

WOMEN POST OFFICE WORKERS IN BRITAIN: THE LONG STRUGGLE FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR II

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In Britain during the Second World War, the Post Office constituted the single largest employer of women. Historically, the Post Office, like many other employers, had discriminated against women. During World War I, shortages of male labor had resulted in some opportunities for women at the Post Office, but the improvement had neither been comprehensive nor enduring. Unlike World War I, World War II, however, proved to a real turning point in the Post Office's personnel practices. By the end of the Second World War, while the Post Office still did not treat women workers completely equally (persisting, for instance, in gender-biased pay practices), management nevertheless had made strides in their treatment and perception of women workers. Post Office executives increasingly perceived women on the payroll not as temporary wartime employees, but as permanent employees, who would be just as essential in peacetime as in war.

For much of its early existence, the Post Office in Britain was not a welcoming place for women workers. For a long time, the institution resisted employing women, and when it did so (beginning in 1868), the Post Office initially hired women for lower pay and less desirable positions than men. The Post Office also maintained strict occupational segregation, hiring women mainly as telephonists and clerical workers, and denying women access to many other positions. In addition, abiding by the Marriage Bar for Civil Service workers, which had been introduced in the late nineteenth century, the Post Office did not employ married women.

Some critics at the time believed that the Post Office was a poor occupational choice for “respectable,” single women. For instance, on August 24, 1859, the *Morning Chronicle* derided the Post Office's employment of women as “a notorious and cancerous evil in our social system.” The newspaper lamented the fact that “so large a number of respectable and well to do young women...apply for not very tempting employment.”¹ As this comment indicates, in the nineteenth century (and continuing into the early

twentieth century), working conditions for women at the Post Office, including pay prospects, were not alluring.

The onset of World War I seemed to pose a momentous opportunity for women's roles at the Post Office to expand. Indeed, shortages in male labor enabled many women to be hired to perform jobs previously confined to men. The Civil Service suspended occupational segregation for the entire duration of the war. However, upon the cessation of hostilities in 1918, pre-war employment norms returned. Consequently, men at the Post Office reasserted their dominance in the skilled (and higher paid) areas such as Engineering. The Government tacitly approved the return to the status quo in the Post Office and elsewhere, maintaining the philosophy that returning soldiers should be able to reclaim their old positions. Many women in all fields, including postal operations, thus returned to the domestic sphere at the end of the war.

Notably, the Post Office did offer some women the ability to stay employed, provided they agreed to transfer to lower grade positions. Yet women employees' ability to take advantage of this diluted offer depended on several factors, including their marital status, as the Marriage Bar for Civil Service workers now was back in effect. Clearly, World War I proved not to be a permanent watershed for women workers making inroads at the Post Office.

Post Office Expansion in the 1930s and Preparations for World War II

In the mid 1930s, with the possibility of another world war looming, the Post Office again began to lose skilled men, as the Armed Forces requested the Post Office to release skilled staff for war purposes. As a result, women employees became increasingly important to the Post Office. Management actively endeavoured to retain existing female workers, and sought to recruit and train additional women for skilled tasks hitherto performed by men.

Coincident with the onset of war preparations, the Post Office experienced a sharp expansion of operations which also very much impacted the organization's gender hiring practices. The Post Office experienced growth especially in fields such as telegraphy, owing to the desire of both the Post Office and the Government to improve public communication services which had proven insufficient in some parts of the country during World War I and the interwar years. Compared to the beginning of the century, weekly trunk calls (calls requiring an operator for connection) increased by eleven million nationally. By the mid 1930s, the Post Office was fielding over 100 million more local calls weekly than in 1900, and experiencing a 180 percent increase in trunk calls made in the evening. This constituted the greatest increase in volume in the institution's history, prompting the Post Office to increase its staff from 1930 to 1935 by five thousand employees, approximately 40 percent of whom were women.² By 1935, the number of female counter clerks and telegraphists had increased by 81.3 percent from 1900. Moreover, the number of branch offices staffed wholly by men had fallen by 5.4 percent.³

78 Hiring additional women proved controversial. While Post Office

management defended the introduction of more women to these roles as a cost-saving device (as women earned less than their male counterparts), the Trades Union Congress argued that it was not profitable for the Government to employ more women if it meant that more men would be unemployed, since high male employment had been a major government aim.⁴

