WOMEN WORKERS AND THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR:

LIVERPOOL 1890 - 1939

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A number of historians and sociologists have identified a sexual division of labour within the occupational structures of capitalist economies. In the description of this sexual division of labour, commentators have pointed to the concentration of women workers in a narrow range of industries and occupations, widely regarded as unskilled and lacking in social status, and in which women are low paid and poorly unionised.

This study seeks to examine the nature of the sexual division of labour in the occupational structure of the city of Liverpool over a specific historical period - from the late 19th century to 1939. Further, it is concerned to analyse the social processes which sustained and reproduced this sexual division of labour during the period. Finally, it aims to explore the impact of this sexual division of labour on the lives of working class women in the city.

A sexual division of labour was apparent at the beginning of the period under review and became progressively more pronounced through a time of technological change in industry and decline in the city's economy. The study finds that the social processes which sustained this sexual division of labour in Liverpool were generated within diverse areas of social life and the social structure. It is argued that the main arenas within which the sexual division of labour was maintained were the family, the workplace and the labour process, the state and the local labour market. Specifically, the inter-relationship of the consciousness and actions of men and women at work, the structure of the labour market and the prevailing ideologies of the period, operative within these arenas, are seen to be effective in shaping the structure of the sexual division of labour. Further, it is found that women workers in Liverpool experienced working conditions dominated by very low pay, irregular and casual working and difficulties with regard to collective organisation. A noticeable deskilling of significant sections of the female labour force after the first decade of the 20th century is revealed by the study. This and other developments in the sexual division of labour were continuously underpinned by the decisive importance of the personal service industry as an area of women's employment. It is argued that the city's economic, social and labour history can only be fully appreciated from a perspective which incorporates an analysis of the history of the sexual division of labour and the lives of working women.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> 'But surely', she thought, 'there is something extraordinary about women's lives.... They are in the majority, time has approved. Why should there be this feeling of oddness, of incongruity? It was perhaps because every inch of a woman's life as she lived it struck her as astonishing, either because nothing like what she was experiencing had ever been recorded, or because it had been recorded only falsely or superficially.'
> From the novel The Thinking Reed by Rebecca West

It has now become a commonplace to argue that 'women are hidden from history'; that at best there exists only a superficial account of women's lives over time, whilst the literature concerning whole historical periods and specific aspects of social, political and economic history totally lacks a female dimension. One feature of the resurgence of the feminist movement in Britain and elsewhere in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the desire to rediscover women's past and place the experience and position of women at that time in an historical perspective. The work of Sheila Rowbotham and others in the early 1970s was an inspiration to many women keen to resituate themselves within the development of contemporary capitalism.[1] Since that time our knowledge of women's history has expanded enormously. A considerable amount of original research has been undertaken. Texts and documents from the 19th century and early 20th century have been rediscovered and a rich and fascina-

1. Sheila Rowbotham, Hidden from History 'Pluto Press, London 1973); Jo O'Brien, Women's Liberation in Labour History: A Case Study from Nottingham (Spokesman Pamphlets, Nottingham 1972); A. Davin, 'Women and History' in The Body Politic, Stage I (London 1972).

ting history is emerging which had been almost totally neglected hitherto.[2]

Despite this flourishing of interest, however, women's history has remained something of a specialist field; a subject apparently informed by a specific set of problems and distinguishable from mainstream labour and social history. It continues to be research largely undertaken by women themselves and the process of incorporating its findings within an existing body of historical knowledge has barely begun. This is undoubtedly the result of the long neglect of women's history. Simply in order to challenge the assumption, often made, that women's contribution to economic and political life is essentially peripheral, uninteresting or even non-existent, it has been important to present findings in a format which focuses exclusively on women. Indeed, it must remain a central aim of women's history to provide information about women's lives which is at present hidden and inaccessible.

A number of feminist historians have, however, challenged the tendency for women's history to develop as a wholly distinct sphere of historical knowledge.[3] But the insertion of a new subject - woman - into a pre-existing analysis of society and history has proved to be a formidable task. The original interpretation of an event, an historical period, a social movement or an institution is totally transformed. Our understanding of the past, or the present, no

2. See Sonya O. Rose, 'Gender at Work: Sex, Class and Industrial Capitalism', History Workshop Journal, Issue 21, Spring 1986, for a review of some of the recent literature.
3. See, for example, S. Alexander and A. Davin, 'Feminist History', History Workshp Journal, 1, Spring 1976; Jill Norris, 'Women's history', Bulletin of the North West Labour History Society, 7, 1980-81.

longer has the same meaning once we incorporate within it the specific features of the female experience. But that such a project is vital to our understanding of the past must be asserted, for social development has been shaped by both sexes and the interaction between them. However amorphous our knowledge of women's historical experience, this 'new subject' was, in fact, there all the time making history. The relationships, conflicts and division between the sexes have been part of the motive force of social change, coexisting with and shaping the class struggle and the development of capitalist society.

