

# REDUCING, RE-DEFINING AND RETAINING: THE STRUGGLE TO MAINTAIN A STABLE WORKFORCE AND SERVICE IN THE BRITISH POST OFFICE DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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*The General Post Office was Britain's largest government department and employer during World War Two. The Government's refusal to classify the organization as an essential wartime industry at the beginning of the war exposed it to the impact of conscription on staffing levels. Deep Treasury cuts to ease the country's wartime financial woes compounded its difficulties. Faced with tough decisions about the prioritization of its numerous services, and the appropriate deployment of personnel, the vital importance of women to the organization once again came to the forefront, thus facilitating a change to its personnel practices.*

The largest government department in Britain before and during the Second World War was the General Post Office (GPO). This was not a new phenomenon, and had been true since the late nineteenth century, but the significance of the GPO for the country's communication needs in peacetime and wartime saw its range of activities widen and its workforce increase as the organization expanded rapidly from the 1920s. In 1920, it acquired responsibility for the provision and maintenance of telephones for the government and the general public (including the provision of an international telephone service) from the now defunct Telegraph Stores Department. This, in addition to other recently-added responsibilities or services – payment of Old Age Pensions through its branch network, the introduction of commercial accounts, postal drafts, Treasury Notes, National Bonds, Savings Certificates,

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Health-Unemployment Insurance and Aerial Post – meant that the GPO was thoroughly embedded in Britain's culture and way of life.<sup>1</sup>

Employing 283,000 staff in 1938 (23 percent of whom were women),<sup>2</sup> the GPO appeared to be well-resourced to meet the inevitable strains of wartime. But by 1940, faced with the financial realities of war, and a grim budget projection for the forthcoming financial year, the GPO, like all government departments, faced the pressures of senior Treasury officials seeking to implement savings across the public sector. The Treasury-imposed target of a 10 percent reduction in staffing across all government departments to reduce expenditure in wartime hit the GPO extremely hard, especially following the departure of copious staff through military conscription in 1939.<sup>3</sup> Yet achieving this target, and replacing conscripted workers where necessary, was not as straightforward as the government or GPO management originally envisioned. Current legislation, such as the Control of Employment Act, 1939, made recruitment more complex, and required official consent for employers to advertise for or engage non-essential labor.<sup>4</sup>

Efficiently implementing any measures relating to wartime labor would be highly dependent on the nature and cordiality of the relationship between the employers, employees and the trade unions in the state sector. The Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries (AWCS) and the National Association of Women Teachers (NAWT) became the two leading trade unions campaigning to achieve equality in wages and treatment for women.<sup>5</sup> The AWCS had been formally recognized as a trade union after its acceptance into membership of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in 1919. It had expanded its scope and membership significantly from its original inception in 1903 as the Association of Shorthand Writers and Typists (with the prominent male social reformer Sidney Webb as its first president). Its success led to collaboration with the Women's Trade Union League in the early 1910s. These unions sought equal pay for these women, particularly as many of these women were unmarried, or widowed following the loss of their husbands in the First World War.<sup>6</sup> But the government continually rejected the calls for equal pay from trade unions representing women clerks and women teachers, mainly on the grounds of affordability after the conclusion of the long and expensive First World War.

The stalemate in negotiations with the trade unions was further exacerbated following several bitter industrial disputes throughout the 1920s, most notably

the seven-month lockout following the General Strike of May 1926. This ultimately led to implementation of the 1927 Trades Disputes Act, which removed all political and bargaining powers from the trade unions, and also prevented all civil servants from joining trade unions affiliated to the TUC. The government adopted an uncompromising stance in dealings with the trade unions, refusing all requests for equal pay or improvements in women's pay and conditions. The outright refusal to grant the request of the National Whitley Council<sup>7</sup> for a House of Commons debate on whether the denial of equal pay for women workers was "inimical to the best interests of the public service"<sup>8</sup> was justified on the grounds that the existence of Family Allowances policy, and the ideology of a 'family wage', rendered equal pay for women unnecessary.<sup>9</sup> However, this argument failed to recognize that many unmarried women in the workforce continued to receive a lower salary and thereby experienced greater hardships. Although some younger women still lived at home with their parents, unequal pay meant that spinsters remained at a financial disadvantage through the prevailing pay disparities.<sup>10</sup>

Some senior politicians raised doubts not only about the validity of the government's claims that the Family Allowances policy was an adequate compensation for the absence of equal pay, but also criticized the main principles of the policy, and the means by which it was implemented. Lord Wolmer and Eleanor Rathbone expressed their unhappiness that this policy meant that men were paid a 'family wage,' irrespective of whether they were married. They argued that this was wasteful, even though these men could eventually get married and use their savings to set up home.<sup>11</sup> The purpose of the 'family wage' was to ensure that a man, according to the 'male breadwinner' model, would be able to earn enough money to support his family, with a wife's earnings being largely unimportant.<sup>12</sup> Post Office employment practices reflected this view, not only through occupational segregation (whereby skilled and higher-paid jobs went to men) but also in the nature of the contracts and payments given to its women workers – all of which will be examined in more detail later.