In 1935, two major developments improved women's Post Office employment opportunities. First, the demand for male labor in the Army Engineering section in anticipation of war paved the way for recruiting more women for telegraphic work. The introduction of voluntary enlistment in 1937 accelerated this trend. Second, wages agreements negotiated in the 1920s for permanent staff came to fruition, leading to the promotion of many women employees, and thus requiring more temporary staff to fill the resulting lower-level vacancies. In 1935, the Post Office recruited five thousand temporary clerks, all of whom were women.⁵

Formed in 1919, the Union of Post Office Workers (UPW) for years had campaigned to improve working conditions and salaries for both male and female workers.⁶ The UPW advocated for a higher standard of life for its members, increased recognition for the value of Post Office work, and equal pay for equal work. In 1935, the UPW formed a new committee, the Temporary Staffs Joint Committee, to represent temporary staff (who were mostly women) and help them negotiate for better wages and employment conditions. Temporary Post Office workers needed this assistance, as few were unionized and many feared publicly challenging management. Among the committee's demands was that all temporary staff should be entitled to overtime when working more than 44 hours per week, but the committee proved unsuccessful in negotiating such a concession.⁷

Meanwhile, in 1937, in response to growing international tensions, the Post Office rushed to prepare for a war-related drain of male workers. Influencing these preparations was the Whitley Council, also known as the Joint Industrial Council. Formed in 1919 on the suggestion of a government subcommittee chaired by J. H. Whitley, the Council aimed to represent employers and trade unions as well as to discuss such matters as wages, job security, technical education and better management. The Post Office Whitley Council had two components: the Official Side, comprising members of the Post Office management, and the Staff Side, comprising staff representatives. The Council's aim was to ensure a forum for the discussion of wages and working conditions. If an agreement were reached by both sides that their case was sufficiently strong for executive discussion, the Council would present it to the Government as a potential future policy. The Council's impact on the treatment of workers proved profound.⁸ Importantly, the Staff Side of the Post Office Whitley Council agreed that both men and women would be recruited and employed (albeit with discrimination) on the full range of duties performed by the Post Office.⁹

Developments at the Post Office mirrored incremental gains for women happening elsewhere in the labor market. In 1938, Margaret Bondfield, former Minister of Labor and now chair of the Women's Group on Public Welfare,

noted that well-established gender distinctions and occupational segregation practices were being overhauled. As she approvingly commented, “women are being substituted for youths who are called up; and as the depletion of men proceeds, the women are learning men’s jobs. Already women are working side by side with men.”¹⁰ However, companies initially recruited women mainly for temporary employment positions which carried very few benefits. Temporary workers were ineligible for pensions and could be dismissed at any time.¹¹ In preparing to fill the void created by male conscription, the Post Office in 1938, like many companies, also envisioned hiring women on primarily a temporary basis. The employment of women on these terms would provide large budgetary savings for the Post Office, as women temporary employees would be paid lower wages than the men who vacated the same jobs for war.

World War II’s Impact on Women and the Post Office

Despite understanding that war would cause a major thinning of the employee ranks, the Post Office management did not foresee the extent of the loss of manpower that befell the organization in the war’s early stages. In the first week of war, the Post Office quickly lost fifteen percent of their staff to the Armed Forces.¹² Conscription, introduced on April 27, 1939, affected certain areas of the Post Office more than others, largely decimating the Engineering section, as the Army desperately needed these workers in order to maintain communication services. Although male labor at this stage of the war was still possible to recruit, many were unsuitable due to inadequate qualifications, advanced age, or other impediments.

Consequently, women in the Post Office became critically important, especially women employed in the Telegraphics department as smooth operations there were particularly vital to the war effort. The Government needed to be able to ensure effective communication with its Allies, and also among its own departments. Yet there was a shortage of even female telephonists, as many women had left their jobs for marriage, forced to forfeit their postal positions under the regulations of the Marriage Bar.¹³ In London in 1940, over fifty telephonists a week married, creating a large void which helped make the demand in London for telephonists the highest in the country.¹⁴ The press and the BBC assisted with issuing recruiting calls, but shortages remained.¹⁵

The Post Office desperately needed to replace women workers who departed, as management needed to maintain a wide array of services. At the outbreak of war, the organization’s responsibilities included 24,000 post offices, 52,000 call offices, 4,000,000 telephones, 17,500 motor vehicles, 25,000 bicycles and 88,000 postal boxes.¹⁶ Consequently, while management in the late 1930s had recruited additional women mainly as temporary, non-skilled replacements for conscripted men, by 1940, however, the Post Office began targeting women to work in skilled positions in areas previously confined to men, such as Engineering and Telegraphy. Management, however,

did not yet have a plan for long-term, permanent positions for women wartime workers; they seem to have viewed women's inclusion in these skilled areas as merely a stop-gap measure until they could redress the skills deficit among the male workforce caused by conscription.