One result of approaching women's history as a discrete sphere of knowledge is a tendency to generalise about women's experience. As feminist historians have begun to relocate women within the body of historical and sociological research the diversity of women's history has been disclosed. There is no single experience to be placed under the heading 'women', but a vast range of differing experiences, as complex and contradictory as those of men. Unfortunately, however, this complexity often slips from our grasp in the face of scarce and deficient source material. The detail of women's lived experience and the meaning working class women placed upon the events and history which they shaped are all too often lost and unrecorded. And the written history of working class women comes largely from the pens and imaginations of the middle class. The incompleteness of the resources available to reconstruct the past through a perspective focused on women forces generalisations upon us. And speculation may sometimes take the place of interpretations more firmly rooted in unequivocal evidence.

This study examines the specificity of female waged labour and explores the social processes which contribute to the reproduction of sexual divisions of labour within the occupational structure. The detail is provided by the labour and social history of the city of Liverpool in the period between 1890 and 1939. The Liverpool working class has, of course, attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. The city is rich in those spectacular events which have formed the meat of labour history. The great dock strikes of 1890 and 1911, the struggle for recognition of the National Union of Seamen and Firemen before 1911 and the renowned rank and file militancy of local seamen in the decades after that, the violent clashes between the police and the unemployed in the inter-war years and even a police strike. Events such as these took place against the backdrop of the migration of Irish, African and Chinese workers into the city, the resulting hostility they faced - in particular the ferocity of a militant Protestantism which frequently led to street conflict within the Catholic community - and an intense poverty amongst the dockside population. And chronic poverty co-existed with immense wealth. The merchants and ship owners, who amassed fortunes from the port's trade built fine, impressive houses but a stone's throw from the dockland slums.

The fascination with the momentous occasions in the city's labour history and with the complexity and diversity of its population is clearly understandable. But in all the published work on the history of the city, women have hardly been mentioned. As a contribution to the project of rescuing women from this oblivion this study places them at the forefront of its enquiry. It is hoped,

however, that a seclusive approach is simultaneously avoided; that the working lives of women described here are located within the fabric of Liverpool's social structure and culture.

The essence of Liverpool's economic, social and political history lies in the dominance of the port and port-related industries within the local economy. Even in the contemporary period, as Liverpool faces a severe economic recession, an analysis of trade through the port remains central to an understanding of this crisis, even though the fact to be established and explained is the absence of that trade. The devastation of the inner city today reflects, above all, the decline of the port, just as the lives, culture and poverty of the dockside population in the past can only be understood in the context of an economy based almost entirely on trade.

The singular importance of the port within the Liverpool economy in the period under review to men's lives, as workers, trade unionists and citizens has formed the basic premise of contemporary research on the city. But an analysis of women's work and women workers is no less tied to the city's dependence on trade. For it was the imbalance in the local economy which this created that left women with an extremely narrow range of job opportunities. A stunted manufacturing sector encouraged their concentration in the low paid, personal service industry. Indeed, it is a strange irony that whilst Liverpool's trading role was representative of Britain's history as an advanced, imperialist nation, thousands of its local women workers worked in conditions more reminiscent of the Third World than the First.

There are other relationships between the predominant source of male employment, in and around the docks, and women's lives to be analysed and explored. The female labour market and the nature of the work in which women were employed were partially structured by the underemployment of a large proportion of local working class men, dependent for a living on casual dock employment. Women's search for work had a particularly desperate edge to it in a city where the regular wage was a rarity. And casualism had a profound impact on women as wives and mothers, since it was they who managed the fluctuating and insufficient income of male workers, a duty often achieved at the expense of their own well-being and health.