By the latter half of 1935, the increased possibility of war following gains by the Fascists elsewhere in Europe prompted the government to reassess its relationship with the trade union movement and acknowledge the need to cooperate with the trade unions to mobilize the workforce. Historian Kevin Jefferys has argued that the Second World War brought the revival of trade

unionism with a new relationship after 1939 culminating in the formation of a united alliance between the government and the trade unions for the remainder of the Second World War.<sup>13</sup> The major trade union in the GPO was the Union of Post Office Workers (UPW) which stated one of its aims to be the “Joint management of the Post Office in conjunction with the State and the development of the Service on the lines of increased public usefulness”.<sup>14</sup> The UPW had, since its formation in 1919, afforded most of its attention to the protection of male members, who far out-numbered females. UPW membership provided very few benefits or protection for women workers, but the growing possibility of war led some women to believe that trade union membership would protect them from management exploitation. Recruitment to the UPW was continuing beyond its normal rate, with membership at the end of June 1939 at 132,129, an increase on the previous quarter of 2,931.<sup>15</sup> Although exact figures for male and female membership of the UPW are not available, there were 25,545 female members by the end of 1939—over 9,000 more than in 1925 when records began. But this represented less than 20 percent of the female workforce in the Post Office’s female workforce, which suggests that women remained skeptical about the UPW’s ability and willingness to represent their interests.<sup>16</sup>

One trade union that gained significant traction by the beginning of the Second World War was the National Association of Women Civil Servants (NAWCS). It was created for female civil servants by women employed in the public service who were unhappy about their working conditions.<sup>17</sup> Seeking to capitalize on the government’s desire to develop a closer relationship with trade unions and organized interests, women’s leaders sought to raise again the issues concerning the inequalities experienced by female employees. The Civil Service section of the AWCS merged with the NAWCS in 1932, and they sought to work together to improve the position of women clerks across the Civil Service.<sup>18</sup> This merger was in the best interest of Post Office women clerks, especially as the AWCS’s concerns, since its collaboration with the Women’s Trade Union League in the early 1910s, had seemed to be moving away from the masses of underpaid women workers and towards a smaller, more select cohort of higher-skilled staff. According to research by Helen Glew, 54 percent (or over 100,000) Post Office women workers belonged to the NAWCS and the Civil Service Clerical Association by 1937.<sup>19</sup> The NAWCS’s commitment to ensure better working conditions and benefits for all Post Office women clerks increased

its appeal. Its growing popularity was compounded by the impression that the major trade union in the Post Office, the UPW, seemed unable to address in detail the inequalities experienced by women workers<sup>20</sup> - an impression exemplified by its numerous failures in negotiations with the Treasury and Post Office management to secure better pay and conditions for Post Office women workers before the war.<sup>21</sup>

### **The debate over the national labor shortage in World War Two**

By January 1940, to meet the nation's growing labor shortages, the government agreed that more use needed to be made of dilution, which would replace skilled workers with semi-skilled workers, and also, included the introduction of female labor to areas previously confined to men. But Minister of Labor Ernest Brown remained opposed to the principle of dilution, and in a memorandum to the Cabinet in February 1940 ruled out an increase in female employment.<sup>22</sup> Unemployment still stood at one million around this time, and the government targeted these workers for future employment. Responding to these issues, Brown conceded the Cabinet's request for a detailed survey of the nation's 'Manpower' needs by a government committee.<sup>23</sup> The Manpower Requirements Committee was formed in March 1940, and concluded that 2 million additional women would be required in industry to meet the country's wartime needs. This contradicted the Treasury's original aim of reducing the labor force to achieve savings. In the Post Office, where shortages in staff were already being experienced, measures to conserve manpower, and keep up-to-date with work, led to the introduction of a 51-hour week where justified - an extension to the standard 44-hour week.<sup>24</sup> This measure, and the employment of fewer staff where practicable, helped to create financial savings. However, it was a short-term solution, especially when the pressures the Post Office would face, and the resulting difficulties caused by the Treasury-enforced reductions in staff, were fully realized. Historian Penny Summerfield has claimed that even after the Ministry of Labor's efforts, pre-war norms were undermined in areas of paid employment and domestic work. She claims that the pressures placed on the war economy by the mass mobilization of women workers ensured that changes were achieved in the treatment of women workers - changes that affected the gender divisions both at home and in the workplace.<sup>25</sup> This was also true in the Post Office, and will be examined in more detail here.

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Reductions had been reported in temporary GPO staff before the war. On April 1, 1939 GPO Provincial Offices reported that 430 temporary women and 70 temporary male clerks were employed, compared to 632 and 120 respectively in 1937.<sup>26</sup> Following the investigations of the Manpower Requirements Committee, the GPO management believed that increasing the numbers of temporary staff could help address the labor crisis, since they would be employed on a lower pay scale, and would be ineligible to compete for higher Post Office grades. Furthermore, they would not be entitled to gratuities or any other benefits afforded to 'established' staff. Although the employment of temporary staff would bring long-term financial advantages, an anomaly in the recruitment regulations meant that those on temporary contracts could make a claim, after three months of continuous Post Office employment, for a permanent position. Moreover, when staff were employed on a temporary contract in the Post Office, the organization was prevented from seeking to hire additional staff to replace temporary employees currently in place until the incumbents were either removed or transferred onto an established contract. This was officially known as 'blocking vacancies'. In April 1939, 76 women were, according to the Post Office official statistics, 'blocking' these positions.<sup>27</sup>

