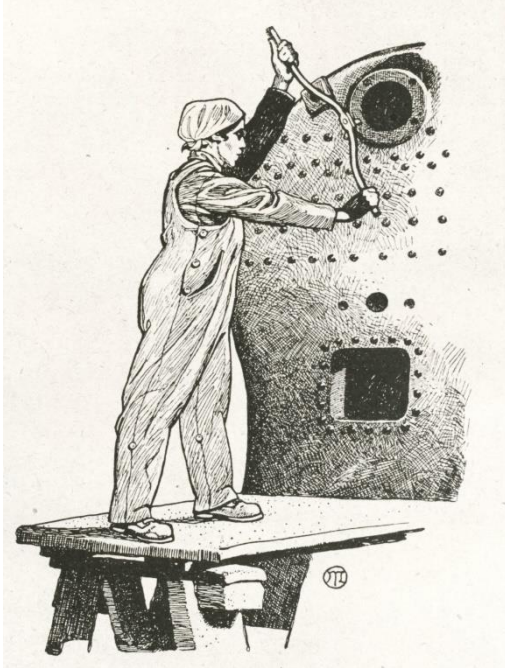


## Female Workwear Trousers

**"... out into hostile life ..." – Female Working Clothes Before 1914-1914/18: Women's Service for the Homeland – "War Workwear" in Rational Dress Movement Bulletins and Fashion Magazines 1914/18 – Men's Work in Men's Trousers**



The study of the history of trousers as part of women's professional and work clothing shows how the activities to be performed affected female dress behaviour. Which activities could women carry out in skirts, when were trousers in vogue? And how did the process of establishing work trousers for women proceed?

From the time of the Enlightenment until 1914, the division into male and female professions was based on biology. Fields of work that demanded qualities such as intelligence, strength, courage or aggression were classified as male professions, whereas child-friendliness, loving devotion, accuracy, hygiene, dexterity or activities in which outward appearance played a role were classified as female abilities. Exceptions to the socially established classifications, usually in combination with the adoption of leggings, were considered sensations reported in the press. The entry into service of three New York "policewomen" in 1912 caused a sensation even overseas, especially because of their innovative costume, which combined the practical with the morally acceptable: "Decidedly ingenious is the mechanism with which the newly-baked policewomen of New York have equipped their skirts. Peacefully they walk along, all lady from waist to hem. But now the 'long-sought' criminals come into view. A tug on the string - and a first-class metamorphosis takes place. The skirt becomes bloomers, the revolver pocket is visible, the legs are tucked under the arm and the criminals are on the cant hook."

Ordinary working women, maids, mountain farmers, oyster fisherwomen, miners in trouser costume, on the other hand, usually went unnoticed. For example, according to pictorial

documents, women who performed the heaviest physical work in English mines from the beginning of the 18th century first wore breeches, then, in the 19th century, long trousers, without this being considered unseemly.

With the beginning of the First World War, there was a dramatic increase in female employment in the warring countries. The mass conscription of men for military service resulted in families losing their breadwinners, i. e. considerably more women had to seek paid work for economic reasons, and there was also a need to fill the jobs left by the men. We read about the consequences of the war for women's occupational work in the magazine *Die Woche* 1915: "[...] The lack of men, however, also gave women the opportunity to work in various industries and activities that until recently had been considered unsuitable for women. For example, women workers in the metal industry have been attracted to heavier work than before. They now have to work on larger machines that were once operated by men, large drills, punches, balanziers and lathes. In the cement works, women now do the coal stamping. [...]"

Wherever women's work was required, and skirts were a hindrance, the option of replacing them with trousers was obvious. For the German dress reform movement, represented by the Association *Deutsche Frauenkleidung und Frauenkultur*, the war-related changes brought about an immense increase in its importance. While the first years of the association's existence were rather quiet, its sphere of action expanded considerably during the First World War as now its proposals were taken up and tailored with great interest. In the special brochure "The Dress of the Working Woman", a total of 63 women's professional dresses is presented, among them numerous models for transformational dress and workwear with trousers. A similar development can be observed in all warring countries.

Supposedly natural boundaries between the sexes became blurred, and socially determined work assignments were gradually abolished. Job vacancies were filled by a female workforce in men's clothes, whose gender took a back seat to the performance of the work in the social evaluation.

These experiences of 1914/18 were decisive for the expansion of the female radius of action in the 1920s. And the question of clothing was also posed anew, for hadn't women's trousers, which were still so frowned upon in 1911, proven themselves as functional clothing in the best possible way? Still overwhelmed by the unpredictable developments of the last few years, the Association Gazette of the German Dress Reformers explicitly spoke out in 1918 "in favour of trouser dress", which it had still vehemently rejected in the pre-war period. And many European women who had 'stood their man' in the war probably thought similar to their American colleague: "I should hate to go back to work in the old long skirts."

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Picture credit: *Hosen, weiblich*, Fig. 152: *Schürzenhose für Industriearbeiterinnen*. Vorschlag der deutschen Kleiderreformvereinigung. In: *Das Kleid der arbeitenden Frau*. Hrsg. von Neue Frauenkleidung und Frauenkultur, Karlsruhe 1917, Fig. 1. Private archive.