

WOMEN WORKERS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Gail Braybon

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GAIL BRAYBON



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To:

My parents, my dogs, Alan and my friends

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PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

This book was originally written soon after I had finished my thesis on the same subject. At the time, I was most interested in men's attitudes to women entering war work, and the standard expectations and prejudices these displayed, and so there is very little here about the views of the women themselves. Since that time, I have been able to fill some of that gap by writing *Out of the Cage* (Pandora, 1987) with Penny Summerfield, which explores women's own feelings about war, work, and employment in the First and Second World Wars, using diaries, typescripts, and interviews. But *Out of the Cage* itself was not designed to be a re-write of our own earlier books about the wars, and lacks the kind of analysis of government, trade union, and employer attitudes found in *Women Workers in the First World War*. Ideally, this book should be read in conjunction with both Penny Summerfield's book, *Women Workers in the Second World War*, also published in paperback by Routledge, and *Out of the Cage*. Together, they give a rounded picture of both wars.

At the end of *Women Workers in the First World War* I wrote that I hoped that other writers would take up some of the subjects mentioned here, and provide more specialised coverage of areas I could mention only briefly. Although women's history is a thriving area, and much interesting research is going on, unfortunately much of this never reaches publication. I have used only a fraction of the original material available, and the war is still a particularly rich area for further study.

PREFACE

This book does not pretend to be a full history of women's work during the First World War. To begin with, I am mostly concerned with the position of working-class women, and thus there is no information on the work of VADs, members of the Land Army, clerks or civil servants, who were primarily middle-class – although it should be evident that many comments made by contemporaries about women's work and their domestic role were aimed at women in general. In addition, although there is some description of women's industrial work, my major interest is in the public and semi-public debates which revolved around such work. What I am trying to show is the remarkable consistency of male attitudes towards women's work, even in the exceptional time of war, and the way in which such attitudes affected the women themselves.

My work here is a development of an MPhil thesis, and although I have, in the last two years, been able to widen the scope of my work considerably, I have still not been able to use all the sources I would have liked, particularly material in the PRO and Imperial War Museum. I have not been funded in my continuing research, and this has been a handicap: it is, indeed, the main reason why I cannot expand this book further. I am very grateful to the Twenty Seven Foundation for the help with travelling expenses during the last few years; without such aid the book would certainly never have been written. Critics of this work will notice many omissions in the source material; I have not been able to do any local studies, which I feel would have been very useful, or follow through union policy in detail between 1914 and 1922, or look at the approach of suffragettes and suffragists as fully as I would like to have done. Although some work has been done in these fields by other writers, there is still much more for historians to do. This book has to be seen as a broad study, and one which has incorporated as many different kinds of source material as possible. I have used government reports and the evidence presented to wartime committees, books of the time, trade union and trade journals, some feminist journals, and newspapers of all kinds. Attitudes towards women's industrial work and opinions about their domestic roles were expressed readily in these, and they represent the view of a broad cross-section of society; these attitudes are what concern me here, as they had a devastating effect upon working-class women after the war, when the public applause

for their 'marvellous work' died away.

In the following chapters, I shall show the way in which the general expectations that women's energies and time should be spent on homes, husbands and children dominated discussions about the desirability of paid work for them, the suitability of certain jobs, and their capabilities as workers. These ideas existed at all levels of society, and the importance of this should be appreciated. I have been criticised for concentrating on women's oppression by some of those who are more concerned about the oppression of the working class in general, and who think that by describing the prejudice of workmen and unions towards women workers I am ignoring the fact that men's behaviour was influenced by their fear of cheap female labour displacing them. I am a socialist as well as a feminist, and appreciate this point, but I see this matter as being more complex than do many labour historians. The following statements sum up my views, and will be elaborated upon during the book.

- (1) The patriarchal system coexists with the capitalist system; the working class have been exploited by the latter, but women have also been oppressed by men of their own or other classes in a multitude of ways.
- (2) The ready acceptance by working-class men of women's lower status, and of strictly defined sex roles at home and work, has bolstered up capitalism and contributed to men's own economic vulnerability. Men who did not wish their wives to work accepted the existence of a cheap female labour force; members of this labour force took low-paid, short-term jobs with the expectation of leaving work on marriage, or were driven to take such work in desperation. This pool of labour was a danger to male workers, yet many men were reluctant to work towards equal pay and equal job opportunities, as such action meant the tacit acceptance of the idea that women need not be defined primarily as wives and mothers.
- (3) The sexual division of labour has also encouraged working-class men to fight for higher male wages *rather than* shorter hours or better conditions for all, and to accept higher risks at work. This fight has been waged on the assumption that women need less money when working, that they will be dependent upon men for most of their lives, and that they will perform all domestic tasks and look after the children (whether or not they are doing paid work themselves), thus sparing the exhausted male worker such chores.