Due to the severe wartime staff shortages, the Post Office implemented new, looser criteria to facilitate rehiring women who had left the organization, often for reasons of marriage or divorce. The Post Office re-evaluated its attitude towards divorced women's application for re-employment. Previously, in the pre-war period, due to the difficulties women encountered in obtaining divorces, and due also to the high burden of proof placed on women to demonstrate that they received no financial assistance from their former husbands, very few divorced women had their claims for re-employment approved.¹⁷ But the wartime need to attract labor led the Post Office to pay much more attention to the claimant's circumstances, and less strictly adhere to the Marriage Bar.¹⁸

In addition, many retired women (and also retired men) wishing to return to work temporarily suspended their pensions in accordance with the Superannuation Acts, which meant that their pensions would be frozen but no longer be paid for the duration they were re-employed by the Post Office. When they finally finished their employment with the Post Office (presumably, at war's end), they would then be able to reclaim their pensions.¹⁹

Due to inadequate pensions, many women sought alternative employment to supplement their pensions, or requested re-employment with the Post Office.²⁰ Women in the Post Office alerted the UPW to the unfairness of the low pensions that they received because of their lower pay, and emphasized that it was insufficient for them to sustain a good standard of living during retirement. The UPW received many complaint letters from widows of male Post Office workers and unmarried women. Recognizing the legitimacy of their grievances, the UPW declared that they wanted a better pension for all postal workers. In their Annual Conference in Blackpool in May 1939, the UPW proposed that pensions for women be increased, but the Post Office refused, citing lack of affordability.²¹

In the war's early stages, the Post Office was overly optimistic in projecting the extent to which men would still be able to fill skilled positions. For example, the Postmasters' Federation mistakenly believed that when temporary junior male staff (ranging in age from fourteen to seventeen) eventually reached their eighteenth birthdays, most would move into skilled areas, thereby reducing the Post Office's dependency on female labor.²² Like the Government, the Post Office did not envisage a lengthy war. Therefore, management erroneously predicted that boy messengers, after completing their apprenticeships, would provide a sufficient supply of skilled workers, rendering female labor in those positions unnecessary. But the war was prolonged, and the Government conscripted young men to fight.

The Government also conscripted skilled men such as Post Office engineers who the Army needed to provide key services. Initially, the Government had not regarded Post Office engineers as essential workers. These

engineers, however, crucially helped maintain the nation's communications after telephone equipment had been badly damaged by enemy bombing. Also, several Post Office engineers such as Tommy Flowers helped decipher the German "Enigma" code.²³ In the first two years of the war, the fact that the Post Office was not yet classified as an essential wartime industry meant that the organization suffered an acute drain of highly skilled workers. Staff could be transferred from the Post Office to other wartime industries with ease. Although the Government always had realized, at least to some extent, the Post Office's importance to the war effort, it was not until 1941, following the Post Office's critical role in maintaining communications during the Battle of Britain, did the Government fully appreciate this fact.²⁴

Trying to compensate for the wartime loss of manpower, the Post Office reduced its services. For example, the number of daily letter deliveries declined from four to three in London, from three to two in the towns, and from two to one in the rural areas.²⁵ Rural deliveries were now generally made in the afternoon every day with the exception of Sundays. To meet the needs of munitions firms and other firms working on urgent, war-related contracts, the Post Office introduced a limited "delivery to callers" service on Sundays.²⁶ The Post Office also reduced the number of daily mail collections, most notably retrenching on evening collections. While the resulting savings certainly helped to reduce pressure on the Post Office's staff, the organization could not retrench in areas that might hinder the war effort. The War Office viewed reducing the capacity of Telecommunications as particularly unwise; as officials understood, providing communication links for essential government business would be the key to winning the war.

Meanwhile, the Post Office aggressively reduced training costs and enacted other cost-saving measures. Shortening training times and closing costly District Office Postal Schools for postal and counter staff provided an annual saving of £35,000.²⁷ Yet despite curtailing services and striving to improve efficiency, the Post Office still struggled with insufficient staff levels. To try to fill the gap, management heightened the recruitment of temporary employees and part-time workers, many of whom were women.²⁸ By 1941, in the inner London area alone, the number of female telephone operators had increased to 1,559 from 1,278 in the pre-war period; in contrast, the number of men employed in the same capacity shrunk slightly from 883 to 837.²⁹ The reduction in the number of male telephone operators would have been more severe had it not been for the fact that the Post Office successfully employed many male telephone operators who were ineligible for conscription. As management contemplated hiring even more women workers, the Post Office Finance Committee warned that male workers, who presumably would feel threatened by being so outnumbered, might strongly resist any further increases in the proportion of female staff, unless they clearly understood that this was strictly a wartime measure.³⁰ However, the Committee's fears seem to have been misplaced, as few men objected to working alongside female colleagues. This did not mean, however, that male workers were yet widely in favor of women receiving equal pay for performing identical work.

