

# Working in Domestic Service

In this activity, students will step into the shoes of an historian aiming to better understand the experience of domestic workers in Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, using quantitative data and statistical testing.

**Length**  1-2 hours (Medium Problem)

**Prerequisites** Measures of Centre, Measures of Dispersion, Hypothesis testing

**Concept** Hypothesis testing

**Theme** Gender

**Discipline** History



## Scenario

You recently read about Nellie, a young woman living in Scotland in the early 1900s who immigrated to Canada to be a domestic worker. Ever since you stumbled across her testimonial about starting work at the age of fourteen you cannot stop thinking about what life must have been like for young women – not far from your age! – working in Canada at that time.

*According to Nellie:*

In Scotland at that time I left school at fourteen. I couldn't wait to leave school. The teachers wanted us to stay on for another year but your family couldn't wait for you to become fourteen so that you could go out to work and make some money and bring it home. They usually have their aprons out for your pay. My mum said, "Well, there's only two choices. Either you work on the pithead, like women, girls, or you go to domestic service." That was all there was, domestic service. So my mum said, "You're not going to work in the pithead. They swear a lot." Fourteen, you know. I didn't know anything about the world. You didn't get told anything in those days. So domestic service I went to.<sup>1</sup>

You have been stuck on choosing a topic for a research project in your Social Science seminar class, but Nellie's story has given you some ideas. You schedule a meeting with your professor to see what he thinks.

## What you need to produce

- A brief paragraph describing preliminary research findings on domestic service work (~150 words)
- A test of significance comparing women doing domestic service work to other working women
- A brief paragraph interpreting test results (~100 words)



## Evaluation grid

Understanding & Interpretation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preliminary research findings are clearly explained and demonstrate a strong understanding of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century domestic service work (4 points)</li> <li>Interpretation paragraph clearly explains the results of comparing wages for women doing domestic service work to wages for other working women (6 points)</li> </ul>	/10
Writing & Style	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Writing is formal in tone, and explains key concepts and data points in clear language</li> </ul>	/2
Requirements	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preliminary research text meets required length (~150 words; 2 points)</li> <li>Test of significance is accurately computed (4 points)</li> <li>Interpretation paragraph meets required length (~100 words; 2 points)</li> </ul>	/8
<b>Total</b>	<b>/20</b>

## Breakdown of the problem

### Guiding question – Part 1

#### What is domestic service work?

At the meeting with your professor, you show him Nellie’s testimonial and ask him what exactly domestic service work involved, and whether Nellie’s experience would have been common at the time. He responds, “These are good questions, and this sounds worth investigating further. I think you have your topic!” He suggests, “Why don’t you read a bit more about this to see if you can answer those questions? You can come see me next week with 150 words or so on what you’ve found.”



**Begin your research and keep track of your findings** in the space below, so you can share them with your professor at your next meeting. Identify specific questions you have about domestic service, as well as the answers you find to your questions in **~150 words**. (Also, remember to keep track of *where* you found your answers – your sources – in the space below.)

Preliminary research on domestic service work
Sources

## Guiding question – Part 2

How can you determine if there is a significant difference between two groups, in terms of the same variable?

At your next meeting one week later, you show your professor your preliminary research findings. You also show him some data you found (in the corresponding Excel file). He says he thinks you are on the right track. The only thing is...

*You:* I think I’m more confused than I was before, and I’m not sure what to do next.

*Professor:* Why is that?

*You:* I found some contradictions in the sources, and I just don’t know what to make of it all.

*Professor:* Tell me more.



*You:* Well, in a text I found from 1892, the author, Jean Thomson Scott, says that women doing domestic work “are really better off than girls working in factories or shops so far as wages and comfort are concerned.”<sup>2</sup> But in another article I found, the author, Marilyn Barber, suggests that only those who had no other option chose to do domestic work.<sup>3</sup> Does this mean that wages were worse for women doing domestic work than for other working women? Were women who did domestic work better off than other working women, or not?

*Professor:* Hmmm. Good questions! In fact, I think your questions have pointed to just what your next steps should be - and I think you have just the data to do it! Why don't you try to determine who is right, Scott or Barber? In other words, perhaps you can test whether the wages for women doing domestic work were significantly different from wages for women in general. This sounds promising!

Was there a significant difference in the wages of women doing domestic work compared to other working women? Who was better off? **Conduct a test of significance** in the space below, using the data from the corresponding Excel file, in order to answer your questions. Then, **interpret your results** in the next space provided below (~100 words). Be sure to support your interpretation with relevant data points, and to explain what your results mean using language that people without a quantitative methods background will be able to understand (as your professor would eventually like you to share your results with other history students, not all of whom have experience with statistical tests).

Test of significance

Interpretation of results



## References

1. Barber, M. J. (1984). Below Stairs: The Domestic Servant. *Material Culture Review* 19, 37-46. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MCR/article/view/17193/22790>
2. Scott, J. T. (1892). *The Conditions of Female Labour in Ontario*. Toronto: Warwick.
3. Barber, M. (1991). The women Ontario welcomed: Immigrant domestics for Ontario homes, 1870–1930. *Ontario History* 72(3), 148-172.

## Additional reference

Sager, E.W. (2007). The Transformation of the Canadian Domestic Servant, 1871-1931. *Social Science History* 31(4), 509-537. <http://www.smu.ca/webfiles/sager.pdf>

