

It is accepted that the number of women in paid work is much larger now than it was at the start of the twentieth century, but when did this transformation take place and how significant have been the changes in women's working opportunities? Here Walsh and Wrigley compare the principal developments in the female labour force in the USA and the UK since 1945. They focus on the persistence of a gender wage differential and greater reliance on part-time work by women and discuss whether these reflect continued discrimination against women in the workplace or whether women have succeeded in securing flexible employment conditions as a matter of choice.

Womanpower: The Transformation of the Labour Force in the UK and the USA Since 1945

A major feature of Western labour forces since the Second World War has been increasing participation in paid employment by women. This article examines this transformation in the labour forces of the United Kingdom and the United States of America, focusing on four issues: we seek to identify how and why female employment patterns have altered; we consider whether similar changes occurred in male employment; and we seek to assess the effects of these changes.

'Womanpower' was the term generally used during the Second World War by employers and US government officials to describe the influx of female workers helping to run the civilian and military economy. In the absence of men, women were considered a temporary source of reserve labour. As such they comprised 33 per cent of civilian workers in the US and 39 per cent of civilian workers in the UK. At the end of the war women started to leave the labour force, but their participation rates still remained higher than pre-war levels. Between 1940 and 1945, the number of women in employment in the US increased by 5.14 million (36 per cent); by 1946 the number of women in work had fallen, but it was still 2.68 million (19 per cent) higher than it had been in 1940. In Britain there were 974,000 more women employed in July 1945 than there had been in July 1939 (an increase of 22 per cent), and in July 1946 there were still 581,000 (13 per cent) more women working than there had been before the war.

Throughout the twentieth century, women's participation in the labour force continued to grow. The war confirmed and highlighted this trend, but the female participation rate and numbers of women workers accelerated sharply in the second half of the century. By the end of the twentieth century, women were largely expected to work. 'Womanpower' increasingly came to mean that women would make a major and permanent contribution to national economies.

For comparative history to have value, substantial similarities must exist between the countries being compared. In the case of the UK and the USA, during the twentieth century, economic, social and cultural similarities were evident. The two economies were interlinked as major players in the international economy, especially following the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944 and attempts to liberalise trade after 1945 (embodied, for example, in the discussions contributing to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, GATT). Later, the extensive financial deregulation that took place on both sides of the Atlantic during the early 1990s intensified economic interdependence even further.

In both economies there was also growing emphasis, from at least 1980, on securing greater 'labour flexibility'. Systems of social protection became weaker, working hours in many jobs increased, and pay differentials between skilled and unskilled workers widened. Women dominate this 'flexible labour force'. Whether they have been victims or beneficiaries of such flexibility has been the subject for lively debate [6, 10, 13].

Dr. Margaret Walsh is Reader in American Economic and Social History at the University of Nottingham. Her recent published work has focused on transport, business and women's history. She is also editor of the *Labour History Review*. Professor Chris Wrigley is currently Head of the School of History and Art History at the University of Nottingham. He has published extensively in the fields of labour and industrial relations.

We begin by providing some data on women and work for the UK and the USA since 1945 in order to identify the major changes in workforce composition and consider whether developments observed for the UK and the USA are common to advanced Western economies.

Female Labour Force Participation: the facts

In both the UK and the USA the number of women in the labour force increased greatly during the second half of the twentieth century. Between 1950 and 1990 the number of female workers in the USA rose from 16.4 million to 56.6 million (rising to 60.8 million in 1998), while in the UK the increase was from 7.1 million to 22.9 million. Between the last pre-war census and the latest for each country the characteristics of the typical female employee have also changed: the young single girl has ceased to dominate the female workforce, and there is greater participation by older women who, often, are married.

This increase in female labour force participation coincided with a decline in male paid employment. In 1956 women formed 25 per cent of the American labour force; by 1994 they comprised 45 per cent. In the UK comparable figures show women increased their share of the UK labour force from 31 to 42 per cent. According to census data between

fell back in the 1990s. Women dominated this part-time labour force, consistently supplying 68 per cent of part-time workers in the USA and at least 80 per cent in the UK (see Table 2).