Many industrial towns were, of course, similarly based upon a male-dominated industry. But labour history has generally failed to explore the implications for women of their exclusion from the dynamic focus of these towns. Women's lack of involvement in a region's primary industry has made them almost invisible; ghosts who emerge only fleetingly from the domestic sphere. In contrast, this enquiry questions the significance for women of working outside the industry which defined the character of the city. How were women's lives, as mothers, workers and citizens shaped by this exclusion? Equally, conventional history underestimates the importance of women's economic activity. The woman street seller or cleaner and the mother at home hardly have a resonance within our images of labour history. But for the women and men who lived and made history the work of such women was often fundamental to family survival and shaped the trajectories of people's lives. Indeed, in Liverpool the income earned by women can be shown to be as vital to working class subsistence as the wages brought home by men.

Chapter Two sets out the framework for this study. It aims, first, to establish the persistence of a rigid sexual division of labour within the occupational structure in Britain throughout the period under review and, further, describes the characteristic features of female waged labour. Secondly, it argues that the mechanisms which sustained and reproduced the sexual division of labour were operative within diverse areas of the social structure. Four spheres of the social structure are isolated and explored in terms of their significance as arenas within which the social processes which tend to reproduce sexual divisions of labour are generated: the family, the workplace and the labour process, the state, and the local labour market. These spheres of social life provide the themes which structure the examination of the sexual division of labour in Liverpool and the analysis of the social processes which sustained it.

Three outlines the structure of the Liverpool labour market and the sexual division of labour within it in the period between 1890 and 1939. It establishes the importance of port-based service industries within the local economy and seeks to explore the sociological significance of the predominance of male dock workers within the occupational structure of the city. The primary concern of this chapter is with the implications for women's lives of the economic dependence of a large proportion of local working class men on work based in and around the docks. The analysis focuses on two aspects of men's employment as dock labourers. First, it looks at the material consequences for women as wives, mothers and workers of the casual recruitment of male dockers. How did the casualism central to the male labour market and the poverty

which resulted from the underemployment of men reflect on women's lived experiences in the city? Secondly, it examines the workplace culture and consciousness generated amongst men at the docks and seeks to analyse the extent to which this culture was influential in maintaining sexual divisions of labour.

Chapters Four and Five examine the characteristics and changing structure of the female labour market in Liverpool and describe and analyse the specificity of women's waged work in the city. Chapter Four looks at four key areas of women's employment in Liverpool in the period: the tobacco industry, sack repair and rag and cotton picking, clerical work and waged domestic work. It seeks to establish the importance of women's wages within working class households, the low wages and poverty which typically confronted wage-earning women in the city and the severe limitations of the local female labour market. It is further concerned with analysing the extent to which women's day-to-day experiences at work and the changes in the labour process within women's occupations, became mechanisms which supported the tendency for a rigid sexual division of labour to be continuously reproduced.

Chapter Five extends the analysis of women's employment in Liverpool developed in the previous chapter. First, it explores the history of women's employment in the clothing industry of the city; the main area of women's work in the manufacturing sector. This history is illustrative of many of the features which defined and structured women's status and value as workers in Liverpool as a whole. It examines the nature and conditions of women's work in the industry,

changes which occurred in the labour process within it and the relationships and divisions which developed between male and female clothing workers. It seeks to uncover the way in which the interaction of these aspects of women's experience as clothing workers encouraged the consolidation of a sexual division of labour within the industry whereby women were increasingly concentrated in low paid work, categorised as unskilled. The second part of this chapter is concerned with the way in which pre-existing divisions within the working class became progressively more pronounced in the period of mass unemployment between the wars. It argues that the consequences of this for women's status, value and dignity as workers were particularly detrimental. Women, already disadvantaged as workers, now faced a more intense manifestation of the social processes and ideologies which structured the poor quality of their working lives. The intensification of the exploitation of women workers and extent of their unemployment are developments largely hidden from our understanding of the 1920s and 1930s. But the impact of this period on women's lives and their future as workers was marked. A sexual division of labour which confined women to certain areas of the economy was consolidated.

Chapter Six looks at the role played by the local and national state in delineating the boundaries of the sexual division of labour in the 1920s and 1930s. In particular, it is concerned with the way in which the content of unemployment legislation and the means by which it was administered were infused with ideologies of gender division, the effect of which was to reinforce the tendency for women to be confined to low paid work in the personal service sector.