As the war progressed, women postal workers increasingly assumed more responsibilities. Owing to wartime pressures, women needed to perform certain duties from which they previously had been exempt, such as night work. In December 1940, Staff Associations (comprising representatives from the UPW and the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries)³¹, representatives from the Postmasters' Federation and both sides of the Post Office Whitley Council discussed women's conditions of employment in the Post Office, and ratified a new agreement between the Postmasters' Federation and the Staff Associations. Henceforth, women employees would be subject to the full range of duties and the same hours (including night hours) as men.³² Management reluctantly undertook this measure. At first, the Post Office agreed that women should not be employed on night and certain other duties unless it was impossible to obtain the services of "suitable men"—defined as men possessing the requisite skills who had not been conscripted and who could work night shifts.³³ Yet the shortage of such "suitable men" meant that women became an integral part of the Post Office's night workforce. Management considered single women with no family commitments as ideal candidates for these shifts, although many women (both single and married) expressed concern to their UPW representatives and to the Post Office management about their safety at night. With the deepening of the staffing crisis, management was not particularly receptive to these worries, though they did agree to organize sleeping and billeting accommodations, if necessary, for staff working nights. Some women resigned, citing unfavorable working conditions. A few left under pressure from their mothers, who were unhappy about their daughters working night shifts.³⁴ Concerned about staff shortages, the Post Office, early in the war, requested temporary suspension of the Marriage Bar. The Post Office argued that suspension of the rule would help enable the Post Office to retain staff in areas vital for wartime communication, which would be "in the interest of the public service."³⁵ The Post Office's efforts with regard to the Marriage Bar were partially successful; the Treasury and the Post Office agreed to reconsider the Marriage Bar on a case-by-case basis. In practice, this meant that some married women were readmitted to their old roles, and others were recruited despite being married. However, they were only employed if they could prove that their personal circumstances warranted the necessity for employment, or if a local Postmaster could prove that sufficient shortages of male labor existed in his area to warrant the employment of even married women.

The Post Office Regional Directors, in several meetings with Treasury officials at the start of the war, were successful in persuading the Treasury to reconsider cases of married former Civil Service employees in accordance with the regulations of the 1934 Report of the Committee on Women's Questions. The report, which the Treasury had ignored in the interwar years, had stated: "Applications from women legally separated from or deserted by their husbands from whom they can obtain no support should be sympathetically considered on merits."³⁶ Consequently, the Post Office succeeded in retaining some women on the grounds of financial hardship or divorce. The Post

Office also re-employed widows who had insufficient means to support their families. Management also sympathetically considered the unfortunate cases of disappointed fiancés, who had resigned (as required) for marriage, only to experience the cancellation of their marriage plans. The Post Office's willingness to consider each case for re-employment on its individual merits represented a fairer approach to women's Post Office employment, but it was a move prompted largely by necessity. Without women workers, the Post Office would be unable to function.

By mid-1940, women were more visible in all areas of the Post Office. Recruitment drives during the war explicitly targeted women. After the initial recruitment drive, women constituted 22.61 percent of all Post Office workers, and the Post Office still needed many more employees.³⁷ In December 1940, in an unusual development, the Post Office asked its male workers in London to bring along their "wives, sweethearts, sisters and lady friends" to help deliver Christmas mail.³⁸ Predicting a considerable increase in letters and cards for the holiday season, the Post Office thus tried to ensure that all Christmas mail would be delivered on time.³⁹

That Christmas season, thousands of women offered their services at local post offices and employment exchanges.⁴⁰ By Christmas 1940, women workers were for the first time driving mail vans. Mrs. Furley of Ilford was the first woman appointed in the London Postal Region during Christmas 1940 to drive a Royal Mail van. Her employment in this capacity was significant for two main reasons. First, the Post Office hired her even though she was already married. Second, she collected and delivered letters and parcels, and performed the full range of duties previously performed by men. The Post Office shortly thereafter appointed four additional female drivers. The success of the initiative in Ilford, East London prompted the Postmasters' Federation to propose that women drivers be appointed in the northern London borough of Enfield.⁴¹