In the USA, from the 1970s through to the 1990s, about a quarter of women in paid employment worked part-time (defined as working less than 35 hours each week) compared to about 10 per cent of working men. In the UK more women worked part time: a third were in part-time jobs in 1971 and this had increased to 46 per cent in 1993/4, slipping only slightly to 45 per cent in 1997. In contrast, just 6.8 per cent of UK men were in part-time employment in 1993/4. Women also accounted for most of those who carried out paid work in their homes (62 per cent in the USA in 1985 and 70 per cent in the UK in 1997). In both countries women formed the majority amongst temporary workers and multiple job-holders. It is clear then that women have been the core of 'the flexible labour force', but what explains these employment

Table 1: Women in the Labour Force as a Percentage of Women of Working Age (15-64), 1955-1995

Country	1955	1965	1975	1985	1995
Austria	50.5 ^a	56.2 ^b	47.6	51.0	62.3
Belgium	33.6	38.0	42.9	49.3	56.1
Denmark	48.9	49.3	63.5	74.5	73.6
France	45.8	46.1 ^c	51.1	56.0	59.4
Germany	48.5	49.0	50.8	52.9	61.7
Italy	27.4	31.0	34.6	41.0	43.3
Japan	61.3	55.8	51.7	57.1	62.2
Netherlands	29.1	-	31.0	40.9	59.0
UK	45.9	51.0	55.1	60.5	66.6
USA	38.3	44.4	53.2	64.0	70.7

Sources:

OECD, Manpower Statistics, 1950-62, Paris, 1963; OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 1959-70, Paris, 1972; OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 1965-85, Paris, 1987; OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 1969-80, Paris, 1982; OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 1978-98, Paris, 2000.

Notes: ^a 1951; ^b 1961; ^c 1968

patterns?

Explaining changes in the post-war labour market

An important factor in the expansion in female employment after 1945 was the general state of the labour market. Between 1945 and 1973 - the 'golden age' of the international economy - there was unusually high aggregate demand for labour, with worker shortages more often a problem than unemployment. A 1965 government survey noted, 'It has been apparent for some years that the only major source of potential recruits to the labour force in Great Britain consists of married women' [12]. In the harsher economic and political climates which prevailed in the UK and the USA during the 1980s and 1990s, employers demanded a 'flexible labour force' and women were much more likely than men to supply this flexibility by agreeing to work part-time and for lower pay [7, 13].

However, supply-side factors also affected female employment. There has been a marked increase in the participation of older women. In both the UK and the USA prior to the Second World War, female employment was largely the province of those under 30 years of age. By contrast in the 1980s and 1990s, the largest groups of working women were aged 40-49 in the USA and 35-55 in the UK. Women expected to be in the labour force for a longer part of their lives. Increasingly they also expected to be working mothers. In the USA, in 1950, 33 per cent of mothers of teenage children worked; by 1992 this had risen to 65 per cent. Furthermore, mothers with children under school age also worked. In 1960, 20 per cent of such mothers were in the labour force; by 1991 this had risen to 58 per cent [21]. In the UK in 1997 only 23 per cent of women with dependent children (defined as those under 16 or those unmarried aged 16-18 and in full-time education) held full-time employment (defined as more than 30 hours each week), but more and more were working part-time.

The proportion of women in part-time work is one notable difference between the UK and the USA. Why did this vary so much? The contrasts in part-time participation rates might be explained to some extent by the differing definitions of part-time. That said, they might also

Table 2: Part Time Work, 1983-1998

Year	Part-time work as a percentage of all employment		Women as a percentage of part-time workers	
	USA	UK	USA	UK
1983	15.4	18.4	68.0	89.3
1985	20.4	19.7	68.5	87.1
1990	22.6	20.1	68.2	85.1
1995	14.1	22.3	68.7	81.8
1998	13.4	23.0	68.0	80.4

Source: OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 1978-1995, Paris, 1999.