The genuineness of women's unemployment became a matter of public debate, fuelling the view that women's right to work was incomparable to men's. Social policy in respect of female unemployment revealed an ideology which discriminated against them as workers and, combined with the developments taking place in the labour process in many industries, encouraged a retrenchment in the traditional ordering of the sexual division of labour.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SPECIFICITY OF FEMALE WAGED LABOUR AND THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

In the period between 1890 and the present there has been no time when all sections of the working class in Britain have been able to enjoy a life free from the anxieties which result from a low income, unemployment or unhealthy working conditions. Even in the relatively prosperous years of the 1950s and 1960s, popularly defined as years of full employment and 'working class affluence', low pay persisted, full-time work was not available to all those who sought it and workers continued to be killed and maimed in accidence at their workplaces. The background to our understanding of women's work and women workers are precisely factors such as these; that few working class men and women born between the mid-19th century and the 1930s have not experienced poverty, or at least a poor quality of life, at some time during their lives. But clearly, whilst some sections of the working class have enjoyed a degree of prosperity in their working lives and a dignity at their work, others have not. Within any broad social grouping there are those whose life story challenges a neat categorisation. Nevertheless, divisions within the working class based upon racial origin, nationality, religion, skill, educational qualifications and gender have been consistently reflected in contrasting experiences in the labour market and the workplace in a way which has denied to one group of workers the standard of living and quality of life offered to others. And these divisions have been equally apparent outside of the labour market, shaping the trajectory of many people's lives.

The focus of this study is the distinctiveness of women's experience as waged workers and the implications of this for women's lives more generally. It seeks to describe and explain sexual divisions of labour within the occupational structure and to explore the changing patterns of these divisions over time. Above all, the aim is to provide an exposition of the mechanisms through which sexual divisions in the wage sector are sustained and continuously reproduced. The study is drawn from the detail of a specific period of Liverpool's history. As such, it aims to reveal the social processes which have reproduced sexual divisions in a concrete situation, rather than to analyse general tendencies by which the sexual division of labour is constructed within the capitalist mode of production. It is hoped, however, that the analysis developed here has a wider significance, raising questions relevant to a more general understanding of the sexual division of labour within the British economy and complementary to the growing body of research in this field.

Throughout the period under review, research concerned with female waged labour has revealed that women have constituted a distinct grouping of workers who have consistently faced an intense exploitation at work. According to one study, 'To the Victorians belongs the discovery of the woman worker as an object of pity, and in the literature of the early 19th century one first finds her portrayed as a victim of long hours, unfavourable conditions and general injustice.'[1] As a number of writers have recently pointed out, the interest of middle class Victorians in the lives of working women was informed not only by concern over the very poor working

1. W.F. Neff, Victorian Working Women: An Historical and Literary Study of Women in British Industries and Professions 1832-1850 (George Allen and Unwin, London 1929) p. 11.

conditions under which many women laboured, but also by the fear that the employment of women as wage labourers was undermining and destroying family life. Indeed, Sally Alexander has argued,

> Because of women's very special responsibility for society's well-being, it was the woman working outside the home who received most attention from the parliamentary commissioners, and to push through legislative reform, emphasis was placed, not on the hours of work, rates of pay and dangers from unsafe machinery - although these were mentioned - but on the moral and spiritual degradation said to accompany female employment; especially the mingling of the sexes and the neglect of domestic comforts. 2

The squalor in which many working class families were forced to live, a result of poverty and substandard housing, was interpreted as proof of the inadequacies of the domestic capabilities of working class women. The ideals of domestic life nurtured by the middle class stood in sharp contrast to the realities of working class life and, defined as a 'problem' by the middle class, the solutions posed focussed on the reorganisation of women's lives.

Given these preoccupations of the bourgeoisie, the conditions of women's labour became a major focus of social comment and government enquiry in the 1880s and 1890s. One aspect of women's employment highlighted as a major area of concern by government investigations and the research of independent bodies was the extent of 'sweating' in some of the main occupations in which women were employed. According to the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System, the sweated trades were characterised by the payment of wages barely sufficient to sustain existence, excessively long hours of work and insanitary conditions.[3] This was the case in trades such as tailoring, mantle-making, shirt-making, furriery

2. Sally Alexander, Women's Work in 19th Century London: A Study of the Years 1820-1850 (The Journeyman Press, London and West Nyack 1983) p. 9; See also Sheila Rowbotham, Hidden from History (Pluto Press, London, Third Edition 1977) pp. 56-7.
3. Fifth Report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System, 1889, p. xxlii.

and chain-making. Much of this work was carried out by women in small workshops run by middlemen working under contract to other firms. And a great number of female workers in these trades worked in their own homes. But some women who worked in factories and in the workshops of businesses which did not contract out their work to middlemen were also described as sweated workers.

