AN INVESTIGATION INTO WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT IN BRITAIN DURING THE PERIOD OF INDUSTRIALISATION.

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In this thorough research of women's employment patterns in 19th century Britain Rowena Gray examines historical factors explaining the fall in participation rates of married women in the labour market during the period of industrialisation.

The first question that arises immediately from the title of this project is: what is industrialisation and when did it occur in Britain? This is a much-debated issue in economic history but I take it to mean the gradual and often incomplete manner in which machinery and technical innovation was introduced into production in all areas of the economy.[1] I will deal primarily with the 19th century period (1780 to 1914), though admittedly it could be argued that the 'Industrial Revolution' began some time before this, at least in some sectors, such as textiles. Industrialisation is a historical phenomenon that is very difficult to pin down to one starting point, and so I feel justified in taking this arbitrary date. Industrialisation brought much social and economic change, which must have altered the outlook of the British people and presented challenges for the way in which society should be organised, that no country in the world had ever confronted before. The volume of contemporary inquiry into the problems of industrialisation is testament to this curiosity and to the attempts that were made to cope with the changing environment. I hope to answer the specific questions outlined above, as well as why it was "not unusual for women to change occupations several times during their lives or to perform several jobs simultaneously" (Honeyman, 2000). The focus here is on women, who appear to have been somewhat neglected in the existing literature, which is mainly concerned with how the Factory Acts and other measures affected the employment of children in industrial Britain (Nardinelli, 1980).

As this is a research paper, I have chosen a number of primary sources as evidence to support my arguments and to direct me to the most pertinent questions that need to be resolved about female employment in the nineteenth century. These

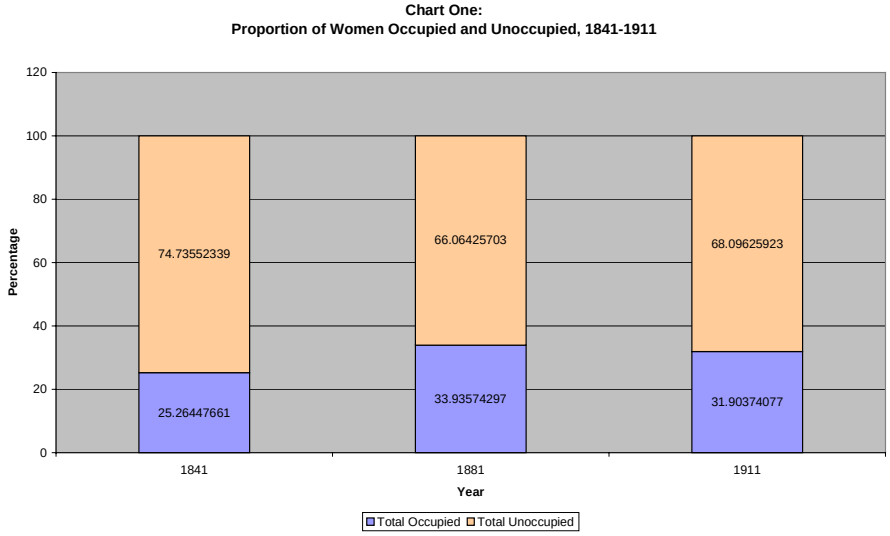
[1] Some have argued that the pace of industrialisation did not speed up until after the First World War. (Jones, 1971).

include selections from newspaper articles, pamphlets and diaries. J.M. Golby's (1986) collection of documents provided the impetus for this study, and led me to the survey of poverty among the working classes conducted by Henry Mayhew in 1850 (Thompson and Yeo, 1971). The use of the medium of newspaper meant that the survey was accessible to a wide range of people, and created much controversy. It made public and explicit what had been tacitly and privately acknowledged by so many - that the world's richest capital city was the scene of appalling poverty, which affected a large proportion of ordinary workers. It is not possible to determine conclusively what the consequences of this kind of survey may have been, but it was probably the middle-classes that reacted most strongly. It represents one of the first pieces of research into the area of homework, as previously only women's factory work had been investigated, even though an indeterminate but significant number of women worked in unregulated jobs, outside factories. Working-class women rarely leave diary evidence so Mayhew's interviews with them are even more valuable (Roberts, 1985). Patricia Hollis' (1979) collection lends further insight into what the impoverished working women themselves thought of their employment situation, the Factory Acts and their standing in society in general. It contains abstracts from meetings of the various governmental commissions formed to look into the problem of the double coincidence of poverty and industry in Britain, and in particular the plight of child and female labour at this time. The purpose of analysing these documents is to try to ascertain "the views and attitudes of the working-class women themselves" (Roberts, 1988), which is often overlooked both in modern studies and Victorian investigations such as are found in Engels' work. I will use the documentary literature throughout the essay, whilst realising that I may not have a fully representative sample of sources and that some of them may have embellished their claims in order to sell newspapers or convince the government or employers of the expediency of a particular policy.