When it became clear that the recruitment of additional temporary staff would not be enough in itself to address the recruitment problems in the Post Office, the government realized that significant changes to British labor laws would need to be considered to ensure the eligibility of enough women to enter the wartime labor market. This was achieved by the Government's expedient decision to suspend the Civil Service Marriage Bar, which prevented married women from engaging in any form of government employment, from 1940. The decision was not initially welcomed by all in government or senior representatives of its several constituent Civil Service departments. Neville Chamberlain's government first piloted the policy at the beginning of 1940 in response to the shortages of workers caused by military conscription. Although this change helped not only the Post Office but all other government departments who were previously subject to the Marriage Bar restrictions, it divided the government.<sup>28</sup> This presumably reflected concerns that it would strengthen the long-term position of women in the labor market and jeopardize the position of men after the war.<sup>29</sup> Previously, 'established' staff were paid a gratuity on marriage in lieu of a pension if they had been employed by a government

department (including the Post Office) for more than six years as an ‘established’ worker, but the Marriage Bar did not apply to married women employed on temporary contracts. Suspending the Marriage Bar now permitted women previously disqualified under this regulation (i.e. ‘established’ married women) to be re-employed by the Post Office. But tensions remained between the Treasury and Civil Service departments regarding the power for decisions concerning the employment of married women – an issue that remained the domain of the now over-burdened Ministry of Labor, which was less familiar with departmental labor needs than the departments themselves. The decisions reached were not always favorable to the respective departments or to the workers, and did little to address the several underlying tensions caused by the pressures of labor shortages created by war.

Concerned that the divisions surrounding the suspension of the Marriage Bar would impede effective mobilization and re-employment of married women for the war effort, Chamberlain’s government, in a last-ditch effort to strengthen the labor market, passed the Emergency Powers Act in a single day in May 1940. This new law sought to simplify the recruitment process. It stated that every citizen of working age could now be called to place ‘themselves, their services and their property’<sup>30</sup> at the Government’s disposal. The Minister of Labor, as a result of the new measure, now had the power to determine workers’ rates of pay, their working hours and conditions of service.<sup>31</sup> But the process of governing was becoming increasingly difficult for Chamberlain. In his assessment of Chamberlain’s final days in power, historian L. W. Fuchser described Chamberlain as “an anachronism, an exhausted old man whose day had passed”.<sup>32</sup> Shortly after passing the Emergency Powers Act, Chamberlain’s government collapsed, and was replaced by the wartime coalition led by Winston Churchill, a Boer War veteran and a strong advocate of British imperialism.

Churchill brought a new style of leadership to the British government. One of his boldest steps was to incorporate the trade unions into the senior levels of the executive. This came as a surprise to many trade union leaders who greeted his accession to the premiership with much trepidation, especially since Churchill had previously locked horns with the trade unions as Home Secretary.<sup>33</sup> Initially, they had believed that the omens for a harmonious relationship between the trade unions and the government were bleak. However, Churchill realized that collaboration with senior trade union leaders such as Walter Citrine, head of the

TUC, and other leaders of the labor movement would be essential to winning the war. He believed that this would be the most effective method to ensure mobilization and distribution of manpower. Trade union representatives were invited to participate in government advisory panels and committee discussions, and it is from this point onwards that their power increased. However, the issue of employing married women continued to divide the wartime government.

The seemingly wholehearted acceptance by Post Office management to suspend the Marriage Bar represented a significant attitudinal change from its position in the interwar years when the Post Office had strongly opposed its suspension. Post Office management had claimed in 1931 that there was no intention to re-employ married women, and maintained that this was the only way to protect men's position in the workforce and also to keep wages down.<sup>34</sup> Employing young women on a low pay scale, and preventing older (married) women, who would qualify for a higher salary and other gratuities, from remaining in the Post Office would, they believe, help to achieve this.<sup>35</sup> Suspension of the Marriage Bar provided additional recruitment options, and also permitted the Post Office to retain staff that would previously have needed to resign for marriage.<sup>36</sup> Several factors contributed to suspension, but the greater autonomy offered to the trade unions through their incorporation into the Churchill government would have been significant. In the Post Office, trade unions such as the UPW, but most notably the increasingly-influential NAWCS, were especially important in pushing forward this attitudinal change concerning the employment of married women.

To ensure this policy change could be implemented and utilized in the best possible way, the Post Office suggested changes to the Treasury in the decision-making process concerning the hiring of staff. It proposed that pressure on the Ministry of Labor be reduced so that the government could dedicate its attention towards wartime planning. Furthermore, the transfer of responsibility for administering labor regulations concerning recruitment to the constituent Civil Service departments would help to ensure that they had the required labor force and resources to prosecute the war effort effectively, especially since they were more familiar with their staffing requirements. But achieving a consensus on decision-making powers concerning the employment of married women was difficult, mainly because of the uncertainty and disagreements surrounding the decisions regarding the adaptations to and suspension of the Marriage Bar in



wartime. After several lengthy negotiations between the Treasury and National Whitley Council, it was agreed that the decisions concerning the employment of married women would be handled by each Civil Service department. To achieve this, the Post Office requested that a reduction in correspondence be made between the Treasury and the Post Office on matters where the Postmaster General could adjudicate, especially concerning the employment of married women.<sup>37</sup> Although not fully implemented until 1943, from late 1940 the Treasury slowly delegated the process and powers concerning the employment of married women to Civil Service departments, especially the Post Office, the largest employer of women in wartime.

### **The impact of war**

GPO management, under pressure from the Treasury to implement economies, now faced two major questions: firstly, what justification (if any) existed for not replacing conscripted and transferred staff; and secondly, how viable was it to reduce Post Office services to achieve labor economies, and reduce overall expenditure?<sup>38</sup> Several options were available, including increasing staff workloads or the consolidation of departments with overlapping responsibilities to absorb additional work.

