



# Women doing men's work and women doing women's work: Female work and pay in British wartime engineering

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## Abstract

Extreme demand pressures coupled with acute skill shortages in the run up to World War II caused British engineering companies to break down existing production processes into smaller constituent parts. This allowed the employment of persons trained over narrower ranges of skills and helped to create an exponential growth of female jobs, from 10.5% of total engineering employment in 1939 to 35.2% by 1943. Women were officially classified into those doing men's work and those doing women's work. Using a unique data set provided by the Engineering Employers Federation, this paper examines female work and pay from 1935 (the first year of rearmament) to 1942 (the peak of production activity) in more detail than has been previously undertaken. It features the pay and hours of piece- and time-rated women, female–male wage ratios, and an assessment of the war's longer term impact on the female labor market.

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## 1. Introduction

Women played a vital role in British industrial production during World War II. Their main contribution took place in engineering and allied industries (engineering, metals,

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explosives, chemicals, and shipbuilding). In June 1939 women comprised 17.8% of employment in these industries. By June 1943 this figure was near its peak at 38.2%. This translated into a net addition of 1376.6 thousand female workers. The engineering industry was the most important source of female employment. Women comprised 10.5% of total employment in the industry in 1939, a figure that rose to 35.2% by 1943. This paper investigates female engineering employment and wages in the run-up to war and during the critical initial war years. It makes use of a newly created data set based on the Engineering Employers Federation (EEF) comprehensive payroll records of member firms.<sup>1</sup> Special emphasis is given to female–male wage differentials.

Prior to World War II, it was common place for both private and public sector women workers to earn considerably less than men within comparable job descriptions (Smith, 1981). Private sector jobs were essentially divided into ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’ with the former receiving substantially higher rates due to the commonly held view that men were more productive. Critical shortages of skilled male engineering labor during the war served both to weaken strict demarcations between male and female jobs and to erode gender wage differentials. From 1940, engineering union agreements with private industry and government departments provided for the employment of women in jobs that before the war had been undertaken solely by men. Agreements also covered women working in previously male dominated work places but on job tasks that, in other establishments, were also carried out by female employees. Hence, women were officially classified into ‘women doing men’s work’ and ‘women doing women’s work.’ In the same year Ernest Bevin, the Minister for Labour and National Service, persuaded engineering employers and unions to grant women equal pay to men where it was clear that they were undertaking work tasks that had formerly been purely a male preserve.<sup>2</sup> This became known as the ‘Extended Employment of Women’ agreement. It applied only to engineering.

Initially, some women regarded this agreement as a breakthrough towards achieving the goal of equal pay for equal work. There was a critical problem, however. Equal pay was to be applied to women for whom it could be shown that they were able to execute job tasks with equal proficiency to equivalent male job holders. Reduced wages and bonuses were allowed under the agreement where women were deemed to require special assistance or additional supervision. As a result, the equal pay issue proved to be highly contentious, with employers frequently invoking the agreement caveats to pay women doing men’s work less than equivalent males (Smith, 1981).<sup>3</sup> In fact, both employer and union positions at plant-level often served to work against a narrowing of gender pay differentials (Summerfield, 1984; Wightman, 1999). On the one hand, the EEF attempted to stem upward pressures on female labor costs by limiting the number of female jobs classified as men’s work. On the other,

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<sup>1</sup> A recent Economic and Social Science Research project (‘War and Pay’), which forms the basis of the present work, transcribed the data from the original EEF volumes on to spreadsheets to allow more comprehensive analysis. The EEF originally assembled the material so that federated firms were supplied with comprehensive background information to facilitate national, district, and firm-level collective bargaining with engineering unions.

<sup>2</sup> It should be emphasised that the equal pay arguments essentially concerned women who were trained for a limited period to undertake sub-sets of the tasks previously performed by skilled men. In other words, equal pay was to apply despite the fact that, typically, women performed over narrower ranges of skilled tasks.

<sup>3</sup> See Inman (1957, pp. 355–359) for a discussion as to why the “question as to what was men’s and what was women’s work in the engineering industry was so complicated that it was well-nigh impossible to come to any satisfactory national agreement based on a distinction between the two types of work.”

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