where women were taking high-paying factory and clerical jobs at a much greater rate than service jobs.

This began to change after World War Two. After the social upheaval of the war, and subsequent Confederation with Canada, live-in domestic service began to decline. Education became easier to access and living conditions improved across the island. Girls might stay in school longer, instead of dropping out to earn a wage. The increased availability of labour-saving appliances like automatic washers decreased the need for additional household labour in the city, though it took much longer for these appliances (and the electricity to run them) to be available in outport communities.

Women after Confederation also had access to more varied and better-paying jobs beyond the anonymous drudgery of live-in domestic service. But although it no longer accounted for the majority of women's paid work, taking a job in service was not uncommon for young outport women right through the 1950s and 1960s (fig. 13).

10. HELP WANTED—DOMESTIC

MAID WANTED: For home at 95 West Valley Road, Corner Brook Townsite, modern new home Apply evenings from 7 to 8 p.m. or write Western Variety Co. Small family, high wages. Could commence work now or August 20th. Ideal home for right girl.
6i-j-15,17,20,22,23,24-809

WANTED: A maid for plain housework. All modern conveniences. Good wages. For further particulars apply to Miss Frances Joseph, P.O. Box 27, Deer Lake.
J.22-t.f.-818

***Fig. 13: Newspaper advertisements, July 1953. Source: The Western Star.***

The work of female domestic servants in 19th and 20th century Newfoundland and Labrador was about more than simply keeping households clean. Their labour was the backbone of many aspects of the Newfoundland and Labrador economy. Domestic service is also significant as one of the earliest (and most common) examples of women's entry into the waged workforce, beyond the unpaid shore work and household labour of previous eras. The large-scale migratory employment of outport domestic servants, just like the more well-known migratory work of men in the resource industries, was a vital part of the pre-Confederation economy.

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