A Ministry of Labor request that the Post Office mobilize 15 percent of its manipulative grades (specialist grades such as Postmen, Sorters, Telegraphists etc.)<sup>39</sup> for 'essential' war industries prompted a huge debate about the nature of the government's employment policy and its perception of the GPO's importance in the labor market. This left many workers, and parents of younger workers, particularly young women, with many concerns. Post Office workers would not, owing to the GPO's status as a 'non-essential industry' at this stage of the war, be afforded the same protections as workers in 'essential industries', such as the provision of equipment to protect from bombs and enemy attack. These concerns were compounded by the regulations restricting the use of air raid shelters, which stated that only staff working outdoors could use the shelters, whereas, in the event of an attack, indoor staff would be required to take shelter in the pre-assigned areas determined by their Air Raid Precautions officer, normally in the basement of their building. But the provision for outdoor staff was not always adequate. Sometimes, there would not be air raid shelters for miles on their rounds, and many would have to seek shelter with local residents. Shortages of

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protective items, especially gas masks for indoor workers such as telephonists, caused widespread concern, particularly amongst parents of young women, whose daughters continued to be employed at the Post Office telephone exchanges.<sup>40</sup> The slow deployment of gas masks to female telephonists demonstrated that considerable work remained to be done in this area to ensure that Post Office staff were adequately protected.<sup>41</sup> The new Minister of Labor in Winston Churchill's coalition government, Ernest Bevin, acknowledged the importance of safeguarding the workers' position by providing a guaranteed working week, and imposed restrictions on employers' dismissal powers.<sup>42</sup>

By May 1940, more than 34,000 Post Office staff from all sections had been conscripted to either the armed forces or other wartime industries, such as munitions, suggesting that the government regarded the GPO as less important.<sup>43</sup> The Post Office was not classified as an 'essential' industry until after 1941, when its key role in the Battle of Britain, especially in maintaining communications, had been fully realized by the government. Although this ensured that the Post Office could now campaign with other wartime essential industries for staffing, it did not mean that the staffing situation was stable, or that sufficient staff were available to meet its needs. The Treasury continued to force the Post Office to seek out efficiency savings. GPO management believed its first aim should be to reduce expenditure on staffing, whilst not implementing the huge swathe of workforce cuts proposed by the Treasury, which it believed would detrimentally affect services. It saw a great opportunity to achieve this through employing more women, even in areas previously confined to men. This would achieve short-term spending reductions, since women would command lower wages than men. This inequality was based on justifications formulated by the government and the Post Office since the late nineteenth century, which claimed that women workers were less efficient than their male counterparts, and also not as physically strong, thus rendering them unable (or less efficient) in Post Office employment where physical strength was required, such as postal deliveries. In areas where physical strength was not a necessary prerequisite for their Post Office role, wage inequality was defined by virtue of the fact that men had always occupied, and would continue to occupy, more senior grades in Post Office work, and the maintenance of the unequal salary scales merely reinforced this inequality.<sup>44</sup> GPO managers believed that increasing the recruitment of women, and opening up all areas of Post Office work, would ensure that a stable

number of workers were available to ensure effective services, especially in areas vital for the war effort such as Engineering and Telegraphy. This would prove controversial, especially since women did not already have the requisite skills to perform the work previously undertaken only by men. As the war intensified, this would be essential to ensure not only the continued functioning of the GPO, but of Britain's war machine. However, a shortage of staff brought a whole new series of problems. One issue was the backlog of work in areas from where staff were transferred, primarily owing to management's perception that their work was of less importance during the war. For example, to meet the needs of customers in Post Office branches, more staff were needed in front line Post Office services, especially following the growth in the number of letters and business transacted at Post Office counters. In response, GPO management withdrew clerks from clerical duties in the GPO's administrative units and placed them on front-line services such as counter work and sorting. This produced difficulties shortly afterwards when arrears in clerical work emerged, e.g. BBC radio license renewal notices.<sup>45</sup> In response to trade union concerns about workers' health and welfare, GPO management passed a resolution on 10 January 1940 that no worker was permitted to work more than five nights a week with immediate effect. This placed further strain on Post Office sections where night workers were necessary due to staff shortages.<sup>46</sup> The large numbers of staff working overtime, owing to staff shortages, led to a high level of sick leave by spring 1940.<sup>47</sup>

Senior GPO officials believed that its problems were not insurmountable. They could still, if necessary, draw on the large reserve of staff ineligible for conscription owing to their age, and some retirees, who had served the organization well in the previous war. Many retired men and women obliged, returning to their former duties for the duration of the war. This helped the GPO to save time and money, since it did not need to train these staff to perform their duties.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, although female pay was lower than the male rate, the obligation to pay women a maximum of 80 percent of the male rates represented only a small saving, and remained a point of contention for women workers and the UPW, who sought to keep the injustices of this inequality on the agenda through writing to the Treasury and Post Office managers, in addition to organizing wages campaigns.<sup>49</sup>

