

THE EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN IN THE COLNE VALLEY AND HUDDERSFIELD TEXTILE INDUSTRY c 1914-1918

Cynthia Phillips

Inequality of Status and Pay in Workplace

The First World War, which commenced on 4 August 1914, saw women entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers. Further to this a great many females were employed in areas of industry that were, by tradition, exclusively male. This phenomenon was in total contrast to customary pre-war working practices which dictated that working-class women, in the main, be confined to low status, gender specific occupations: thus much received opinion suggests that women war workers experienced a previously unknown liberation from 'women's work' and coupled with this enjoyed a newly enhanced status within British society. But did women textile workers the wartime workforce achieve higher status due to their substitution (in place of men) into conventionally male occupations within the local textile industry?

What was the experience of women textile workers in the Colne Valley and Huddersfield? Did they suffer from the same ideological restrictions as women war workers nationally?

By tradition, in Colne Valley and Huddersfield, women and men have worked alongside each other (often performing different jobs) in the textile industry. However, working practices seem to reflect the general attitudes to women in this period, despite working alongside men, women textile workers appear to have been somewhat constrained by the sexual division of labour (the work place was divided into men's work and women's work).

Can it be argued that in 1914 perceptions of women's primary role (wife and mother) and lesser productive potential were in fact universal? Was there much variation in the attitudes towards women?

It seems that women textile workers of the Colne Valley and Huddersfield experienced broadly similar restrictions in the workplace as working-class women in general.

Recruitment of Female Labour

The Immediate impact of war, in terms of unemployment, was relatively short lived as women workers were gradually recruited in order to replace male workers who were 'called to the colours'. A Government Report (1916) states

With the general recovery of trade and the withdrawal of men for the forces the situation improved, and by April 1915 the number of women in employment reached pre-war level, though there were striking changes in the nature of work done.¹

Employment registers were circulated and women were encouraged to register their availability for war-work. Committees were set up to co-ordinate and organise the appeals to women, by mid-1915 industry began to suffer acute labour shortages both in men and women's work. A Government Report noted the seriousness and difficulties encountered by certain industries in 1915.

In certain industries employers began to experience difficulty in obtaining skilled women to replace men and for work in women's ordinary occupations., the need for a widespread system of replacement became urgent.²

There appears to have been a slight, but perceptible, change in ideas about women and this is evidenced in the contemporary press and propaganda thus from late 1915 women entered

the workforce in large numbers. The Government and local agencies encouraged employers to release men for war duty and employ women as replacements. As the war progressed the need for women's labour intensified and replacement became a regular occurrence; what was the reaction of employers, male employees and trade unions to the women war workers? Did pre-war attitudes to women prevail in the wartime workforce?

Legislation

Female and male wartime employees were subject to national and local legislation and controls. The Munitions Act of 1915 brought many establishments engaged in war production under government control. The Ministry of Munitions was set up in June 1915 and had many functions with regard to workers on war production. How did this legislation affect women war workers and were women in particular the subject of restrictive legislation? The term 'dilution', which in this case means the dilution of skilled work, was used to describe women's substitution into men's skilled jobs. But, arguably, women were not readily accepted into the workforce; many trade unions wanted, among other things, a guarantee that the post-war period would bring about a return to pre-war working practices. The Treasury Agreement of 1915 allowed this and thus women were accepted into munitions work. This Agreement was subsequently taken over by the Ministry of Munitions and so the temporary nature of women's wartime employment became official in June. Industries and establishments who were not, at that time, under the control of the Ministry of Munitions made their own agreements. In the Colne Valley, Huddersfield and surrounding districts similar agreements were made with regard to women textile workers. B.Drake states

In February 1916, some sixteen employer's associations and some nineteen trade unions entered an important general agreement laying down terms of dilution.³

This agreement appears to demonstrate the similarity of the Colne Valley and Huddersfield with the national picture in that an overriding concern seems to have been the protection of male occupations. Agreements were also reached with regard to rates of pay for war work though they did vary on a regional and occupational basis. But these agreements did make women's entry into the workforce more acceptable to employers, trades unions, and male workers for the duration of the war.