1950 and 1980 the percentage of males of working age in employment in the USA fell from 89 to 78, whereas the percentage of women in employment rose from 35 to 60 per cent. In the UK the picture was similar for 1951 to 1981: the percentage of males of working age in employment declined from 88 to 78 per cent, while for women there was an increase from 42 to 58 per cent. Table 1 shows similar trends among most Western and Central European countries, although in Japan the rise in female participation is apparent only from the mid 1970s.

The characteristics of female and male employment have often differed, but this is especially notable when hours of work are examined (see Table 2). In recent years, part-time work has become steadily more important in the UK, with almost a quarter of all employees working part time by 1998. In the USA, part-time work grew during the 1980s, but

reflect varied work cultures. In the USA there has been a longer tradition of full-time work than in the UK: those with education or training have purchased child-care and household cleaning services, while those who are semi-skilled or unskilled with young children have worked flexible 'full-time hours' around their partners' employment.

Part-time work, like homework and temporary work, is heavily gender-specific. Why has there been such a growth in female part-time work? The demand-side answer often emphasises employers' desires to have fewer core workers and more flexible and less expensive workers whose employment is easier to regulate according to business needs. Averitt [2] has suggested that part-time employees have proved especially attractive to small firms. But, for the workers, such employment has entailed lower pay, less or no social welfare entitlements (including pension provisions) and little or no job security [8].

There has been some controversy as to whether such part-time work is indicative of women being exploited or whether it reflects women's success in securing a type of work that meets their needs. Prominently, Catherine Hakim supports the latter interpretation in the context of Europe [10, 11], arguing:

'At the end of the twentieth century the majority of women still regard themselves as secondary earners who are financially dependent on another person, or the state, and who are working to supplement but not to replace this other source of income. In contrast, virtually all men are expected to be primary earners throughout their life, whether they like it or not, and to support not only themselves, but also a family' [11, p.136].

Her view has been acknowledged as providing a true, but insufficient, explanation of the differences in male and female employment patterns. Rosemary Crompton argues that gender division of labour has also stemmed from other factors, including various structural constraints on women's opportunities [6]. In the US a similar debate has taken place [5].

Has part-time work been 'dead-end' employment or has it, for many, formed a bridge between childcare and full-employment? In 1981, more than half of the mothers in Britain who returned to paid employment did so as part-timers. Hence, for many women, such employment came to be associated with the life-cycle stage of motherhood. In contrast, part-time work tended to be accepted at the beginning or near the end of a man's working life. When employers seek flexibility from male workers overtime, shift-work or seasonal work tends to be varied [3].

Occupational segregation

There has been similar controversy over the occupational characteristics of female employment and the persistence of the gender gap in pay. Women workers tend to have been located in a relatively narrow range of occupations and also in the lower status posts within firms - characteristics termed horizontal and vertical segregation [10, 14, 15]. Table 3 shows that, in both the UK and the US, women dominate the retail, clerical, health and teaching sectors, but are greatly

underrepresented in professional and managerial jobs. In spite of equal opportunities legislation and some changes in social attitudes, much still needs to be done before equality of opportunity and pay is achieved. Why has job segregation remained so robust?

One argument has suggested that women suffer because society tends to undervalue female skills and male patterns of work are assumed to be the norm [17]. Hakim is critical of this view, citing pharmacy as an example of an occupation in which highly educated professional women were free from discrimination. She suggests that, 'Workers who give priority to familial responsibilities will inevitably prefer jobs offering convenience factors over jobs offering high pay and promotion prospects,

and they are unlikely to seek management positions which often do not have well-defined limits to responsibilities and working hours' [11]. There is no concept here of moving towards a symmetrical cultural norm in which family responsibilities are an integral part of both male and female employment patterns: women have had to adopt and adapt to male models [20]. Even when educational achievement has enabled women to pursue high-grade managerial and professional careers successfully, these have frequently been in the so-called 'feminine' or 'soft' sectors such as catering, retailing and the health services.