As working-class women were invariably worse off than any other section of the population under this economic system, whether or not they were wage-earners, I make no excuses for wishing to examine the rhetoric and action used to keep them in their 'proper place'. Labour historians have examined the nature of men's oppression; I hope to throw some light on that of working-class women. They can be seen as a coherent group, whether or not they were full-time wage-earners for life, since all of them were affected in some way by the assumptions about women's role in society. Much of this book is concerned with the way in which attitudes towards them influenced their lives as paid workers, as most working-class women were employed for at least part of their lives, but in addition the importance of their unpaid domestic work has to be taken into account. It was this which was used to limit their job opportunities and wages, and this which made their lives harder.

There is another point which I would like to clarify. In the following pages I make much of the importance for women of the right to paid work. In many ways there is nothing wonderful about the right to work (hence the slogans which went up around Paris in 1968, 'Never Work'), as it simply means the right to sell your time and your labour for an inadequate sum of money. But women always worked; it was simply a matter of whether they were doing *paid* work or unpaid, and whether they were forced into the ghetto of low-paid jobs or allowed to enter other trades. Women before and after the war were often obliged to depend upon men for financial support or work at rates few men would have accepted; in this context the 'right to work' and the right to enter men's trades were important indeed.

Finally, it should be obvious that I see the evidence in this book as being relevant to the present. A study of women's position during the First World War isolates one phase of a continuum. Research (undertaken by Penny Summerfield, and to be published shortly) indicates that even during the Second World War, when, it is popularly assumed, women were allowed into men's jobs *en masse*, the assumption that a woman's first responsibility was to her home and family remained remarkably resilient, and acted as a brake on the opening up of opportunities for women. The demand for women's labour during the two wars may suggest that at this time, if no other, views of women's position and role might change — such has been the conviction of many a social historian when describing the granting of women's suffrage. Yet in fact views of women remained consistent during the war. Perhaps traditionalist views were even encouraged by the events of 1914 to 1918. By the end of the war there was a strong desire to get back to the

'normality' or 'stability' of peacetime, and fears about sudden change were fuelled by the October Russian Revolution – with all this symbolised for the position of women in Russia – and by the seeming reluctance of women in England to abandon their wartime jobs and 'go home'. Working-class women wage-earners in the 1920s had to face far more hostility than they had before the war. The fact that women did *not* escape from the classic female trades is important, and many of the features which characterised the position of working-class women in industry then still exist today.

1 **WOMEN'S POSITION IN THE LABOUR FORCE BEFORE 1914**

No analysis of women's work during the First World War would be complete without some description of the conditions and attitudes which existed before 1914. Obviously I can only touch upon certain aspects of women's work here – other writers have covered the nineteenth century in far more depth¹ – but in this chapter I want to do two things: first, to establish the nature of women's industrial work before the war and, secondly, to give some idea of prevailing attitudes towards women as workers. The years between 1890 and 1914 concern me most, but I shall give a fairly brief description of women's work in earlier years, as the pattern of labour which existed by the turn of the century was established by the Industrial Revolution. Similarly, the feelings expressed about 'women's role' in the 1900s had their roots in Victorian ideas about suitable work, and the duties of wives and mothers. Although this is very much a background chapter, certain features of particular relevance to later chapters should become clear, particularly the close association between job opportunities open to working-class women and ideas about Women's Role in society.

The Industrial Revolution and its Effects

The Industrial Revolution had a profound effect upon the nature of women's paid work and their role in the home.² The development of the factory system led to the separation of 'home' and 'work' for those drawn into the new industries. In earlier years much industrial work was done in the homes of the workers: carding, spinning and weaving of wool and cotton, knitting, glove making, etc., were done by men, women and children, at the hours they chose. Such work was often interspersed with agricultural labour for local farmers, or work upon the cottagers' own gardens or common land. Many families thus had a varied source of income, and the whole family was a productive unit, producing goods for its own consumption and for sale to others. Typically, in the textile industry the wages earned by the whole family were paid to the man, as the 'head' of the family, even though wives and children worked just as hard. Different processes were performed by men, women and

children under the same roof, and they were paid a 'family wage'.