I have made use of another primary source in constructing graphs from data on women's employment in the period 1841-1911,[2] to investigate the extent to which some occupations saw a rise in the numbers of females it employed, while others witnessed a notable contraction. One point of interest is that the proportion of all women who were engaged in paid work increased notably between 1841 and 1881, but that this level decreased slightly in the thirty years to 1911:

[2] All data derives from (Mitchell, 1988).

Figure 1: Proportion of Women Occupied and Unoccupied 1841 – 1911



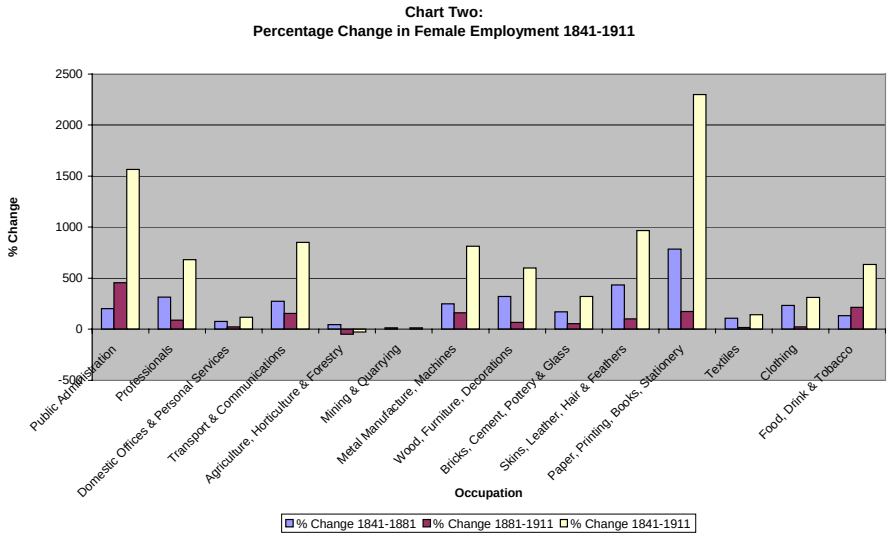
Source: Mitchell, 1988

The contraction in female employment in the latter period maybe due to inaccuracy in the data, as it may be that women switched out of officially recorded occupations into less formal employment, including working from home. One aim of this project is to identify broad trends in women's work in factories, smaller workshops, homework etc. Homework may be defined as the form of work whereby raw materials were collected from a central office and finished goods completed in the homes of the workforce (Pennington and Westover, 1989) it was referred to by some, including the Select Committee on Homework (1908), as sweating, due to the low pay and poor conditions in which the mainly female workforce toiled, which was rendered "quite insufficient to enable an adult person to obtain anything like proper food, clothing and house accommodation." However, due to intensified industrialisation, homework may have been disappearing from the 1870s.

The more rapid increase in the female population and growth in school attendance among girls after the 1870 Education Act (Ibid) may have caused the proportion of women employed to fall, despite the fact that absolute numbers were rising rapidly. Either way, over the 60 years from 1841 to 1911, an increase in the female population at work is clearly visible. The chart below illustrates the

percentage changes in women's employment across various occupations and draws attention to the main growth areas, administration and the professions, as well as printing and transport. In fact, another noteworthy growth area was in chemicals, but the percentage increase was so huge that it could not be included.