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There were also social problems that would impact on women's performance, and also affect the country's ability to meet the needs of war. Examples were the shortage of day nurseries and inadequate shopping facilities, which particularly affected women workers.<sup>50</sup> By 1942, the Post Office agreed that female staff would be given three months unpaid maternity leave. A few days sick leave in the early stages of the pregnancy was also permitted, as it was assumed that the illness was caused by the pregnancy. Service before and after maternity leave would be regarded as continuous and would not affect the terms under which an officer was re-employed. No guarantee of re-employment was given, but there was little chance that a worker would lose her job, though the Postmaster General warned that, in some departments, it might not be possible to keep a post open for three months. No extension to the three month period without pay could be sanctioned. Women retained after marriage, after consultation over the Marriage Bar regulations, were eligible for this concession.<sup>51</sup> The same regulations applied to unmarried mothers. This, according to the UPW, provided women with adequate time to make necessary childcare arrangements before returning to work, although the provision of nurseries nationally was limited, with certain areas, especially the larger cities such as London, having more nursery places available to residents than smaller towns or cities. The shortage of nursery places forced many women to ask parents and relatives to take care of their young children during working hours, although as historian Penny Summerfield argues, this position changed for the better towards the end of the war, and was sustained in the post-war period.<sup>52</sup> Also, women with domestic responsibilities, whether caring for their children or for another relative, had their hours reduced. They still worked, on average, eight hours a day, although women believed this was an improvement from their previous twelve-hour shifts. Nevertheless, the extent to which this demonstrates a more compassionate stance towards women workers is debatable. While the GPO management and the government were clearly acknowledging the importance of engaging with women's groups and their concerns, it is highly probable that this was done in the interest of ensuring that women were content with their treatment in the Post Office with the aim of averting any damaging strikes or worker militancy.<sup>53</sup>

The appointment of part-time staff was considered by the Post Office, although it appeared that this was limited as far as possible to men in the provinces. Recruiting part-time staff would provide several savings for the GPO.

Firstly, these workers would not be eligible for a retirement pension. Secondly, their rate of pay was lower owing to their lower status, thus ensuring economy. Additionally, a new system of 'long' and 'short' duties was introduced in London to cover all the posts – 'long' duties being in excess of eight hours, 'short' duties less than eight hours.<sup>54</sup> Concurrently, cuts in administrative and clerical staff at national and regional headquarters were favored by GPO management, and were partially achieved at the Post Office Savings Bank. Certain administrative processes, such as the second check on interest rates applied to personal bank accounts, were suspended until the end of the war. This released men to perform work essential to the war effort, including engineering, telegraphic and telephone work, for which women were also now being trained, having been released to assist in areas deficient in staff. Although women had been trained in these areas in the previous war, with some women continuing to perform engineering work in the Post Office in the interwar years, their numbers were at this stage insufficient for the war effort. Men, however, continued to outnumber women significantly in these 'skilled' areas in the Post Office. But the Post Office survey of the manpower situation, and the estimates on how savings could be achieved, only took account of the savings in *work*, and failed to account for the Post Office salary obligations to staff on loan (for war purposes) to the Ministry of Labor and the forces, where the Post Office was still required to pay their salaries, since they remained officially employed by the GPO.<sup>55</sup> The GPO's expenditure for 1939-40 increased by £1,412,000 compared to the previous financial year, leading to estimates that the organization now operated on an annual £2,414,000 deficit.<sup>56</sup>

One option to reduce the GPO's expenditure was the employment of women at night. In peacetime, women were excluded from night work, since there had always been sufficient men to perform these duties. The Post Office and the Treasury expressed concerns over their safety, and believed these duties should be confined to men. Although GPO management had advised the UPW on September 11, 1939 that it might be necessary to employ women beyond 10:30 p.m., no woman had, by the start of the war, been employed after 8 p.m. Their employment through the night in the previous war had been unavoidable, and the UPW conceded that this was a possibility in this war. With the impact of conscription on male staffing levels, this situation changed, warranting expedient modifications to the regulations governing night-time employment. Several

issues were considered before employing women at night, including the availability of public transport. Over 1,000 full-time night telephonists had been mobilized nationally, and the UPW hoped that this would remove the temptation to keep women on late duty any longer than necessary.<sup>57</sup> The importance of night staff and the necessity to begin a comprehensive retraining program meant that, in accordance with these new arrangements, payments for night duty would be made retrospectively to women who had performed night duty from October 1939 to January 1940, although at a lower rate than to their male colleagues, thus being in line with the prevailing wage inequalities in the Post Office.<sup>58</sup> The Treasury hoped that women would see this as compensation for the new expectation placed on them as a result of war, and that this would help to reduce the demands for improved wages. Yet despite these improvements, the UPW did not want women to work at night because of concerns over their safety.<sup>59</sup>

By May 1940, the Post Office still declined to employ women after 10 p.m. on security grounds, owing to the continued high risk of enemy bombing at night – a move supported by the UPW in the interest of protecting female staff. They did not want ‘men’s work’ to be carried out by women unless it could be demonstrated that this was absolutely necessary.<sup>60</sup> In response, the agreement reached throughout a series of negotiations between the UPW and the GPO management during 1940 was that women would, when a shortage of workers was noticeable, share night duties with the men, and was agreed based on the previous war’s experience. The UPW would agree to the employment of women at night only if it was clear that every effort had been made to recruit men.<sup>61</sup> But by June 1940, Post Office headquarters informed the UPW that it was now necessary to employ women from 11 p.m.<sup>62</sup> The UPW’s apparent concern about the welfare of women workers at night coincided with its desire to protect the long-term labor interests of its predominantly male members. Its overriding concern was that if the Post Office employed women for night work at a lower rate of pay than men, and that this experiment proved successful, it could, as a long-term cost-saving initiative, drive down male wages so that they were more in line with the female rate of pay.<sup>63</sup> This would provide a long-term economic advantage, even though it would be likely that management would, at some stage, need to debate with women’s groups about the provision of equal pay.<sup>64</sup> These measures would be implemented if shortages of staff jeopardized the functioning of Post Office services. The alternative, according to the Post Office,