Semi-skilled and unskilled women with little investment in human capital cluster into 'pink collar' or 'clean' work in offices, financial institutions, or retailing. The service sector offers most employment opportunities to women, but, unlike workers in manufacturing, who are predominantly male, service workers have not benefited greatly from strong trade union bargaining. Furthermore, since unskilled workers tend to marry other unskilled workers, a double income is typically required in order for the family to survive. This model for the employment of working-class women may

therefore underpin broader economic inequalities in society so that skilled workers have much more comfortable living standards than the unskilled who often live in poverty.

Occupational segregation is even more distinctive amongst workers from the ethnic minorities who suffer double discrimination due to their being both female and non-white. There has been a long history of segregated ghettos within the American female workforce; this pattern has emerged more recently within the UK, but has not been so strongly marked because the influx of non-white immigrants here has largely overlapped with equal opportunities legislation. Minority workers in both countries have been treated with considerable disrespect. White men generally earned most, followed by men of other races and ethnicities; white women come third, with minority women at the bottom of this hierarchy.

Wage and unemployment rates offer some evidence for this type of discrimination. In the USA, if Euro-American women's median incomes are set as the base level at 100, even after years of equal opportunities legislation, African American women rate only 87, Chicana (Mexican-American) women 85, Island Puerto Rican women 52 and US Puerto

Table 3: Occupational Segregation

a) The principal employers of women in the U.S.A. (1998)

Occupation	Women as % of all workers
Secretaries	98.4
Receptionists	95.5
Bookkeepers	93.0
Registered Nurses	92.5
Nursing Aides	89.0
Elementary School Teachers	84.0
Waitresses	78.3
Cashiers	78.2
Sales Workers	68.3
Sales Supervisors & Proprietors	40.0
Managers & administrators	29.8

Source: US Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 20 Leading occupations of Employed Women, 1998 Annual Average, Washington DC, 1999

b) The principal employers of women in the UK (1997)

Occupation	Women as % of all workers
Service Industries	86.0
Health Associates (Nurses & Midwives)	89.0
Clerical & Secretarial	75.0
Personal & Protective Services	66.0
Teaching	63.0
Sales	62.0
Professional & Managerial	32.0

Source: Labour Market Trends, 1998

Rican women 83 by comparison [19]. In 1987, whilst the unemployment rate for all US women was 6.2 per cent, for white women it was 5.2, for Hispanic women 8.9, and for African American women 13.2 per cent. In the UK in 1996, unemployment amongst white women was 6.4 per cent but was 17 per cent for black Caribbean and almost 11 per cent for Indian women; unemployment was 15 per cent amongst ethnic minority women as a whole

Some effects of ‘Womanpower’

During the post war years up to the mid 1970s governments, trade unions and women’s networks sought to advance women’s employment opportunities by legislative reform, improved educational opportunities and group activism. Historians and social scientists continue to debate which of these three pathways has had most impact on women, especially white women [4, 18]. Certainly legislation focusing on minimum pay, equal pay, civil rights and access to education strengthened an anti-discrimination ethos and, in the USA, pointed to affirmative action as a means to achieve equity. But, these measures would not have been passed without pressure from the feminist movement. By the 1980s many American training and educational barriers had fallen and women were found in a broader range of occupations [9]. The gender gap in pay too witnessed some notable narrowing (see Table 4): in both the USA and the UK, women’s average weekly earnings rose from just over 60 per cent of average male earnings in the late 1970s to around 75 per cent by the later 1990s. Affirmative action policies appeared to be having some impact [4, 13]. Nevertheless, these averages mask major difference in age, education and ethnicity: there was still a ‘glass ceiling’ in white-collar jobs and continued crowding of women into unskilled and semi-skilled jobs.

Table 4: The Gender Gap in the USA and the UK
(Hourly & weekly earnings of women as a percentage of men’s)

a) United States

Year	Hourly	Weekly
1979	64.1	62.5
1990	77.9	71.9
1996	81.2	75.0

b) United Kingdom

Year	Hourly	Weekly
1970	63.7	53.7
1976	73.5	64.3
1981	73.0	65.0
1990	76.0	68.0
1999	80.9	73.8

Sources: US Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau, *Women’s Earnings as Percent of Men’s, 1979-1996*, Reports Series P-60, Selected Issues (Washington DC April 1998) and U.K. *Annual Abstract of Statistics*, 1972, 1978, 1983, 1992 and 2000 editions.