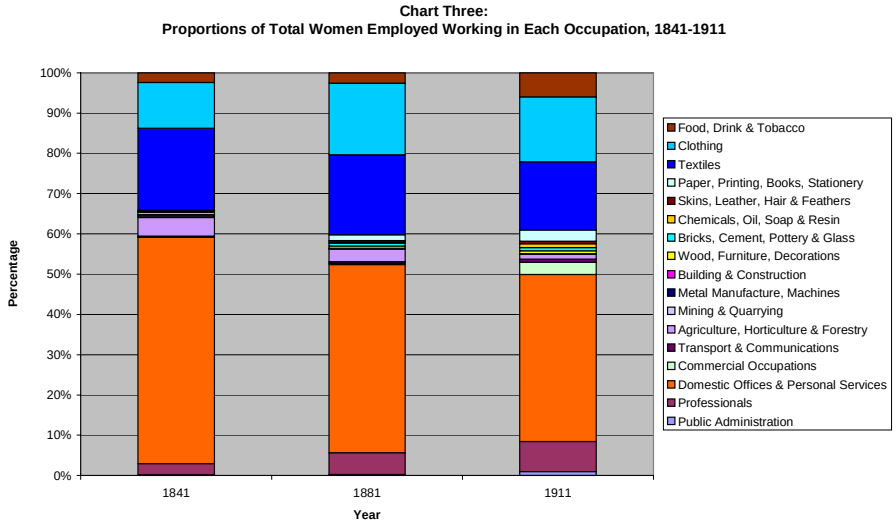
Figure 2: Percentage Change in Female Employment 1841 - 1911



Source: Mitchell, 1988

It is more useful perhaps to look at the change in the composition of occupations that women worked at over this same time period. Chart three does just that, revealing how domestic service, despite its increasing numbers employed, had less relative prominence in terms of proportions of women working in each occupation. Broadly speaking, clothing and textiles maintained their positions as significant sources of employment for women, while other sectors such as food and drink, the professions and printing saw considerable gains. Agriculture was the main area that declined as an employer of women over the period, as technology replaced female labour. This section has provided a summary of the main trends in female employment. The next will aim to explain how these trends came about.

Figure 3: Occupation breakdown of working women



Source: Mitchell, 1988.

Technology played a pivotal role in creating employment for women during industrialisation. It allowed employers to subdivide skilled work processes, and to set women, who were generally unskilled, to work on individual tasks, with the use of machinery. This is called 'dilution' and it facilitated mass production of the components of the final product. One example comes from the tailoring trade, which, once the sewing and buttonhole machines were invented, employed a large quantity of women on finishing tasks (Morris, 1986). It was condemned by Engels, who argued that men were forced out of work, or remained only as supervisors, as "feeble women or even a child" could complete the work with the help of the new machinery (Engels, 1993). The introduction of technology did not happen at one point in time, across all industries, as inventions took time to be perfected and adopted. This was especially important for the persistence of home working, which was mainly a female mode of production. Improved efficiency in one area of the business could often lead to an enlarged demand for labour in the more labour-intensive sectors, which makes sense, as some processes can never be mechanised. Factor endowments may also have influenced the extent to which home working persisted, as London, which lacked the space of the northern industrial centres, continued to use labour-intensive methods of production for longer into the nineteenth century (Jones, 1971). This may account for the acute poverty of the

capital. To counter the dilution process, unions attempted to establish a tradition of skilled work in many occupations (Lown, 1990). Even where machinery was specifically introduced to allow for female workers, such as in 1835 when Richard Roberts invented the self-acting mule for the textile trade, men successfully resisted this intrusion (Honeyman, 2000). Their exclusion of women and monopoly on skill yielded a hysteresis effect, whereby women lost the techniques and knowledge necessary for certain trades. With the onset of complete industrialisation and especially power-driven machinery, however, central production became the only profitable option and homework was phased out, with diminished wages (Honeyman, 2000). The position of female home workers became more tenuous[3] and led many to try to find alternative employment.

One of the major factors effecting women's employment and their occupation decision was the introduction of legislation, which labelled women as "protected persons",[4] in the Factory Acts. Some welcomed the legislation due to their genuine concern for women and children and the often-harsh conditions in which they worked. This group may have been predominantly middle-class, with little direct knowledge of the realities of work in factories or workshops around Britain. Others believed that legislation needed to be introduced to prevent women from working in jobs, which they considered to be unsuitable for them, as they took away feminine qualities. The main proponent of the Factory Acts, Lord Shaftesbury, told the House of Commons in 1846 that factory women disobey their husbands and meet together to drink, sing and smoke (Roberts, 1988). There is a difficulty here in distinguishing between people who genuinely lobbied for the Factory Acts for these reasons, and those who supported them with the hope that they would result in the decreased employment of women (leaving jobs free for men), particularly in skilled trades, and who used this excuse as propaganda for their cause. Official sources often tried to 'sell' the Factory Acts to the people by convincing them that they would necessitate a fall in labour supply that would in turn raise wages (Golby, 1986).