was that men and women should perform unequal amounts of night duty. This looked more likely, especially since the recruitment of sufficient men would be difficult. When it was necessary to do this, the night duties of staff needed to be spread as evenly as possible amongst the day staff.<sup>65</sup> By the end of 1940, the Post Office had recruited an additional 800 women to London's telephone exchanges to improve the answering speed of trunk calls (calls requiring an operator for connection). Many of these worked at night to cope with the increased demand on the telephone system, which saw evening trunk traffic increase by 150 percent in the two weeks following the re-introduction of the shilling trunk call<sup>66</sup> in February 1940 compared to January 1940, when higher rates were in place.<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere, 185 additional staff was recruited in the south-west region to handle the increased pressures.<sup>68</sup> By December 1940, an additional 6,900 'girls', the majority aged between 16 and 25, were employed across London's telephone exchanges by comparison to the numbers employed in the pre-war period.<sup>69</sup> The UPW, acknowledging the bravery of its members, wanted to ensure that if women were required to work at night, they would be afforded the best protection. The UPW were unhappy that its members would be protected by the Post Office Home Guard – a unit that resembled the more well-known Local Defense Volunteers or 'Home Guard', and requested a fully-trained military presence. However, this was refused on the grounds of cost.<sup>70</sup>

Although mass-mobilization of the workforce begun in 1940 to facilitate production for the war effort, by 1942, the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill was referring to a 'crisis of manpower'.<sup>71</sup> The social research organization Mass Observation claimed that this was the year of the crisis of 'womanpower'.<sup>72</sup> The Post Office was still inadequately staffed. Sixty-five thousand GPO staff had joined the armed forces, 5,000 were 'on loan' to other departments, with the GPO now employing 293,000 staff, of whom 41.5 percent were women.<sup>73</sup> Whilst maintaining its services was a major concern for the GPO, it appeared that its overriding concern was to implement staff economies to ensure that overall savings could be achieved in a period when finances were limited. By 1941, some economies had been implemented successfully, some of which were achieved by giving more work to others, or by simply reorganizing processes. For example, in the London Postal Region the numbers of Postmen and Sorters were reduced by 16 percent and 14 percent respectively. Conversely, the number of women employed as Counter Clerks in the same period increased by 20

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percent from 1,278 to 1,559.<sup>74</sup> However, this did not take account of the increase to temporary staff, who were recruited separately and subject to different employment regulations.

The UPW estimated that the Post Office could survive on a skeleton basis with a loss of 15,000 staff, but it would be unable to provide the same level of service. A series of inter-departmental committees were formed in the Post Office to examine the feasibility of economies. The terms of reference for the Telecommunications Committee, formed in July 1942 were: "To examine further, in the light of the increasingly urgent need for conserving manpower, the statistical requirements of the Administration and the Engineering Department in the telephone and telegraph field, and to report whether, as a war-time measure, these requirements can be further reduced, and whether the use of alternative and more economical methods (e.g. random sampling) might not be extended."<sup>75</sup>

In the Telegraphs section several options were considered, including the abolition of the Greetings Telegram Service, the abolition of a night telegram service and an increase in the minimum charge for a telegram from 9d to 1s.<sup>76</sup> It remained the case that the section should be prepared to release 10 percent of female staff into the Forces, if their ages permitted.<sup>77</sup> But the 54-hour week was denied to women temporary staff since many had domestic responsibilities – a move welcomed by women's groups, especially the AWCS, on the grounds that women's family responsibilities also needed to be considered in wartime.<sup>78</sup>

### **Conclusion: How successful was the economy drive?**

The efforts to implement economies in the Post Office had created the symbiotic effect of improving the position and treatment of women in the organization to a certain extent. Post Office managers cited the improved educational opportunities offered to female trainees, and the possibility of progression to higher Post Office grades after training, as examples of these improvements.<sup>79</sup> However, problems remained. A study of retirees from the Post Office in 1945 conducted by the Post Office Regional Directors found that 42 percent of women retired prematurely on health grounds, compared to 11 percent of men. Post Office and Treasury representatives responded to these statistics, in their meeting with Post Office Regional Directors, with assurances that equal pay would become a reality in the future, but owing to lack of finances, the present tendency was to reduce the differences between the pay and



duty of men and women.<sup>80</sup> This became necessary, especially since more women were employed in the Post Office at the end of the Second World War than any preceding period in its history, but also their status in the organization, whilst not being equal with men, had significantly improved. They received higher allowances and improvements in their pay, especially if they undertook night work. Although inequalities in areas such as pay remained, some women felt that the organization was slowly changing to consider the women's point of view. This was seen with the decision reached by Post Office management that, after the war, telephonists would work a 36-hour week – a much more favourable working schedule than the 56-hour week plus overtime during wartime. Additionally, the working hours of all women workers and their conditions were re-examined with the promise, fulfilled after the war, of reduced hours, fairer pay and better working conditions.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, when many women were retained after the Second World War for skilled areas of work in the Post Office, many women now believed that they had achieved a significant victory in cementing women's position in the organization, even though there was still a very long way to go.