To improve the quality of the work being performed by new women employees, the Post Office began to provide more extensive training. In 1942, the Post Office re-established district office postal schools, which had been closed in 1940 as a cost-cutting initiative. In London, 3,600 women sorters and postwomen trained alongside their male colleagues, with training similar to that given to regular staff. It included lectures and practical instruction in all areas of Post Office work over a six week period. This training proved highly successful, with women on indoor sorting duties generally performing even more efficiently than their male counterparts. On average, women also performed mail deliveries more expeditiously than men, finishing their rounds more quickly (although women sometimes carried less mail than men, which distorted the statistics).⁴²

84 Due in part to ramped-up training efforts, the Post Office experienced productivity gains but these gains were insufficient to avert serious ongoing labor shortages, especially in London. Consequently, the importance of women to the Post Office—and the war effort—continued to increase. In September 1942 at the National Women's Conference organized by the Government,

Prime Minister Winston Churchill praised the wartime contributions of British women working in all fields, declaring that their valuable contributions had “definitely altered those social and sex balances which years of convention had established.”⁴³

While experiencing more opportunities and engendering more respect, women employees, including at the Post Office, still experienced gender bias with regard to pay. Concerned that they were being exploited for their cheap labor, female UPW members hoped that the union’s executive committee would campaign powerfully for equal pay throughout the Civil Service.⁴⁴ Yet the UPW, reluctant for patriotic reasons to agitate too aggressively for higher wages at a time of war, was not particularly successful in this respect. Therefore, at this stage of the war, although Post Office women’s responsibilities increased, their pay did not. In the Post Office, women only received 77.5 percent of the male wage.⁴⁵ The Treasury tried to justify the pay discrepancies by claiming that women postal workers possessed lower physical strength than men and therefore could not as effectively undertake such required physical duties as carrying mail sacks and moving heavy equipment.⁴⁶ This argument, however, became harder to maintain after women during the war demonstrated their ability to be as efficient and effective as men. Yet the pay discrepancies continued, prompting the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, established in 1944, to disapprovingly note that “even within the Civil Service darkness begins to descend in the special case of the Post Office...”⁴⁷

In early 1945, the UPW was already looking ahead toward the end of war, and trying to strategize accordingly. The UPW claimed that retaining women after the war would be easier if equal pay were granted immediately.⁴⁸ Post Office Director General Thomas Gardiner, though conceding that the case for equal pay appeared logical, noted that compensation changes carried serious implications. He claimed that women, even with the inequalities of pay, were better off than average male employees. Moreover, Gardiner argued that the implementation of equal pay, if it were used as a means to erase inequality, would be extremely complicated if it were to cater appropriately to both single and married women. In a letter to the Treasury, he suggested that such a system could set a dangerous precedent, requiring a “concomitant reorganization of the whole wage structure of the country, with the object of arriving at a common level appropriate to single men and women.”⁴⁹ In addition, he and other members of the Post Office Management who opposed equal pay for women workers further claimed that allowances would also be required for all staff, appropriate to their particular domestic situation, which would incur additional costs.⁵⁰

The Post Office estimated that the cost of increasing women’s pay to match men’s would be an additional £1,000,000 per year, including the costs of covering future pensions. The corresponding increase due to war bonuses would be an additional £450,000 a year. These calculations were based on the number of workers employed at the beginning of the war and included the increase in pay for women in grades where there was no corresponding male grade.⁵¹ These facts formed an important basis for the discussions relating to

the reconstruction of the Post Office after the war, and women's place in the organization.

Retaining Women after the War

Well before the end of World War II, the Post Office debated what to do about female employment after the war emergency had passed. The male-dominated management held a wide range of opinions about the best course of action, and some did not favor retaining women who were hired during the war. However, management could not ignore the invaluable skills of many women workers, and management also pragmatically realized that staff shortages were unlikely to disappear immediately after peace had been declared.

On May 1, 1944, representatives of the four Civil Service unions met with representatives from the Trades Union Congress and the Labor Party to discuss the employment of female telephonists after the war. They agreed that telephonists would work a 36 hour week after the war—a much more favorable working schedule than the wartime 56 hour week plus overtime.⁵² The reduction in hours, the Unions argued, would be feasible owing to reduced post-war demand for Post Office services. The full-scale introduction of automatic exchanges would also presumably reduce dependency on telephonists.