Some women took the contrary view to that outlined above, stressing the detrimental effects that such protective, but prohibitive legislation might have, in causing the unemployment and destitution of women, and in resulting in the erosion of their already meagre wages. Among these was Emma Paterson, head of the Women's Protective and Provident League until 1886. She convinced the authorities to establish an alternative method of guaranteeing proper working conditions for women by employing female factory inspectors (Roberts, 1998). Intuitively, this

[3] The 1908 Select Committee on Homework found the earnings of homeworkers to be very low, with workers having to work long hours just to make a living. (Morris, 1986).
[4] This classification was first brought in under the 1844 Act. (Roberts, 1988).

would have benefited female employees of factories more than the Factory Acts, as their welfare would be monitored directly and did not depend on the cooperation of employers with the legislation. The argument against the Factory Acts was that it placed an implicit tax on the employment of women. As two workers interviewed by the Royal Commission on Factories and Workshops said: "making it less profitable to employ women tends to drive them to unprotected occupations which are more laborious" (Hollis, 1979). It was not only the factory laws that had this effect. Many women had been forced into prostitution at least on a part-time basis, as Mayhew's interviews have graphically highlighted. One woman declared that "there is not one young girl that works at slop-work that is virtuous" due to the fact that they cannot make enough money at the more socially respectable but unpredictable endeavours of needlework (Thompson and Yeo, 1971). The 1864 Contagious Diseases Acts (Hollis, 1979) intervened in this trade, making it more difficult to do business. Many of the Classical economists of the period backed the regulation of child labour, arguing that children could be easily exploited and made to work long hours. Most followed the view of John Stuart Mill, who believed that "women were 'free agents' as much as men" (Blaug, 1958), and condemned the 1847 Ten Hours Act, which limited the working-day of women. For those who foresaw no augmentation in productivity arising from the reduction in working hours, such as Torrens, a fall in wages was predicted, given the narrow profit margins in most industries (Ibid.) These factors forced many women out of formal employment and into unregulated activity (Morris, 1986).

"A woman finds it difficult to earn her own living on account of the hostility of her male competitors" (Marcus, 1982). This outlines the importance of prejudicial male attitudes in determining women's access to paid work. Humphries calls this the social-control hypothesis, adding that it allowed all family members to work (as financial reasons necessitated) whilst maintaining the segregation of the sexes. Her index on the segregation of workplaces does appear to support the thesis that women were confined to certain jobs within industries, and that this worsened over time (Humphries, 1987). Women had always worked in the pre-industrial period, mainly in domestic industry, where production was based round the family unit. Moving into the 19th century, their role became much less clearly defined and women tried to move into all areas of employment. This raised new issues about the interaction between men and women. It was the working of women in public that was a particular problem for many in society, and the notion of a family wage was constructed to encourage women to stay at home, supported by their spouses (Pennington and Westover, 1989) making marriage the ultimate aim for women (Butler, 1979). The belief that the labour market had a fixed number of positions meant that a fear built up that cheap female labour that could replace men (Hunt, 1981). The unions are perhaps the best example of a body who played on the fear of

poverty in society (which had become more widespread with industrialisation), advising married women to stay at home and avoid stealing jobs from men, who were assumed to have families to support. Women were encouraged to enter only occupations that were perceived to require domestic and nurturing qualities, such as teaching and nursing (Lown, 1990), while domestic service was sometimes held up as the optimal job for women. There was a certain amount of hypocrisy in this as it was tacitly recognised that the ideal of the family wage did not exist, and so women and children were never fully prohibited from the workplace, only from higher wages thus only men were truly protected (Nardinelli, 1980). This was seen even in the work of Engels, who belonged to a movement that would later advocate women's liberation, as he recounts the story of a Lancashire man who was reduced to housework, while his wife worked in a local factory (Engels, 1993). This echoes the words of a deputation to Sir Robert Peel regarding the Ten Hours Act, when they described women's work as "an inversion of the order of nature and of Providence" (Hollis, 1979) Contemporary feminists railed against these notions, arguing that "this degradation of women is simply the accident of a new social order that has not yet righted itself" (Marcus, 1982) society would eventually remember that men and women had worked side by side, for equal pay, in the pre-industrial era. I believe that attitudes were important in affecting women's employment decisions; but that this has been over-stated by feminist historians, imposing their own paradigm on the nineteenth century.