The Industrial Revolution took place during the Agrarian Revolution — which involved the enclosure of common land and the modernisation of farms — and thus male and female workers in all areas found their land disappearing, while those in the textile industry were faced with competition from powered machinery.³ Textiles lay at the heart of the Industrial Revolution; first cotton spinning, then carding and weaving went into the factory. Although handworkers attempted for a while to compete, this was impossible as machinery became more sophisticated. Wool saw less speedy changes and many other hand industries remained, but cotton had set the pace, and factory work was regarded as increasingly normal.

A completely different pattern of life was established for both male and female workers in the new industries, and outside. Deprived of additional income from common land, and of work in domestic industries, those in many areas became dependent upon labouring full-time for farmers. Those in the emergent textile towns had to adjust to life in the factory. The cotton industry had employed many women in the home; it now employed them in weaving sheds and card rooms, and they were often preferred, with children, to men. Even at this early stage of industrialisation they were said to be more docile and co-operative and more amenable to the discipline of the factory, which many men resisted bitterly. They were also cheaper to employ than men. The old idea of the 'family wage', which had never been appropriate to single women living alone, even in the pre-industrial age, was adapted to fit the changing circumstances. Women were paid less than men because it was assumed that they were living with husbands or fathers who were also working. Working men increasingly felt that women were taking jobs which should have gone to men, and they argued that as women were classed as dependants, men's employment should be given priority. Employers were reluctant to accept this philosophy to begin with, eager though they were to exploit the idea that women required less money, but the developing labour organisations and trade unions took up the cause of working-class men, rather than women, and they were quite prepared to press for the exclusion of women from certain jobs, partly for economic reasons, partly for reasons which will be discussed shortly.

By the mid-nineteenth century women made up the bulk of power-loom weavers, and were seen as natural recruits for any other mechanised industries. They were also being employed as domestic servants in ever increasing numbers — far more women than men were servants

throughout the century. At the same time, they were being withdrawn from mining, which was now considered to be unsuitable work for them – although many women did hard and heavy work in agriculture at lower wages, and there remained thousands of women who still worked long and tedious hours in cottage industries and aroused little attention from middle-class investigators (with the notable exception of the handloom weavers). The pattern of employment for men, women and children which existed in 1914 was established during the second half of the nineteenth century. Men and women in the factory trades went out to work, leaving their homes for more than a dozen hours a day, were usually paid in cash, and bought food, clothes and fuel with these wages, where once they had grown food, made clothes and cut wood. The house was no longer the centre of industry, and no longer the place where goods were produced for the consumption of the family. Running a home, which had once been a full-time task, and included care of garden and animals, now became a matter of cleaning, cooking and child care. Child care meant looking after children who had once been occupied in domestic industry themselves; formerly men and women could supervise their children's activities while they were all working; as adults now went out to work, and children were steadily withdrawn from the factories and mines which had been so eager to employ them in the early days of industrialisation, it was clear that somebody had to take care of them. Although the development of state education ensured that they would be supervised for part of the day, schooldays were shorter than workdays, children did not start until the age of four or five,⁴ and they went home at lunch-time. It was assumed that women, those who had always organised home life, should stay at home to look after the children.

The flourishing factory system affected the labour of both sexes, but the repercussions were different for men and women. Women were established as quick, docile workers, ideal for machine minding, but they were also seen increasingly as men's competitors. They found themselves capable of earning independently (instead of earning as part of the family unit), but also encountered the belief that they were taking work away from men by working for lower wages, and that they should, if married, retire to look after their children. Women had not given up paid work on marriage in pre-industrial times; those who worked in agriculture or in the hand industries had been expected to help maintain the family. But attitudes were changing as society changed. This was partly because children had to be looked after by an 'unoccupied' adult. It was also because men saw the retreat of married women

from paid work as improving their own chances of finding and holding work. But there was another factor in operation as well. The new middle classes did not approve of married women working. To them a leisured wife was a sign of a man's success — alone, he was making enough money to keep his family in comfort. Throughout the first sixty or so years of the nineteenth century, the number of middle-class men and women was increasing, and their standard of living rose steadily. The money they acquired went on houses, possessions, large families and servants. Middle-class women were withdrawn not only from paid labour, but from many of the domestic tasks which had occupied their mothers and grandmothers. Their role was to devote themselves to their husbands, and, above all, to their children: motherhood was 'the consummation of the world's joy to a true woman',⁵ or, as Frances Power Cobbe put it: 'the great and paramount duties of a mother and wife once adopted, every other interest sinks, by the beneficent laws of our nature, into a subordinate place in normally constituted minds.'⁶ The home became the middle-class man's retreat from the world of business and competition, and the wife who presided over this retreat was not to be sullied by paid work herself. Domestic work was also unsuitable; she was supposed to spend her time educating her children while servants performed the menial tasks. Large numbers of cheap servants were vital to this world.