In the aftermath of Germany's surrender on May 7, 1945, Post Office management, after further consultations with the Whitley Council, gave all temporary telephonists three options: to transfer to full-time established grades (not necessarily as telephonists); to remain in their present positions with the same conditions of employment; or to accept part-time employment.⁵³

Negotiations between the Treasury and the Post Office Whitley Council identified three major problems with the existing employment structure and personnel practices. First, appointments to higher positions still favored men. To remedy this, the Post Office proposed several modifications, which were all accepted by the Government for implementation in the post-war period. This included abolishing the Marriage Bar, which would open up more opportunities for women. The Post Office also proposed changing the recruitment system by providing open competition, meaning that people could apply for these vacancies even if they were not already Post Office employees, and that these jobs were also open to men and women. Second, gender segregation of work still existed. If occupational segregation were left intact, opportunities would be as restricted as before the war. Notably, the majority of women who had transferred into previously male-only positions during the war had done so without established contracts, which left them vulnerable. When the war ended and soldiers returned home, many women now faced redundancy or were expected to return to their previous lower grade Post Office jobs. Third, the fine distinction between departmental and general clerical classes meant that men could reach a higher class, with higher pay, much more quickly than women, with opportunities for women to

progress severely hampered by their generally lower education levels. "Clerical classes" were confined largely to administrative jobs and lower grade Post Office work, whereas "departmental" positions included more skilled areas such as Engineering and Telegraphy. Due to wartime necessity, many women had been permitted to enter the "departmental" sections of the Post Office even though they lacked the appropriate academic background or training. It was questionable to what extent women might continue to have opportunities for "departmental" positions after the war. The Post Office Whitley Council proposed that salary scales for men and women be modified through changing the criteria (such as age and years of service) to help women reach the same point on the pay scale at the same age as men. Even though this would still not guarantee wage equality, merely a better salary, the Whitley Council hoped that this could be used as the platform for further improving and making the pay scales system more equal at a later date. However, contrary to the Council's hopes, salary scales for men and women remained separate, perpetuating and deepening these pay inequalities.⁵⁴

Many officials from the Post Office and the Treasury envisioned overhauling the employment recruitment system to ensure that the organization could pursue the best candidates for the job, irrespective of gender. However, some opposed opening up Post Office employment to this extent. Sir Stanley Angwin, a member of the Post Office Whitley Council, disliked the idea of women being employed to any appreciable extent in the Engineering section after the war. Contending that women had been employed only on minor engineering work during the war, Angwin asserted in 1944 that "It would be embarrassing from an administrative standpoint if their services were retained after the war, as they could not be fully interchangeable with men."⁵⁵ This typified the sexist views held by many of the older managers.

However, given the vital contributions of women to the war effort, it became almost impossible for Post Office leaders to resist the growing tide of opinion in favor of greater and more meaningful female employment. Also the strength of women workers was increasing, as reflected in the growing power of the women's trade unions and the higher numbers of unionized female staff. Post Office trade unions, especially the Union of Post Office Workers (UPW) and its journal *The Post Office Magazine*, strongly supported eradicating occupational segregation (to afford a stronger position to women in the Post Office) and also supported reintroducing Clerical Aggregation, where replacement staff would be recruited from among the same sex as those leaving their posts. Clerical Aggregation had been introduced in 1936, but had been suspended in 1939 owing to the shortage of male labor to replace those conscripted or promoted. The Post Office needed to decide whether it should revert to pre-war recruitment methods, and, if so, how it would be justified; or whether it would retain practices which had served them well during the war. Both the Post Office and the Treasury knew that reintroducing Clerical Aggregation would, owing to the gender composition of the Post Office in 1945, consolidate women's position in the Post Office at both clerical and managerial levels. For example, the number of female sorting clerks and

telegraphists increased annually from 1939 throughout the war by 20 percent, whereas the number of men shrank by 5 percent.⁵⁶ During the war, the number of men employed in supervisory positions in the London area declined from 2,464 to 2,349, with more women retaining their supervisory positions, with only a reduction of 10 female supervisors in this period from 230 to 220. The numbers of male supervisors outside the London area increased from 399 to 404, while the numbers of female supervisors fell just one, from 9 to 8.⁵⁷

Ultimately, the Post Office reintroduced Clerical Aggregation at the end of World War II, which signalled the strengthening of women's position in the Post Office for the post-war period, especially for those women employees during the war who had already reached management positions. The Post Office implemented the measure largely in response to the excellent work women had performed during the war, and also owing to a critical attitudinal change in which management no longer viewed women as primarily temporary employees.

Conclusion

Unlike their experiences after World War I, women at the Post Office after World War II generally achieved long-term improvements with regard to their status, position, and opportunities for advancement. The fact that women had proven themselves to be efficient and diligent workers in two world wars made it more difficult for the Government and the male Post Office management to continue denying women more established, permanent positions in the organization in a variety of capacities.