In 1879, Emma Paterson described how there was a "great disinclination" among women for domestic service, condemning it as "at the best but a kind of slavery" (Golby, 1986). This may be contrasted with the perception of domestic service earlier in the century, which was summed up by Edward Higgs when he stated that domestic service was relatively well paid during this period, and was advocated by some as the optimal profession for young girls: "as an improving and educative process" (Higgs, 1986). The apparent diminution in popularity of domestic service, which was born out in the figures above, may have been due to changes in how working-class women perceived it. This may be explained by the fact that institutions were sending most of their young girls into domestic service, thus diminishing its respectability (Marcus, 1982). It may be concluded that only women with no alternative employment available, such as rural girls who migrated to the city, were attracted to domestic service in the later period. There are other explanations for the drop in the proportion of women being engaged as servants in this era (one reason given is that middle-class demand for servants had fallen off). This is unlikely, as real incomes were rising at the time, so much so that domestic

tasks had been contracted out to laundries, bakeries etc.[5] A more plausible explanation is that even the increase in wages was not sufficient to compensate women for the long hours and lack of freedom of a domestic servant. This example demonstrates the way in which perceptions changed over time and how this may partly explain why some occupations gained relative to others as employers of women, up to 1914.

Female activists of the day blamed the failure of women to organise effectively and bargain with employers for the erosion of wages. In part, this may have been due to apathy, as the power of the male unions was perceived as too great to be overcome. Some women even supported the notion of women staying out of the labour market and allowing men to take the available employment, as long as they could earn a family wage and thus keep the family from impoverishment. One instance of this occurred in 1853, when wives went out on strike with the Preston mule spinners, demanding a family wage for the men that would permit their wives to stay at home (Roberts, 1988). This undoubtedly had an adverse effect on women's wages as it sent a signal to employers that women did not deserve a full wage. *The Girl's Own Paper* spoke out against married women accepting low paid work for these reasons, as this pushed down the rates for single women trying to support themselves, but there was still no mobilisation of women behind this (Pennington and Westover, 1989). Beatrice Webb said that women did more damage to themselves than men, in the labour market, due to the lack of solidarity (Hollis, 1979). Perhaps though, this is simply a further sign that the working-classes did not wish to mobilise as a political entity, which was recognised by the *Pall Mall Gazette* during the depression years of the 1880s, when middle-class Socialists were attempting to rally the workers, in claiming that "they do not want revolution, they want a job" (Jones, 1971).

Female employment could not only have been determined by ideological and sociological factors. Supply and demand for labour and for goods undoubtedly played their part. The casual and seasonal trades in the Victorian era, with their fluctuations in demand, depended on "a abundance of the unskilled, 'degraded', or inefficient labour" (Ibid). Due to the barriers to entry to many trades, home working was often their only option and employers were eager to tap into a plentiful, immobile and un-unionised workforce (Pennington and Westover, 1989). The *laissez-faire* system that prevailed in nineteenth-century Britain became increasingly competitive over time, as other countries caught up with British development and began to challenge their firms for markets abroad. This created a constant downward pressure on wages, which was compounded by the nature of home working. It

[5] West mentions how "man has invaded woman's sphere" in setting up these service industries that are replacing the live-in domestic servant (Marcus, 1982).

involved information asymmetries in that the employer could not directly observe the employee at work, making it difficult to determine productivity and easier for workers to embezzle raw materials (Bythell, 1978). Unskilled female labour was particularly abundant because of institutional barriers to women acquiring skill, as unions controlled access to apprenticeship. The expectation that women would look after children and any elderly parents also prevented many from taking up full-time jobs outside the home. The supply of unskilled labour between ages 20 and 30 was pushed out by the tremendous amount of rural-urban immigration among these age groups (Jones, 1971). This compounded the unprecedented explosion in the population, which had produced a surplus of women.[6] The new Poor Law of 1834 ensured that all women had to work, unless they had an independent fortune or a husband. There was no subsidisation of meagre wages as there had been previously- only a place in an unpleasant workhouse for those on the extreme margins of society. In order to avoid the fate of the workhouse, men and women worked long hours for a low return, often in their own homes, in an effort to make enough to subsist that Mayhew frequently mentions this in his interviews (Thompson and Yeo, 1971). As Mayhew pointed out: "there are so many to work at it that one will under work the other" (Ibid) - with such a glut of labour, workers will be so desperate as to undercut each other.