Conflicting pressures make it too difficult to predict whether the position of women within the labour force will continue to advance at this more recent rate. Renewed economic liberalism in both countries since the early 1980s eroded some of the legal security for employees that had benefited women, but improvements in education and training for women, already evident in the data for the 1980s, might continue to diminish the gender gap [18]. Growing numbers of women in British trade unions may also continue to exert pressure for change as these institutions adjust their structures and policies, albeit reluctantly [21]. In the UK, at least, union organisation has helped to reduce the numbers in low pay and, according to one recent academic study, has helped to narrow the gender gap by 3 per cent [16].

But, cultural attitudes in both countries suggest that much more remains to be done. The issue of child-care is symptomatic of resistance to women obtaining full working equality [13]. Whether single or living

with a partner, mothers still tend to assume primary responsibility for children’s welfare and this is a decision deemed to be private. The absence of adequate publicly supported childcare and the resilience of traditional male attitudes towards domestic responsibilities have retarded women’s abilities to develop their full potential as productive workers, and may well do so in the foreseeable future.

References:

- [1] **T. L. Amott and J.A. Matthaei**, *Race, Gender and Work. A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States* (Boston : South End Press, 1991)
- [2] **R. T. Averitt**, *The Dual Economy: The Dynamics of American Industry Structure* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988)
- [3] **V. Beechey and T. Perkins**, *A Matter of Hours: Women, Part-Time Work and the Labour Market* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987)
- [4] **J. K. Blackwelder**, *Now Hiring. The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 1997)
- [5] **D. S. Cobble**, *Women and Unions. Forging a Partnership* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1993)
- [6] **R. Crompton**, *Women and Work in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)
- [7] **E. Drew and R. Emereck**, ‘Employment, flexibility and gender’ in **E. Drew, R. Emereck and E. Mahon**, *Women, Work and the Family in Europe* (London: Routledge, 1998)
- [8] **C. Fagan and J. O’ Reilly**, ‘Conceptualising part-time work: the value of an integrated comparative perspective’, in **J. O’ Reilly and C. Fagan**, *Part-Time Prospects* (London: Routledge, 1998)
- [9] **C. Goldin**, *Understanding the Gender Gap. An Economic History of American Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)
- [10] **C. Hakim**, *Key Issues in Women’s Work* (London: Athlone Press, 1996)
- [11] **C. Hakim**, *Social Change and Innovations in the Labour Market* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)
- [12] **A. Hunt**, *A Survey of Women’s Employment, 2 vols.* (London: HMSO, 1965)
- [13] **J. Jacobsen**, ‘Gender Aspects of the Economy’ in **G. Thompson** (ed), *The United States in the Twentieth Century. Markets* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2nd ed., 2000)
- [14] **A. A. Kemp**, *Women’s Work: Degraded and Devalued* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994)
- [15] **A. Kessler-Harris**, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982)
- [16] **D. Metcalf, K. Hansen and A. Charlwood**, *Unions and the Sword of Justice* (London: Centre for Economic Performance, LSE, 2000)
- [17] **T. Rees**, *Women and the Labour Market* (London: Routledge, 1992)
- [18] **US Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau**, *Time of Change: 1983 Handbook on Women Workers* (Washington DC, 1983)
- [19] **US Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau**, *1993 Handbook on Women Workers: Trends and Issues*, (Washington DC, 1994)
- [20] **M. Walsh**, ‘Women’s Place in the American Labour Force, 1870-1995’, *History*, 82 (1997), pp. 563-81.
- [21] **C. J. Wrigley**, ‘Women in the Labour Market and in the Unions’ in **J. McIlroy, N. Fishman and A. Campbell** (eds.), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, 1945-79*, Vol. 2 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

For Further reading, see [1] [4] [6] and [10]