By the end of the war, Post Office management had abolished restrictions inhibiting women's entry into certain Post Office sections (such as Engineering). They now granted women maternity leave and an option to return to work after childbirth if they wished. Before the war, women would have needed to resign immediately after marriage due to the regulations of the Civil Service Marriage Bar. In 1946, the Civil Service finally abolished the Marriage Bar.

As was the case in World War I, labor shortages on the home front in World War II certainly brought women workers into the limelight. This time, due to a variety of factors including women's strong work performance, attitudinal changes, and pressure exerted from trade unions, women workers achieved sustained improvements to their rights and positions within the organization. Not just women benefitted; the Post Office and the country also benefitted from giving women workers more opportunities. For instance, during the war, with the help of more empowered women employees, the Post Office managed to keep intact its communications network, which proved vital to Britain's war effort.

88 Besides long overdue reforms in the Post Office's personnel practices, women experienced other important gains after the war. For example, beginning in 1948, with the passage of the British Nationality Act, women

could retain their nationality when they got married. But equal pay remained unresolved. In 1945, the feminist Six Point Group described the equal pay issue as “beyond all doubt, the major issue facing us today.”⁵⁸ In 1955, the Civil Service finally introduced the principle of equal pay, although its application continued to be debated for several decades. Therefore, while fully remedying gender inequalities in the workplace would take considerable additional time, by the end of World War II, women employees nevertheless enjoyed a stronger position in the Post Office than before the war, and one that would continue to improve.

NOTES

1. British Telecom Archives, London (hereafter abbreviated BT), “Women’s work in telecommunications,” *Morning Chronicle*, 24 August 1859.
2. *Post Office Magazine*, January 1936, Vol. 3, no. 1, 2.
3. British Postal Museum & Archive (hereafter abbreviated BPMA), POST 33/4033B, C.H. Walker, Association of Counter Clerks and Telegraphists, to Stanley Baldwin, September 28, 1934.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives* (Manchester, 1998), 2-5.
6. The UPW was created as the result of the amalgamation of the Postal and Telegraph Clerks’ Association, the Fawcett Association and the Postmen’s Federation, together with several smaller trade unions in the Post Office. Trade union leaders believed that workers could be better represented through the creation of one larger union, namely the UPW, to represent their case.
7. British Library Sound Archive, (hereafter abbreviated BLSA) F9728, Interview with Sylvia Goaman.
8. For further details on the Civil Service Whitley Council system, see numerous works by Rodney Lowe, including “Bureaucracy triumphant or denied? The expansion of the British Civil Service, 1919–1939,” *Public Administration*, Vol. 62, no. 3, 291–310; “Welfare Legislation and the Unions during and after the First World War,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 25, no. 2 (June., 1982), 437-441; and “The Failure of Consensus in Britain: The National Industrial Conference, 1919-1921,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 21, no. 3 (September, 1978), 649-675. See also Pat Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State*, 2nd edition (London, 1996), 139.
9. The Women’s Library (hereafter abbreviated WL), London Metropolitan University, 6NCS/1/A/6, Post Office Liaison Committee, December 16, 1935.
10. Margaret Bondfield quoted in Peggy Scott, *British Women in War* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1944), 159.
11. BPMA, POST 69/10, Christmas Postal Traffic and Staff, 24 February, 1939.
12. BPMA, POST 56/20, *The Post Office Went to War*, 5.
13. If they had completed at least five years of service, women received a marriage gratuity after leaving for marriage, but even then, they were not eligible for a pension.