What, it may be asked, has this scheme of things to do with the domestic lives of the working classes? In many ways it was entirely inappropriate. Although working men were generally paid more than women, this wage alone was seldom enough to support families in any degree of comfort. A skilled man might be able to support a wife and a number of children, but well-paid skilled men were in the minority. In any case, even the most steady workman could find himself laid off or ill, and the only aid the state offered was in the workhouse. A family dependent upon a single wage-earner was very vulnerable. For those working-class women who did give up work on marriage, life was very different from the middle-class ideal. They could not devote themselves to the moral education of their children as they had far too much domestic work to do. This work was often made harder by the fact that only one wage was coming in — cheaper food was bought, more clothes had to be altered or mended, accommodation was worse, washing was done at home instead of being sent to the laundry. Many married women were sacked from factory work when they married, or when their first child arrived, but found that they had to take in washing or sewing or go out cleaning in order to make ends meet.

But the concept of the 'idle' wife was increasingly influential. Working

women were sacked on marriage simply because a number of manufacturers also believed that they should be at home looking after homes and husbands. Pressure groups forced Parliament to consider what was 'suitable' work for women who were, or would become, wives and mothers – and governments which were usually reluctant to interfere at all in industry nevertheless passed Factory Acts limiting women's labour. Middle-class authors and investigators had much power when backed by an outraged electorate. Wanda Neff described this influence in her book *Victorian Working Women*:

But even while economists and the manufacturers were satisfied with the general status of women in the textile factories, other forces entered the question. The sentimental prejudices of the average Englishman were arraigned against a system which, in his opinion, attacked the institution of the home, ranked by him above scientific theories or private fortunes . . . All women were regarded in the first half of the nineteenth century solely as potential mothers. The worker with her own earnings was, accordingly, an affront against nature and the protective instincts of man. That the family was affected by the labour of girls and women in the mills was a consideration that raised general concern. The question of the health of human beings who were entrusted with the responsibility of the next generation, the conflict of factory work and long hours with domestic life and with a mother's care of her home and children, the moral and spiritual degradation which might result from the employment of females outside their homes – with all this most of the literature dealing with the new industrial age was primarily concerned.⁷

This ideology of women and the home had a more insidious influence also. Skilled working men aspired to middle-class respectability. For them too a non-working wife became a status symbol, and they readily adopted the idea that wives should devote themselves to the comfort of husbands and children. Many trade unionists, fighting for better wages and more secure employment, also adopted this ideology. A non-working wife seemed to be the answer to many problems. As she withdrew from the work-force she ceased to compete with men; she provided a comfortable retreat for the hard-working man; she did all the domestic chores; she kept the children from harm. More and more she appeared to be a 'right' that the working man could aspire to, and even a symbol of the working class's struggle against capitalism. When all men earned good wages, their wives need work no longer.

Although women were theoretically withdrawn from underground mining during the nineteenth century, and restrictions on night work and long hours were adopted in the new factory trades, many married women continued to work, in spite of social pressure not to. A large number of them were *hidden* workers – those who did paid work in their homes for atrocious wages, or worked a few hours a day as char-women. Others worked for occasional spells, when the family particularly needed the money, or returned to work when widowed. Only in the cotton and pottery industries did many women continue to go *out* to work after marriage on a regular basis. These worked under the close scrutiny of society: MPs, novelists, philanthropists, all took it upon themselves to study the ill-effects of such work upon homes, husbands and children. To begin with, this concern often stemmed from a general distaste for the effects of the factory system upon established life, but increasingly it became centred upon women. It is worth looking at views of working-class women's work in some detail here, since they have elements in common with attitudes expressed in the early twentieth century, and even during the First World War. Two industries in particular attracted attention in the 1830s and 1840s; one was mining, which many considered was unsuitable for all women; the other was cotton-weaving, which critics believed should not be done by married women – debates on the cotton workers continued throughout the century.