The Select Committee located the source of sweating in the material conditions of life within the cities and large towns of Britain, towns in which the opportunities available to women as workers were often limited. Their commentary on this exposed that bourgeois opinion which whilst informed by a sympathy for the plight of working women was also tinged with the view that blame for their conditions lay, in part, on their own shoulders.

> ....it may be said that the inefficiency of many of the lower class of workers, early marriages, and the tendency of the residuum of the population in large towns to form a helpless community, together with the low standard of life and the excessive supply of unskilled labour, are the chief factors in producing sweating. Moreover, a large supply of unskilled labour is available in consequence of the fact that married women working at unskilled labour in their own homes, in the intervals of attendance on their domestic duties and not wholly supporting themselves, can afford to work at what would be starvation wages to unmarried women. Such being the conditions of the labour market, abundant materials exist to supply an unscrupulous employer with workers hopelessly dependent upon him. 4

The findings of the Select Committee were confirmed by the evidence given to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1893 to 1894. Again, what was revealed was the widespread payment of very low wages to women, the insanitary and overcrowded conditions in which they worked and the dependence of many industries on home workers. In certain towns, where the principal industries employed men on

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4. Ibid., p.xxlii.

a casual and irregular basis, women's employment patterns were also characteristically casual. Married women, in particular, could often find work only irregularly and on the fringes of industries, for example, as home workers to the clothing trade, as neighbourhood-based washerwomen or in other domestic work which employed them only intermittently, as street sellers or match box makers. Such was the case in Liverpool in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Thus, as Clara Collett observed,

> ....there is a very large class of women and girls in Liverpool who pick up a living by odd jobs.... The kind of work offered and the circumstances under which it is sought (i.e. irregular employment for men) all tend to keep in existence a large class of irregular female labour, and with it a dislike of regular work. 5

Low hourly wage rates, combined with irregular employment tended to further depress the income earned by women, as did the hidden costs facing homeworkers. They supplied not only heat and light but, invariably, also some of the materials used to make a product. Home workers also lost time and money fetching and returning work and waiting for it at the factory.[6] And the irregular and low earnings of women forced many to undertake a number of casual jobs within a working week. Others took in lodgers to supplement the family income.[7]

The revelations of government enquiries of the chronic poverty amongst working class women encouraged a number of organisations to campaign on their behalf. In particular, the Women's Industrial

5. Royal Commission on Labour, Reports from the Lady Assistant Commissioners, 1893-4 (c. 6894 - XX111) Vol. XXXV11 Part 1, 'Report of Miss Clara E Collett on the conditions of work in Liverpool and Manchester', p. 67.
6. Report of an Enquiry by the Investigation Committee of the Liverpool Women's Industrial Council, Home Work in Liverpool (The Northern Publishing Co Ltd, Liverpool 1908) p. 6.
7. See Leonore Davidoff, 'The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in 19th and 20th Century England' by Sandra Burman (ed.) Fit Work for Women (Croom Helm, London 1979) pp. 64-97.

Council, the Women's Trade Union League and the Anti-Sweating League undertook independent research on women workers and organised conferences and exhibitions with the aim of urging the Government to extend employment legislation to protect the interests of low paid women workers. Pressure from this lobby led to the appointment, in 1908, of a Select Committee on Homework. Its recommendations were incorporated into the Trade Board Act of 1909, which set minimum wage rates in a number of sweated trades.[8] Nevertheless, subsequent research confirmed that improvements in women's industrial conditions came about only slowly and unevenly. Even in the trades covered by the Trade Board Act ineffective monitoring left many employers free to evade its legal requirements, and there is evidence that the minimum wage rates were not put into effect widely amongst homeworkers.[9] Moreover, the minimum wages set by the Trade Boards were extremely low. And many of the occupations in which women worked were, of course, not covered by the terms of the Act. In general, the conditions in which women worked and the wages paid to them remained considerably inferior to those of men until the Second World War.[10] Indeed, the inferiority of women's industrial position was apparent in every decade after 1945. Thus, for example, the Fourth Annual Report of the Equal Opportunities Commission in 1979 stated, with regard to women's wage rates,