Agreements in the Colne Valley/Huddersfield Textile Industry

On February 4 1916 sixteen employers representing the West Riding of Yorkshire Woollen and Worsted Industries met with nineteen trade union officials 'for the purpose of dealing with the exceptional conditions arising out of the War'. The purpose of the formal meeting, at which women were not represented, was to discuss the conditions under which substitution could take place. It bears a remarkable similarity to the national agreements in that it also stipulates the temporary nature of women's substitution into male employment. The first clause in the agreement addresses the issue of women substitutes. It states

1. That substitutions of men by women are temporary, and that those men who have joined H.M. Forces shall be entitled to be reinstated in their former employments if and when they return fit for resuming them.

It seems that the trade unionists, like those at national level, were intent upon securing a set of conditions which would ensure a return to pre-war working practices at the end of the War. This agreement further stresses that substitutes were to be temporary for the duration of the War. Two clauses in the agreement serve to highlight this fact. They state

3. That where women in consequence of this agreement are employed to take the place of men, such women shall not continue to be so employed after men become available.

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4 that where any workplace are not fully employed through shortage of work, the women who have taken the places of men shall be the first to be discharged or suspended provided that qualified men can be found to do this work.⁴

Further to these conditions placed on female substitution the trade unionists and employers formed a consultative committee, the Central Joint Committee, in order to sanction the process and also discuss any problems that might arise. At their first meeting the Committee passed a resolution which stated

...that where it is found that the introduction of female labour is necessary (for the maintenance of the industry) in occupations not already agreed as suitable for female labour, such introduction shall only be made after consultation and agreement between the Employers and the Operatives' Representatives in the local branch or branches of the trade concerned, and failing agreement, after a decision by a meeting of the Joint Committee.⁵

The resolution shows that the introduction of female labour was not to be undertaken lightly. In some cases expressed permission was required. This fact indicates that there was little if any increase in the status of women in the textile industry at this time. Evidence with regard to unequal rates of pay perhaps further reinforces this pessimistic interpretation of women's inferior position and low status in the industry.

Discussions about rates of pay show that women substitutes were, under the terms of the Agreement, to receive equal pay for equal work or four fifths of a male wage in cases of dilution. Yet it seems that some employers continued to underpay women substitutes. Within two months of the agreement being signed the Yorkshire Factory Times reported that union representatives were insisting on employers observing the agreed wage rates in order to protect 'soldier's' interests.⁶ This demand by unions shows that employers were continuing to exploit women's labour and also that unions were, arguably, intent on protecting male rates of pay rather than securing equality for women textile workers.

Furthermore, these women did not receive the same war bonus as men. The male workers over 21 years were awarded 10 shillings per week and women were awarded six shillings and sixpence.⁷ The Agreement perhaps serves to demonstrate that women textile workers were subjected to the same constraints and controls in the workplace, with regard to conditions placed upon substitution, as the women of the national picture.

Of the many women who worked in the mills in wartime many were recruited under the Industrial Compulsion Scheme. These were usually single, childless women who were required to work in some form of 'war effort'. These women were 'imported' from many areas of the country in times of acute labour shortages.

The General Union of Textile Workers

A great many Colne Valley textile workers were members of the General Union of Textile Workers (GUTW), which had a Colne Valley District branch. There are several entries in the Colne Valley Branch of the GUTW minutes that provide further evidence of the protracted discussions with regard to the introduction of female labour into local mills and also negotiations about rates of pay.

GUTW Minutes Regarding the Introduction of Female Labour (dilution) into Textile Mills

December 21, 1915. Meeting held at Slaithwaite Socialist Club.

Resolution 1 - accept - re-working agreement and meeting with factory inspectors re replacement of men of military age by females and young persons be accepted.⁸

April 6, 1916.

Resolution 9. That the secretary be allowed to accept the invitation of The Board of Trade to join the Advisory Committee of Women's War Employment (industrial) but any changes in working conditions must receive the sanction of this committee.⁹

On April 8th 1916-/ndustrial Compulsion Scheme. An article in the Worker noted that a number of young women arrived in Huddersfield and district from places such as Goole, Grimsby, Hull, Scarborough, Harrogate and Mansfield to work in the local textile industry. At this time 180 young women were sent to this area

A committee was set up to organize the introduction of the women into occupations in the textile mills. The Lord Mayor chaired the committee and one of the employer's representatives was William Crowther. The committee was also responsible for finding accommodation for the young women. Despite the concerns of workers and unionists about 'corners in' not being suitable, and causing more work, in excess of 100 women were still in the textile trades in June of that year. These women worked mainly in the spinning and finishing departments.