Mining was hard, dirty and dangerous work for both sexes and all age groups. Not surprisingly, many people felt that children should be withdrawn from such work – it stunted their growth, led to deformities, and imposed heavy work and long hours on those who were least able to protest. But much attention was also paid to the work of women in the mines. This was partly because it was felt that such labour was a harsh burden on those who were physically weaker than men, and that it might damage their health and childbearing capacity. It was also because of the possible effect of the working conditions upon women's behaviour and their social role. One Factory Commissioner wrote:

They are to be found alike vulgar in manner and obscene in language: but who can feel surprised at their debased condition when they are known to be constantly associated, and associated only, with men and boys, living and labouring in a state of disgusting nakedness and brutality.⁸

Observers may have been genuinely concerned about the harshness of the work, but few can doubt that the fact that half-naked men and

women worked together in the darkness shocked them at least as much, if not more. In addition, women's work was supposed to destroy the comfort of the home. They returned to their houses in the evenings, blackened and exhausted, and reluctant to do domestic work and cook proper meals. They thus failed to be caring wives, and were seen as playing a part in the brutalisation of their husbands. As the writers of the Report on Mines expressed it:

Give to the Collier the comforts of a clean and cheerful home, and the companionship of a sober and decently-educated female, not degraded to brute labour by working in the pits; let her attend to a mother's and housewife's duties; and you will soon change the moral condition of the collier.⁹

One can see again evidence of the strongly held feeling that women should be the guiding light of the home. Lord Shaftesbury was quite happy to exploit further the horror aroused by the descriptions of women's work, in his speeches to Parliament:

They know nothing that they ought to know . . . they are rendered unfit for the duties of women by overwork, and become utterly demoralized. In the male the moral effects of the system are very sad, but in the female they are infinitely worse, not alone upon themselves, but upon their families, upon society, and, I may add, upon the country itself. It is bad enough if you corrupt the man, but if you corrupt the woman, you poison the waters of life at the very fountain.¹⁰

This was an all too common theme throughout the nineteenth century; not only were women seen as being more susceptible to physical injury, they were also believed to succumb more readily to moral corruption (which then expressed itself in the form of bad language, promiscuity, profanity, etc., all of which were classed as equally dangerous to society). The state of their physical health was said to be more important than that of men, because of their childbearing role, and ironically they were supposed to remain men's moral superiors — a source of guidance to husbands and children alike.¹¹

The result of the furore over women in the mines was legislation to ban them from working underground. Unfortunately, no alternative work was offered to them, and families found their incomes cut drastically, while single women faced starvation. The middle-class reformers

did nothing about this unfortunate state of affairs. Two additional points can be made. Mining was hard work, but wages in this industry were much higher than those of many classic 'women's trades'. Women miners could afford to eat better food than the women in more 'suitable' trades. In addition, it is an interesting fact that although women were removed from the pits by the Mines Act, boys over the age of 11 were still employed. One has to wonder now whether a twenty-year-old woman or a twelve-year-old boy suffered the more from gruelling pit work. Middle-class reformers reacted to bad conditions by *banning women from the work* instead of calling for improvements for men and women alike. This response became typical, and was adopted by later trade unionists as well.

Women's work in the cotton mills did not cause quite such an outrage, although there were plenty, like Shaftesbury, who exaggerated the harshness of the work or the unpleasantness of factory conditions in order to hammer home their points about the ill effects of such labour. Weaving and carding were not exceptionally hard work, and no one could stir up public anger by producing etchings of half-naked workers, as they had done during debates about women miners. Nevertheless, many saw the work as being particularly harmful for married women, who would neglect home, husband and babies, and break up the family. As Lord Shaftesbury (by this time Lord Ashley) put it:

You are poisoning the very sources of order and happiness and virtue; you are tearing up root and branch all relations of families to one another; you are annulling, as it were, the institution of domestic life decreed by Providence Himself, the wisest and kindest of all earthly ordinances, the mainstay of peace and virtue and therein of national security.¹²

Or, to quote a factory inspector:

we will not see that female labour in factories, even though it be necessary, is at variance with domestic teaching, and that, for the sake of the wages it brings, everything that is good and holy in the female character is often being sacrificed.¹³

Married women's work was supposed to lead to poor housewifery — although none of the critics stopped to wonder about the general standards of working-class housewifery, and the adverse effects of poverty, poor housing, lack of good food — and to promiscuity. Women's relatively