

Impact of world war one on the british workforce



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' World War One transformed the British workplace.' How far does the evidence support this view?

Before we discuss how the workplace had been transformed after the World War One, there are some facts we should know about the British workplace before 1914. First of all, the sex ratio of the workplace are uneven which males dominate. According to the statistic from census, the percentage of female workers in major occupation had occupied the total population of 29.6% in 1911.[1] From this, we can make consumption that beside the women at home, there were still higher rate of male at workplace before the war. Moreover, the working sector was more focused on primary, including agriculture, light factories such as milling, textile etc. With the influence of industrialization occurred in the 19th century, manual workers were majoring the industries. All of these jobs mentioned requires less education, yet they have trade union and labour party to protect their basic right already. Last but not least, in terms of salary, men were earning more money than women. With the above, these are some basic factor to discuss if the workplace had been transformed.

However, workplace is not only about single changes such as occupation type, sex ratio etc. To define occupational structure, it attributes the accumulated distribution of different jobs by looking into skill level, economic function, and social status etc.[2] We also have to look at the employment rate, trade union to analyse if the whole workplace has changed.

In terms of sex ratio, World War One transformed the British workplace in small extent. As mentioned above, female workers only accumulate 29.6%

out of the total occupied population in year 1911. Then in the same chart, from 1966 Census, it showed the rate had slowly increased between the interwar period. In 1921, it slightly decreased by 0.1%, which the women worker had occupied 29.5%, and in 1931, it increased to 29.8%. Under the factor of less population just after the Great War, the rate had decreased in 1921. Yet the most important factor is that women still did not gain much right and status in the society. They were not expected to work as the role they worked during the wartime. From Hakim[3], we can also see from the chart of Occupational segregation in Britain during 1901 to 1971. The percentage of men or women working in occupations showed that the women are gaining more social status gradually. For example, in 1901, the workplace was full of men as there were 74% that were 90%+ male workers, 83% were 80%+ men workers, and 95% were 50%+ men workers. After the war, in 1921, the rate slightly decreased, which 70% were 90%+ male workers, 76% were 80%+ men workers, and 92% were 50%+ men workers. It showed that the workplace was less male dominated after the Great War. But it actually increased in 1931 but still less discriminated than in 1901. The power of World War One cannot be measured easily. Yet small transformation could be proved with the above evidence in terms of sex ratio in the workplace.

In terms of occupation type, World War One transformed the British workplace in small extent. People are more skilled after the Great War, for both female and male. For example, the percentage of female white-collar workers increased from 29.8% to 37.6%, female clerical and related employees increased from 21.4% to 44.6% from the 1966 Census. In the

chart of major occupational groups and a percentage of total occupied population[4], it showed that the percentage of manual worker was decreasing from 74.6% in 1911 then 72% in 1921 and 70.3% in 1931. Where the non-manual workers were increasing from 18.7% in 1911 then 21.2% in 1921 and 23.0% in 1931. For women, it is a big improvement in their social status as they can join more skilled career. Yet, during the war they were allocated to participate in the heavy industry, such as chemicals and metal industries, infrastructure etc. They were forced to leave the primary sector. According to the Board of Trade figures, number of women were employed as bank or finance sector in 1914 is 505,000 and gained 429,000 by 1918.[5] Civil services and government establishment were also the occupations had gained lots of female employee during the war. From the above, we can see that the type of occupation had been changed during the war and after the war as well. To certain extent the Great War transformed the British workplace in terms of type of jobs.

In terms of salary, women got lower salary than men during the early 20th century. People worried that the women will get most of the jobs even after the men returned from war, as the cost of the company will be much less, in terms of finance, hiring women will be a greater option. However, this perception did not happen. As many women refuse to have lower wage than the men after the Great War, men could get back to their original position. Surprisingly there was a strike in London where women workers get on buses and trams to oppose unfair wages. This equal pay strike spread to other towns as well, including the South East. From the journal Women's Wages in Britain and Australia During the First World War, the wages of women were

not regulated during the first 9 months of the Great War and not until 1915, women in Midlands working as munitions work gained 33.3% more wages than the government regulated. The higher skills the job required, the more unfair the wages were to the women. The situation is quite chaotic as there were different wage rises according to different job type or country. Thus, if the job is not directly affecting the war, the wages varies a lot. By 1917, men could get 12s as wages while women can get 6s.[6] From getting no wages and unstable wages to 6s, it was an improvement to women though they still not yet gain equal pay as men. Therefore, the Great War did make changes to the British workplace in terms of wages.