But the increased role of women in the Post Office came with a heavy price, both financially and to the overall structure of the organization for the post-war period. The GPO had replaced staff lost as a result of conscription or wartime transfer created by the Essential Work Orders, and had recruited an additional 10,000 workers to the 'priority areas', which included engineering and telegraphy, to ensure that services could be maintained. Even though these additional 10,000 workers now took the overall Post Office workforce to 293,000, the demographics of the workforce had changed dramatically. Expenditure on the wages bill had reduced and short-term savings had been achieved through an 18 percent increase in the number of women employed, now 41.5 percent of the workforce, who commanded lower wages than their male colleagues. Furthermore, the retired workers re-engaged in Post Office work had their pensions suspended for the duration of the war. The additional women employed were appointed on temporary contracts. Nevertheless, the Post Office believed that it remained severely under-staffed in several sections, and had sought to examine means by which it could improve provision in the priority areas to ensure that services could continue for the duration of the war.<sup>82</sup> Staffing reductions had been achieved in certain areas, but perhaps the biggest

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achievement was to maintain services through the recruitment of cheaper staff. This perhaps explains the optimism of Assistant Postmaster General, Captain H. Crookshank, who stated at the end of the Christmas rush in 1943: “The difficulties have been increased this year by the sacrifices which the Post Office has quite rightly made in giving up staff to those fields of the war effort where they are most urgently needed, but thanks to the cooperation and goodwill of all ranks of the Post Office the traffic has been handled with notable success.”<sup>83</sup>

The difficulties faced by the Post Office as a result of the war, and the strategies it developed to overcome and address these problems demonstrate the foresight of its leaders and the commitment of its employees. Throughout the Second World War, the Post Office continued to provide a service to the public and the government despite losing a large number of its most skilled staff, and also in the face of deep budget cuts. The commitment of the women workers employed by the Post Office and those recruited specifically to help with the war effort was essential to ensure its ability to maintain its service to the public and the government. The Second World War not only highlighted the vital importance of the Post Office as an institution in British society, but also the vital role of women to its operations. Henceforth, both the Post Office and its women workers had cemented their place in British history for their vital contribution to the war effort.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University (hereafter abbreviated WL), 6AWC/FL275, Statement of the Claim by supervising grades of the Accountant General's Department, General Post Office, 1920.

<sup>2</sup> British Postal Museum and Archive (hereafter abbreviated BPMA), POST 56/110, Communication Workers Union to the PMG, November 17, 1942.

<sup>3</sup> BPMA, POST 56/12, Post Office Diary, (Wages of Post Office Temporary Staff – Post Office Circular) December 17, 1941.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Gowing, 1972.

<sup>5</sup> For further details on the campaign for equal pay in the teaching profession, see Dolly Smith Wilson, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> The work of Post Office trade unions, especially the role of the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries (before their amalgamation into the National Association of Women Civil Servants) is explored in detail in Mark J. Crowley, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> This was created in 1919 as a forum for representatives of workers and employers to discuss employment, wages and technical education. For a detailed discussion of the Whitley Council system, see Rodney Lowe, 1982, and for its role in the Post Office, see Crowley, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Modern Records Centre, Warwick University (hereafter abbreviated MRC) MSS.148/UCW/3/7/1, Civil Service National Whitley Council (Staff Side) Equal Pay (1935 Campaign) Committee, 26 February 1935.

<sup>9</sup> For a full discussion, see John Macnicol, 1980.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion on these issues, see Pat Thane, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Johanna Alberti, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Pedersen, 1993, p. 355.

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Jefferys, 1995, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> MRC, MSS.148/UCW/1/1/6, Union of Post Office Workers: Programme Rules and Standing Orders, July 1937, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/1/23, Quarterly Meeting of the Executive Council, July 7, 1939, p. 29. Recruitment in the quarter was 5,159. Member losses during the quarter were 2,228, with 1,526 linked to what the union called 'unavoidable and legitimate causes' (although these were not elaborated on further), 666 due to resignations and lapses, mainly due to arrears, with a reduction of over 50

percent on the normal quarterly loss to arrears of 1,200. Net recruitment comprised 114 additional telegraphists, 103 sorters, 48 counter clerks, 355 sorting clerks, 407 telephonists (women), 919 postmen, 113 mail porters, and 872 other grades. Total membership of 132,129 included 1,527 telegraphists, 5,659 sorters, 1,132 counter clerks, 21,319 sorting clerks, 14,577 telephonists (women), 58,345 postmen, 2,414 mail porters and 27,156 in other grades.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Clinton, 1984, p. 429.

<sup>17</sup> WL, 6AWC/FL275, Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries Annual Report, 31 December 1935, pp. 14-15.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Gordon and David Doughan, 2001, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Helen Glew, 2010, p.194

<sup>20</sup> BPMA, POST 33/5696, UPW Temporary Women Telephonists Employed on Night Work, August 5, 1941.

<sup>21</sup> Glew, 2010, contains detailed discussions of these negotiations and the failures of the UPW to secure better conditions for its female membership.

<sup>22</sup> Harold L. Smith, 1984, p. 927.

<sup>23</sup> The National Archives, Public Record Office (hereafter abbreviated TNA: PRO), CAB 92/02, Manpower Requirements Committee Service Requirements Sub-Committee (undated).

<sup>24</sup> BPMA, POST 56/127, Post Office Diary, August 8, 1941.

<sup>25</sup> Penny Summerfield, 1989.

<sup>26</sup> BPMA, POST 1/866, F. H. Nichols to Miss M. Curtis, HM Treasury, April 19, 1939.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> TNA: PRO, CAB 92/02, Manpower Requirements Committee Service Requirements Sub-Committee (undated).

<sup>29</sup> WL, 6NCS/1/A/1/1/11, National Association of Women Civil Servants, November 16, 1940. See also Mark J. Crowley, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Gowing, 1972, p. 151.

<sup>31</sup> Trades Union Congress Archive, London Metropolitan University (hereafter abbreviated TUC), HD 6661, The TUC in Wartime, June 1940.

<sup>32</sup> L.W. Fuchser, 1982, pp. 190-191.

<sup>33</sup> For a detailed account of Churchill's battle with the trade unions and his response, see David Smith, 1980.