Resolution 1. Finishers meeting [at] Marsden. Meetings with employers re finishers rates for females. Dilution Committee re Women's War Work. Feeders meeting at Marsden (J & E Crowther). Warpers (J & E Crowther) Delegates H. Farrar and Ellen Shaw.

April 27, 1916

Resolution 2. That a meeting for Textile Operatives be arranged for Marsden, to receive a report regarding the arrangements for the introduction of female labour into the textile factories and the safeguards provided in the interests of the local operatives with reference to the same, and also to discuss if necessary other matters in connection with the union and trade conditions

Resolution 3. That the meeting be held in the Mechanics Hall on Tuesday May 9th commencing at 7-45pm.¹¹

May 16, 1916. Resolution 9. Accept executive delegates report [re] Dilution of Labour Committee. [Held in response to resolution 2 April 27 1916]. Local committee meeting at Marsden.¹²

June 15, 1916.

Resolution 5. Feeders meeting at Marsden. [A] meeting of imported females (recruited under the Industrial Compulsion Scheme) and females in the finishing department.¹³

GUTW Minutes Regarding Female Rates of Pay in Textile Trades October 11, 1916.

Resolution 8. Women weavers B. Hall & sons Miinsbridge settled to be paid women's scale as from July 1 1916.

[b] Improved girls' war bonus referred to Sir G Askwith.

[c] Twisters in JE Crowthers Marsden settled to be promoted to weaving during present crisis on attaining 17 years of age.¹⁴

November 9, 1916

Resolution 2 ..and the case of Messers Crowther Bruce re weavers being deducted war bonus for time lost be reported to the General Secretary for enquiry and redress.

March 8, 1917.

Resolution 5. That this committee are in favour of a ballot vote of the women members being taken on the question of equal War Bonus for women as for men¹⁵

March 15, 1917.

Resolution 12. That the General Executive be requested to consider the question of applying for a further increase in the War Bonus.

Resolution 13. That the repeated threats of employers to put men of military age karki be brought to the notice of the GE with a view to some kind of protest against such conduct.¹⁶

March 29, 1917. [Industrial Conscription/Compulsion]

Resolution 10. That this committee representing the textile workers of the Colne Valley District of the General Union of Textile Workers is opposed to any for of Industrial Compulsion, and views the proposed scheme as a menace to the civil and industrial liberties of the British people and that copies of this resolution be forwarded to the Prime Minister Mr Lloyd George, Mr Neville Chamberlin, Mr Arthur Henderson and then FW Mallaliui MP for Colne Valley.¹⁷

April 12, 1917

Resolution 4. That this committee is not in favour of the resolution of the Huddersfield district that an application should be [put forward] for an increase in the War Bonus of 10 shillings per week for members of the union, and is of the opinion that any further application should include a condition that the same War bonus shall be paid to women as is paid to men.¹⁸

May 10, 1917.

Resolution 4. That the delegates be instructed to raise the question of the inclusion of the textile trade in the Amending bill to the Munitions of War Act with a view to a protest against such inclusion.¹⁹

This protest came to nothing, as the textile industry did become part of the Munitions Act in 1917.

Resolution 5. That the delegates report to the EC the introduction of women into the willeying department and move strong protest against such introduction, as it is contrary to the agreement between the employers and operatives representatives in respect to the dilution question.²⁰

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Willayers and fettlers were two of the very few textile trades that actually improved on basic pay during the war years. It was the Marsden/Colne Valley workers that fought for these changes, as wage rates had remained the same since 1913. At one stage of the protest fettlers in eight Colne Valley mills handed in their notices. Employers contacted the appropriate government agency headed by Sir George Askwith, who instructed the employers to deal with this matter promptly in order to avoid a strike.. It appears that the employers did not respond quickly enough and the fettlers went on strike.

The GUTW refused strike pay on the grounds that the fettlers had not complied with union rules. However, the issue was eventually resolved when the fettlers were awarded a farthing an hour on basic rates of pay.