14. BPMA, POST 56/99, Post Office appeals to its married ex-Telephonists, October 29, 1942.
15. BPMA, POST 56/22, An Account of the Work of the Post Office during the Second World War by Sir Thomas Gardiner, Director General of the Post Office, 1936-45.
16. BPMA, POST 56/20, *The Post Office Went to War*, 5.
17. BPMA, POST 121/341 details the Post Office's official attitude towards divorce.
18. BPMA, POST 1/866, Re-employment during a national emergency of pensioners and married women who were formerly established civil servants, April 1, 1939.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (hereafter abbreviated IWM), 20305/3, Interview with Sylvia Joan Clark.
21. BPMA, POST 1/866, Re-employment during a national emergency of pensioners and married women who were formerly established civil servants, April 1, 1939.
22. Post Office staff could be permanently employed when they were eighteen years old, and this was the hope of the Postmasters' Federation—the organization representing all Postmasters.
23. For further details, see IWM, 18332: Interview with Tommy Flowers, 1998.
24. BPMA, POST 56/110, Man and Woman Power: General Review, December 9, 1942.
25. BPMA, POST 56/110, Appendix to Minutes of Regional Directors Conference, December 9, 1942.
26. BPMA, POST 56/152, Maintenance of the British Civilian Postal Services (undated).
27. BPMA, POST 56/9, Finance Committee: Review of Economy Proposals, October 3, 1939.
28. BPMA, POST 56/152, Maintenance of the British Civilian Postal Services (undated).
29. BPMA, POST 56/27, Accountant General's Department, February, 1941.
30. BPMA, POST 56/9, Finance Committee: Review of Economy Proposals, October 3, 1939.
31. The AWCS, created in 1909, was the first ever trade union within the Civil Service to represent women workers.
32. BPMA, POST 56/127, Post Office Diary, (Press Notice), September 12, 1941.
33. Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (hereafter abbreviated MRC), MSS.148/UCW/2/13/21/23/1, Agenda of the 23rd Annual Conference, Blackpool, May 6-9, 1941, 22.
34. BPMA, POST 56/110, Temporary Staff: Un-notified Absences—D. J. Lidbury to Regional Directors, October 13, 1943.
35. BPMA, POST 1/865, W. S. Douglas (Treasury) to the Postmaster General, March 9, 1939.
36. BPMA, POST 122/2365, 1934 Report of the Committee on Women's Questions, cited in a Post Office Memorandum, January 8, 1945. Emphasis in original.
37. BPMA, POST 69/10, Summary of Post Office Staff, 1939.
38. BPMA, POST 56/96, An Appeal to Post Office Workers, December 6, 1940.

39. BPMA, POST 56/27, Published Postal Commercial Accounts, 1941. For the entire year of 1940, the Post Office handled 193 million parcels – an increase of 4.3 percent from 1938.
40. BPMA, POST 56/96, An Appeal to Post Office Workers, December 6, 1940.
41. BPMA, POST 56/96, Women to drive London Mail Vans, March 27, 1941.
42. BPMA, POST 56/160, South Western Region War Diary, January, 1941.
43. Sir Winston Churchill quoted in Harold L. Smith, “The Womanpower Problem in Britain during the Second World War.” *The Historical Journal*, 27, 4 (1984): 925.
44. BPMA, POST 33/5696, Memo to Regional Directors and Postal Branches, February. 17, 1942.
45. Elsewhere in the Civil Service, women received 80 percent of the male wage. This fact is noted in several discussions between the Post Office management and the UPW, and formed the basis of the interwar and wartime equal pay campaigns in the Civil Service. The minutes of the Civil Service National Whitley Council (Staff Side) Equal Pay (1935 Campaign) Committee provide more details about these issues, and identify the inequalities of pay between the Post Office and other Civil Service departments. For further details, see MRC MSS.148/UCW/3/7/1, Civil Service National Whitley Council (Staff Side) Equal Pay (1935 Campaign) Committee, March 27, 1935. Detailed information on Post Office women’s pay relative to men is provided in the financial documents issued by the Post Office Accountant General, and cataloged in the POST 69 series at the British Postal Museum and Archive. For further details, see BPMA, POST 69/10, Financial Position, January 13, 1939.
46. BPMA, POST 1/865, F. Hardwick to F. G. Salter, H. M. Treasury, March 2, 1939.
47. Royal Commission on Equal Pay 1944-46 Report, 11.
48. BPMA, POST 33/5694, Regional Directors’ Conference held at Headquarters, Jan. 24, 1945.
49. BPMA, POST 33/5694, T.A. Gardiner to E.A. Sharp, H.M. Treasury, December 1, 1944.
50. BPMA, POST 33/5694, Extracts from memorandum relative to the principle following the Committee’s Report: Equal Pay for Equal Work (undated).
51. *Ibid.*
52. MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/1/28, Quarterly Meeting the Executive Council, Jul. 12-14, 1944.
53. BPMA, POST 56/152, Maintenance of the British Civilian Postal Services (undated).
54. MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/1/28, Executive Council, July 12-14, 1944, 63.
55. Sir Stanley Angwin quoted in BPMA, POST 33/5694, Equal Pay for Men and Women, November 9, 1944.
56. MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/1/28, Quarterly Meeting the Executive Council, 12-14 July, 1944, 40-46.
57. BPMA, POST 56/27, Accountant General’s Department, February, 1941.
58. Six Point Group quoted in Barbara Caine, *English Feminism: 1780-1980* (Oxford, 1998), 223.