In terms of working culture, the Great War had made few changes to how people work in the society. It was very popular to have family-based company or self-hired back in the late 19th century. During the war, as the demand for materials like heavy metal, machine guns, chemicals increased rapidly, factories and other industries had to expand their business and buy more machine, so they can fulfil the demand. Also, a large war requires large number of doctors and nurses in the war field to take care the wounded soldiers. With more training and quantity demand, the workplace had changed. Individual workplace like accounting company, clinic etc, started to expand their size to hire more people and do more business except local or small area. With higher demand as mentioned and limited domestic manufacture[7], mechanisation and mass production became one of the signature culture after the war. By refining the machine, there are less labour needed and cheaper the running cost it would be. Some historian also pointed out that with simpler procedure in factories, women can participate

in this industry. This also explained the employment rate of women increased. Moreover, as mentioned in last paragraph, women labour started a strike for equal pay, it also made the public more concern about labour welfare, social welfare, health etc. Hence, more doctor and nurses and fairer to the workers and labour. For example, shorter working week, minimum wages based on whether time or piece work.[8] Last but not least, the War Cabinet did put out the question of women wages and established a committee to help them strive for equal pay. From the above, we can see the Great War had transformed the nature of work of Britain workplace.

In terms of unions, First World War did make some transformation to the British workplace. ' Women's trade union membership increased by about 160% during the war'[9], said from The Union History. With more job opportunity for the women, they joined the trade union to protect their own basic human rights and rise social status. Work Union is the one who are more precise in making serious commitment for the women. By 1918 they hired 20 women as full-time officials which is rare for the workplace in Britain at that time. Also, the membership rose to over 80, 000. Beside this union, there were also few union at that time, such as the Women's Social and Political Union, National Federation of Women Workers etc. All these union had turn more actively during and after the war and grew especially fast at 1918. Membership figure stood at roughly 750, 000 at the beginning of the period, rising to 6, 500, 000 in 1918.[10] The union had done a lot of attributes to the women and labour right. For example, they moved the first equal pay solution successfully, strikes by engineering workers to against syndicalism etc. From the above we can conclude that the trade union and

different women workers union were making improvement as the war provided them more opportunity to remark the workers contribution to the war and maintain a balanced and healthy society. Such situation boosted women to fight for their own rights not only being a "warworker" but having a stable and good career. So the war did transformed British workplace in some extent.

In terms of unemployment rate, the Great War did make changes to the British workplace in a bad way for interwar period. From the unemployment chart from 1919 to 1937[11], in 1919, the unemployment rate was around 3% where the gross national product (GNP) is 100. And in 1921, the unemployment rate had rose to around 12% and the GNP dropped to 85. The Great Depression took place after the war ended a while. Not only because of the stock market had collapsed in the United States, when the men were back to home it was harder for them to recover and back to their original career. First, as mentioned above, women had lower wages than man, it was more highly likely for organizations and company to hire women if it is not skilled jobs at that time. Second, mechanization had taken place after the war. Mass production and machine can replace numerous male workers and hire less skilled labour. Third, some of the soldiers were mentally unable to go back to normal life. Trauma and experience from war is one of the reasons that men did not go back to their original career. Before the Great Depression took place, the unemployment rate in 1925 to 1929 was high as well. The total labour force unemployment rate was 8.4% while all insured workers was 10.9%.[12] From the above, we can see that the employment rate had dropped rapidly after the war due to various reasons especially

faked demand in shipping industries and weapons. To conclude, World War One transformed the workplace in terms of unemployment.

In conclusion, the workplace had changed in many ways not only as basic as the occupation type and salary, others like sex ratio, trade union, work culture, employment rate were also crucial in judging whether the workplace had changed. As mentioned in the beginning, occupational structure is very important to workplace as this reflect how the society is building and whether it is healthy. And from all the evidence above, we can see they are making effort to improve yet still unacceptable under today's standard. Yet we could see it as a modernization progress. For example, the sex ratio is still imbalanced and there were still children under 15 or around the age is working as part time worker or labour etc. What makes a workplace is not only about the employee or employer, but also the culture and environment itself. Trade Union and wages were the example that shows the Great War was making good impact to the workplace as people were striving for equal pay, higher wages due to these strikes and the government also started to regulate and protect the labour rights. Therefore, from the evidence provided above, World War One did make transformation to workplace but not only one sided and some of them are just short-term effect. Thus, some of the changes could not be explained that is due to the war or other factors. But still the war had transform the workplace to certain extent.

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