Industrial Disputes in the Colne Valley Textile Industry 1914-1918

In the early months of the war textile production increased on previous levels and thus much overtime was necessary to meet the increasing demand for cloth, much of which was for military uniforms (khaki and serge). As with pre-war practice, weavers (and many other textile operatives) were not paid overtime rates, however unlike pre-war working conditions the war meant that wartime production relied heavily on overtime.

Workers made representations to GUTW officials about low rates of pay and the exertions wrought by this overtime. At a meeting of The Heavy Woollen District Trades Council, Ben Turner, a representative of the GUTW discussed the issue of females working overtime in the mills. He stated that women textile operatives had to

... stand all day from 5.30 in the morning until 8.30 at night In the interests of womanhood and motherhood ... they should, during the crisis have at least two nights a week, as well as Saturday afternoons free from overtime.²¹

There was to be much unrest in the textile trade due to the practice of employers not paying overtime rates.

In December 1914 male and female weavers at three Marsden Mills met and agreed that they would stop working unpaid overtime after Christmas if their employers refused to pay overtime rates; they were fully supported by the union. The weavers were to finish work at 5.30 pm rather than continuing to work overtime until 7.30pm.²² Throughout the Colne Valley members of the union held meetings and urged trade union officials to negotiate with employers. The weavers were demanding a limit on overtime of two hours a night with no work on Saturdays. Weavers in other Colne Valley mills followed the example of the Marsden weavers in refusing to work overtime. However, trade declined in January 1915 and this had the effect of preventing the unrest spreading further. During the last week in January employers made an offer to the weavers in Marsden. They were offered one penny an hour overtime rate up to until 8pm and twopence an hour after that time. But the weavers rejected this offer demanding one and halfpence up until eight o'clock and no overtime after eight o'clock.

However, in mid-January the Home Office issued regulations that fixed the number of hours of overtime at a maximum of nine hours per week, this applied to 75 percent of women and young persons involved in war work. The GUTW proposed that these overtime limits should also apply to men and put this to local employers. The response was that the union's proposal would be taken up as far as was practicable.²³

The Minutes of the GUTW Meetings also provide much Information about industrial disputes and concerns related to war work in the textile industry. December 31, 1915

Resolution 1. That we advise the men weavers at Messers W & E Crowther to continue to refuse to carry pieces for the women, and that if the matter develops Mr A Graham will arrange with the secretary to call a shop meeting.²⁴

January 13, 1916

Resolution 5. The secretary reported that the difficulty which had arisen at W & E Crowther in consequence of the men weavers having refused to continue carrying the pieces for the women had been settled by the firm engaging a man for the work.²⁵

February 24, 1916

Resolution 5. that the report re Pearson Bros [Slaithwaite] be accepted viz that women weavers had accepted an advance of 9d per cut on their present scale and the men's scale to remain the same.

GUTW- Women's Trade Union Guild December 17, 1916

Resolution 5. moved by Miss Thorton and seconded by Miss E Raynor that the following resolution be sent to the District EC - that the introduction of children into the weaving department is a growing evil and a menace to the trade and we ask the District EC to give a lead in stopping it.²⁷

February 16, 1917

Resolution from women's meeting March 3rd. We request the General EC through the District EC to ask for a War Bonus of 10 shillings for the women like the men have, and go for it, for women only.

Addition to Resolution. For women trade union members only.

Resolution 6. Resolved that we ask the General EC to take some action in trying to get an age limit, namely 18, for young persons to begin to learn weaving.

Resolution 7. Resolved that this guild recognizing the peril that the workers liberties are in, if the threatened Industrial compulsion becomes law, urges the General EC to use every effort to prevent the passing of such an act.²⁸

April 30, 1917

Resolution 5 Resolved that we ask the General EC to arrange a conference and send invitations to all the unions in the Textile Industry to discuss ways and means of gaining control and ownership of the Woolen and Worsted Industry. [Is this Syndicalism?]

Resolution 6. Resolved that we ask the General EC to arrange a conference to try to ascertain the opinion of the women of other districts as early as possible in regard to equal War bonus, we think nine weeks is ample time for this to have been done.