> We have reported in previous years that progress towards equality in measurable respects, e.g. in terms of earnings, had come to a halt. We have now to report that the position of women in this respect has begun to worsen. Women's average gross hourly earnings reached a peak of 75.5% of those of men in 1977 and have been declining as a proportion in subsequent

8. See A.M. Anderson, Women in the Factory: An Administrative Adventure 1893-1921 (John Murray, London 1922) Ch. 3.
9. James A. Schmiechen, Sweated Industries and Sweated Labour: The London Clothing Trades 1860-1914 (Croom Helm, London 1984) p. 177.
10. See A.M. Anderson, op.cit., B. Drake, Women in the Engineering Trades (Fabian Research Department, Trade Union Series No. 3 1918); Winifred Holtby, Women in a Changing Civilization (John Lane, London 1934) pp. 69-116.

> years. In 1978 the figure fell to 73.9% and this decline has continued so that in 1979 it stood at 73% .... We are bound to underline the sense of alarm which we expressed in our last report. Trends such as these constitute the reality of people's lives and are at least as important to them as formal equality before the law. 11

It has not been the case, of course, that all women, in all industries, have suffered the same intensity of workplace exploitation. Moreover, in exploring the specificity of female waged labour in respect of the period under review in Liverpool we clearly start from an understanding that a rigid sexual division of labour, which has confined the majority of women workers to low paid work at the lower levels of the skill hierarchy, pre-dates the period. Ivy Pinchbeck's classic study, Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, is research which suggests that the search for the origins of the sexual division of labour takes us back into the pre-industrial era. In this work it is argued that women workers formed a supply of cheap labour from the 16th Century onwards. But, according to Pinchbeck, the exclusion of women from skilled, well-paid work and apprenticeship, stemming from their position as assistants to their husbands under forms of domestic production, only became 'oppressive' with the transition to capitalist production. With the separation of work from home, and the growing employment of women as wage labourers throughout the 19th century, the cheapness and low status of women's labour became increasingly apparent. Their wages remained at a nominal, 'supplementary' level and they found themselves excluded by lack of training from skilled and better paid work.[12] Equally, we can trace the significance of the determining influence on women's lives of their role in the family from the period of the transition

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11. Fourth Annual Report of the Equal Opportunities Commission 1979, p. 2.

12. Ivy Pinchbeck, Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution (Frank Cass, London 1969) p. 2.

to capitalism. As Sheila Rowbotham has argued, with regard to the growth of capitalist production and the resulting demand for female labour outside the home: 'Women could not enter commodity production on the same terms as men. Like the man they sold their labour power now as a commodity, but they still worked to maintain the labour force at home.'[13]

The central point to be established here, however, is that throughout the period under review, a sexual division of labour remained as a persistent feature of the occupational structure within the British economy. And, whatever the variation from place to place and industry to industry, this segregation of 'women's work' from 'men's work' was apparent in virtually all areas of the economy and was structured around the inferior working conditions of women relative to men. Women were concentrated in specific industries widely regarded as suitable areas of female employment, or in particular occupations customarily defined as 'women's jobs'. A category of work to which was attached a women's rate of pay, lower than that paid to men, was the central feature of women's inferior industrial status. But there were a series of other factors which, in general, distinguished women's work from that of men. Low levels of trade union organisation, long hours of work, sexual harassment in the workplace, specific forms of paternalist management, poor opportunities for promotion and exclusion from work categorised as skilled were, to a varying degree, typically confronted by women at their place of work.[14]

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13. S. Rowbotham, op.cit., p. 58.
14. On women's trade unionism see S. Boston, Women Workers and the Trade Unions (David Poynter, London 1980); B. Drake, Women in Trade Unions (Virago, London 1984: first published in 1920 by Labour Research Dept.); S. Lewenhak, Women and Trade Unions (E. Benn, London 1977); Norbert Soldon, Womenin British Trade Unions 1874-1976 (Gill & MacMillan, Dublin 1978); On sexual harassment at the workplace see Jan Lambertz, 'Sexual Harassment in the 19th Century English Cotton Industry' in History Workshop Journal, Spring 1985; Linda Grant, 'Women in a Car Town: Coventry 1920-1945' in P. Hudson and R. Lee