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- <sup>34</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Glew, 2010. See also M Zimmeck, 1986; and Martin Daunton, 1985, p. 252.
- <sup>35</sup> BPMA, POST 47/606, E.B. Mackintosh to the War Office, October 13, 1931.
- <sup>36</sup> BPMA, POST 1/866, Re-employment during a national emergency of pensioners and married women who were formerly established Civil Servants, April 1, 1939.
- <sup>37</sup> BPMA, POST 122/2364, J. Scholes to Treasury Secretary, July 1, 1943.
- <sup>38</sup> BPMA, POST 56/110, Man and Woman Power: General Review, December 9, 1942.
- <sup>39</sup> For further details, see the definitions provided by E. N. Gladden, 1967, p. 9.
- <sup>40</sup> BPMA, POST 56/23, Post Office ARP Manual, pp. 2-3.
- <sup>41</sup> BPMA, POST 56/163, T. H Boyd to all Post Office Managers, ARP in the Post Office, September 19, 1938, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>42</sup> John Stevenson, 1984, p. 459.
- <sup>43</sup> BPMA, POST 56/152, London Postal Region War Diary, December 1940.
- <sup>44</sup> For a detailed discussion of this, see Crowley, 2012.
- <sup>45</sup> These were licences for the radio to cover BBC costs.
- <sup>46</sup> BPMA, POST 33/5696, Post Office Circular to Regional Directors, January 10, 1940.
- <sup>47</sup> BPMA, POST 115/637, *The Sub-Postmaster*, General Secretary's Notes, April 1941.
- <sup>48</sup> MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/13/22/3, 21st UPW Annual Conference Blackpool, May 20-24, 1940, 12.
- <sup>49</sup> BPMA, POST 33/5696, UPW Claim for equal pay for women, July 7, 1942.
- <sup>50</sup> Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex (hereafter abbreviated MO), Mass Observation Report 1255, Appeals to Women (May 1942), p. 2.
- <sup>51</sup> MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/13/24/1, Agenda of the 23rd Annual Conference, Blackpool, May 18-20, 1942, p. 90.
- <sup>52</sup> Summerfield, 1989, p. 1.
- <sup>53</sup> BPMA, POST 56/110, Committee on the reduction of National Government Staffs – Notes for presentation of case by the PMG and the Director General, January 20, 1943.
- <sup>54</sup> MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/1/23, Quarterly Meeting of the Executive Council, January 17-19, 1940, p. 162.

<sup>55</sup> BPMA, POST 56/13, The War Effort of Northern Ireland, 1939-45, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/1/23, Quarterly Meeting of the Executive Council, January 17-19, 1940, p. 162.

<sup>58</sup> BPMA, POST 33/5696, Post Office Circular to Regional Directors, January 10, 1940.

<sup>59</sup> MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/13/22/3, 21st UPW Annual Conference Blackpool, May 20-24, 1940, Supplement to the Post, p. 12.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/1/24, Meeting of the Executive Council, June 20, 1940, p. 13.

<sup>63</sup> BPMA, POST 33/5694, T.A. Gardiner to E.A. Sharp, HM Treasury December 1, 1944.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/1/28, Quarterly Meeting the Executive Council, July 12-14, 1944, p. 28.

<sup>66</sup> In the British money system, 12d (pennies) were equal to 1s (shilling). 20s (shillings) were equal to £1 (pound).

<sup>67</sup> BPMA, POST 56/110, Minutes of a meeting with the Departmental Staff Side, February 5, 1943. The shilling trunk call was originally introduced in 1936 to reduce the cost of calling, but was suspended in January 1940 owing to the pressures on the telephone system, and the need to prioritize telephone circuits for government usage. The Post Office and the Treasury had hoped that higher call costs would reduce the demand on the telephone system by 'non-essential' subscribers (i.e. the public) but the unpopularity of this move forced the reintroduction of the shilling trunk call very shortly after its initial abolition.

<sup>68</sup> BPMA, POST 56/160, South Western Region War Diary, January 28, 1940.

<sup>69</sup> BPMA, POST 56/97, Postmaster General Defence of Post Office War Work, extract from *Sunday Times*, December 1, 1940.

<sup>70</sup> MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/1/24, Quarterly Meeting of the Executive Council, July 17-19, 1940, p. 27.

<sup>71</sup> Winston Churchill, quoted in MO, Mass Observation Report 1255, Appeals to Women (May 1942), p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> BPMA, POST 56/110, Communication Workers Union to the Postmaster General, November 17, 1942.

<sup>74</sup> BPMA, POST 56/27, Accountant General's Department, February 1941.

<sup>75</sup> BPMA, POST 56/110, Telecommunications Committee, July 24, 1942.

<sup>76</sup> BPMA, POST 56/110, Departmental Staff Side Meeting, February 5, 1943.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/1/28, Quarterly Meeting the Executive Council, July 12-14, 1944, 30.

<sup>79</sup> BPMA, POST 33/5694, Length of Training for Post Office Operatives, April 1945.

<sup>80</sup> POST 33/5694, Notes of Regional Directors' Conference held at Headquarters, January 24, 1945.

<sup>81</sup> MRC, MSS.148/UCW/2/1/28, Quarterly Meeting the Executive Council, July 12-14, 1944, p. 24.

<sup>82</sup> BPMA, POST 56/110, Communication Workers Union to the Postmaster General, November 17, 1942.

<sup>83</sup> BPMA, POST 56/99, PMG thanks staff for handling Christmas mail, December 31, 1943.

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