The Courtauld silk factory provides the contradiction to the norm of employer hostility to female factory labour.[7] Technology had arrived early in the textile industry, as far back as 1720, and factories had been depending on the inexpensive labour of women and children since that time. Indeed, the 1851 census shows more women working in the silk industry than men (Lown, 1990) Courtauld wanted to keep employing women but were caught in the "ideological crossfire" with those who were offended by the notion of females working outside the home and in supposed unwomanly activities. They were firmly opposed to the Factory Acts, which made their female employees relatively more expensive, as women were their employees of choice replacing them with men would not improve efficiency. Thus, in some areas, women were the workers of choice in the formal factory setting.

These points have highlighted the negative aspects of the story of female employment up to 1914. There were some positive outcomes, as women were forced to search for new areas of work and some were aided by the widening educational opportunities after 1870. The emergence of the consumer society created a service sector that employed a growing number of women in the latter half of the 19th

[6] It is suggested that there is an excess of 405,00 women over twenty in Britain in 1851, by W.R. Greg, in 'Why are women redundant?' *National Review*, April 1862 (Hollis, 1979).
[7] This is the subject of Lown's (1990) investigation into women's employment.

century, as shop assistants and personal aides to the social elites. Admittedly, many of the more interesting job opportunities became available only for the relatively more educated middle-class, who were still only a small proportion of the total female population at work by 1911. The proportion of working women who were employed in the professions went up by almost 5% between 1841 and 1911, though they were engaged in a narrow range of activities (Mitchell, 1998). This increase reflects both women's increased desire to move into these new avenues of work (Zimmeck, 1986) and the need to find a means of subsistence for the surplus of middle class women. It is interesting to note that where women replaced men in these sectors, the pay and conditions associated with the job often became devalued as more women entered. Zimmeck (Ibid) emphasised this, explaining how individual clerical tasks became associated solely with either men or women, with women often consigned to the more repetitive, mechanical parts of the job, leaving the more creative aspects to men. This is a useful example of the crucial influence that ideology and social norms had in Victorian society.

Many myths have been dispelled in this project. Contrary to popular belief, women had been an integral part of the workforce before industrialisation and continued to play a significant role afterwards, despite the frictions in the market, which led to a movement among the male unions and even officials, to sideline their function. Official participation rates of married women fell dramatically from 1851 to 1911, by 15% in fact (Hunt, 1981). In many cases, continuing in employment could only be done in the homework sector, so that records of the level of female employment are in fact understated. As the 19th century came to a close, the plight of women in home working received much public attention and led to an improved organisation of the female labour force, together with governmental enquiries into the problem. That women were more impoverished than men was well documented by Charles Booth in the 1880s and later by Bowley and Rowntree (Ibid.) The fact that women's wages were consistently a half to two thirds less than those of men up to 1914 cannot have helped (Pennington and Westover, 1989). By the outbreak of the First World War, social reformers were calling on male and female workers to unite and use their joint bargaining power to effect changes in conditions and pay for all. During the war itself, a revolutionary change came over the labour market out of the sheer necessity of wartime conditions. Constrained supply of adult males led to an unprecedented rise in the formal employment of women, due to processes that had been resisted for almost a century, such as dilution.[8] In some areas, such as clerical work, women had asserted their dominance before the cessation of war, while in most manufacturing jobs, women were ousted, as one worker has described, "On the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month the Armistice was

[8] For a full explanation see Horne,

announced. We were all stopped, just like that, no redundancy, nothing" (Griffiths, 1991). While the position of working women during the nineteenth century can be contrasted to that which prevailed during the 1914-1918 War, there is obviously much continuity. It would take another 40 years of the reform of attitudes and another world war, before married women were actively welcomed back into the workforce.

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