June 25, 1917. Resolution 6. Resolved that we ask the District EC to request the General EC to get the proposed compensation for short time which they are asking, to be paid to union members only, and to be paid through the union offices, with a view to making the union stronger²⁹

Conclusion

Contemporary evidence does arguably show that women were not readily accepted into traditionally male areas of employment. It becomes clear that the Government encountered the same reluctance and thus found it necessary to continually inform employers, even as late as 1917, of the pressing need for female substitution. Trade unionists were concerned to protect male employment and restricted women's entry into the workforce by employing adolescent males and retired men rather than women. Where female substitution was necessary it was accompanied by national and local agreements between trade unions and employers that appear to have been reached without consulting women workers. At both national and local level the agreements stressed the temporary nature of women's employment, it seems that women were only to be accepted into the workforce under these male imposed conditions that served to protect male employment. These agreements remained in force until the war ended and female substitution remained problematic in many industries and was actively resisted, by many employers and trade unionists, for the duration of the war.

On balance. It can be argued that the experience of war work did little to improve the status of women either at national or local level. Historians of the optimistic school of thought argue that women had wider job opportunities, more freedom, financial independence and this brought them higher status in society and in the workplace. However, there is little evidence to show a marked change in women's status. Indeed, women were the subject of male imposed controls throughout the war. When the war ended the enforced dismissal of hundreds of thousands of female workers highlighted their continuing inequality in the labour market.

Very few women managed to hold onto skilled work as this had to be given up in favour of the returning men. Women were at once effectively deskilled. The expectation being that they would return to traditional women's work and the domestic sphere.

From the onset of recruitment women were only too aware of the fact that their inclusion in the workforce was temporary. The spectre of domestic ideology was with them throughout their war employment and was rigidly enforced when the war ended. The rapid return to pre-war working practices demonstrates women worker's powerlessness and unchanging low status in the labour market both during and after the First World War.

APPENDIX 1

Report on the Increased Employment of Women during the War

In the early days of the war there was concern with the decrease in levels women's employment. However, the situation changed as more men enlisted for the armed forces and gradually by 1916 women's employment reached prewar levels. There was much difficulty in finding skilled women to replace men and indeed female substitution was actively resisted by many employers and male workers. The Government appealed to employers to release men and employ women.

Substitution

A conference was held, in 1915, between the Government, employers, trade unions and workers. The first general agreement was negotiated. The agreement, and subsequent agreements, stressed that female substitution could take place on the proviso that female labour would be withdrawn after the war. Women's inclusion in the war-time workforce was to be temporary.

The Women's War Service Register. 1915

The urgent need for substitution became increasingly apparent. Statistics revealed that Labour Exchanges were placing more women in employment than was usual. The Women War worker's Committee reviewed the figures and encouraged employers to increase substitution levels. It stressed the increasing gravity of the labour situation, more women workers were needed. The Government suggested that a vast amount of work, previously associated with men, could be done by women. The Government appointed local Women's Employment Committees. Huddersfield was one of the first towns to have such a committee. By 1916 there were thirty six committees, seven in Yorkshire alone.

Textiles in Huddersfield

By 1915 there was a serious shortage of labour. Women's Employment Committees were empowered to seek lodgings for women who, through the Industrial Compulsion Scheme, moved to areas which had the severest shortages of labour. The Huddersfield Committee were trying to find accommodation for such women. They also appointed a Woman Welfare Officer to look after the women's interests.

Reasons for the shortage of Women Textile Workers

The local Women's Employment Committee suggests that women were drawn to the higher wages paid in munitions factories. Also, they had a patriotic desire to be involved in war work. Furthermore munitions work had higher status therefore many women preferred to work in munitions factories rather than textile mills. The Government suggested that a small increase in textile wage levels might help to ease the situation.

The Reserve of Women and the Difficulties of Utilising the Reserve

There was much discussion about the difficulty of persuading married women, with experience in industry, to return to work. The Committees suggested that a major difficulty was that married women wanted conditions and hours of labour to suit domestic arrangements. Some employers did have half day shifts thus married women could work for these employers, but in general not enough employers operated this kind of shift system. It

was also suggested that many married women had soldiers billeted with them therefore they did not have the time to work. The Government questioned the practice of billeting soldiers in industrial areas as it effectively decreased the supply of female labour. It was also noted that women would not work for the low wages offered by most employers. The Government suggested that a small increase might help. But the Committees found that the majority of employers did not want to employ married women they preferred to employ girls, there were three jobs for every one girl. WYAS, Kidees Central Library, Archive Ref., S/NUDBTW

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