Taking the picture for England and Wales as a whole over the period, the vast majority of women workers were employed in a very limited range of industries and occupations. The single most important area of women's employment was the personal service industry. In particular, large numbers of women were employed as domestic servants, but other work in this occupational group included cleaning, laundry work, and catering. These occupations accounted for over 33% of the female workforce in every census year between 1891 and 1931. In the earlier years the proportion was much higher. For example, as Table 1 shows, in 1901 42% of women workers earned their living in the personal service industry alone. Within the manufacturing sector the concentration of women in just a few industries was equally striking. In 1901, for example, the textile and clothing industry between them accounted for a further 30% of women workers. In other words, in 1901 72% of women workers were employed in just three occupational groups. (See Table 1) Elsewhere in the economy, in the wide variety of industries which comprised the manufacturing sector, women workers were only thinly distributed. Thus, although significant numbers of women worked in the food, drink, tobacco, paper and light engineering industries, with the exception of the tobacco industry, these industries were predominantly male. The

(14) (eds.) Women's Work, Family Income and the Structure of the Family in Historical Perspective (Manchester University Press, forthcoming);A.M. Anderson, op.cit.; On paternalist management strategies in relation to women workers see Judy Lown, 'Not so much a factory, more a form of patriarchy: Gender and class during industrialisation' in Eva Gmarnikow (Ed.) Gender and Class at Work (Heinemann, London 1983) pp. 28-45; On Women's exclusion from skilled work see, for example, Barbara Taylor, 'The men are as bad as their masters...' in Judith L. Newton et al (eds.) Sex and Class in Women's History (RKP, London 1983) pp.187-220; Cynthia Cockburn, Brothers (Pluto Press, London 1983) especially Chapter 6; Barbara Drake, Women in the Engineering Trades, op.cit.; R. Penn, 'Skilled manual workers in the labour process 1856-1964' in Stephen Wood (ed.) The Degradation of Work (Hutchinson, London 1982) pp. 80-108.

TABLE 1

DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN IN MAJOR OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS, ENGLAND AND WALES

1891 - 1951

OCCUPATIONAL GROUP	percentage of female labour force					
	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931	1951*
Personal service	-	42	39	33	35	23
Indoor domestic	35	33	27	23	24	11
Other	-	9	12	10	11	12
Clerks, Typists	-	1	2	8	10	20
Commerce and Finance	-	7	9	10	11	12
Professional and Technical	6	7	8	7	7	8
Textile goods and Dress	17	16	14	11	9	7
Textile workers	15	14	13	12	10	6
Metal manufacture and engineering	-	1	2	3	2	3
Storekeepers, packers etc	-	-	-	2	3	3
Transport	-	-	-	2	3	3
Paper, printing	2	2	2	2	2	1
Food, drink and tobacco	-	1	1	2	1	1
Leather, fur	-	-	-	3	1	1
Agriculture	1	1	2	2	1	1
Unskilled/N.E.S.	-	-	-	1	3	6

* There was no national census taken in 1941.

Source: E. James 'Women Workers in 20th Century Britain' Manchester School of Economics and Social Science, XXX, September 1962, reproduced in J. Lewis, Women in England, Table 10, p. 156.

broad picture reveals that women tended to be concentrated in industries dominated by female labour. In 1928, for example, women accounted for 63.9% of workers in textile factories, 72% of workers in tobacco factories and 66% of clothing workers.[15] And these three industries accounted for about 64% of female factory workers in 1931. (See Table 1)

The concentration of women workers in a narrow range of occupational groups went hand in hand with a concentration in jobs designated as semi-skilled and unskilled, and to which were generally attached low rates of pay. (See Table 2) This remained the defining characteristic of women's work despite changes in the female labour market. Thus although two other occupations became increasingly important as areas of female employment as the period progressed - clerical work and work in the retail trade - this development was not representative of an elevation in women's skill status or their standard of living as wage earners. As Catherine Hakim has shown in a study of changes in occupational segregation over the 20th century,

> The types of occupation in which men or women are over-represented have changed somewhat, but women increasingly form the majority of the labour force in the lowest grades of white-collar and blue-collar work, often in occupations that closely mirror functions carried out on an unpaid and non-specialist basis in the home. 16

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15. A Study of the Factors which have operated in the past and those which are operating now to determine the distribution of women in industry, Cmd. 3508 (HMSO, 1930) pp. 6 - 7.

16. C. Hakim, 'Sexual Division within the labour force: occupational segregation' in Department of Employment Gazette November 1978.

TABLE 2

SKILL AND STATUS: FEMALE WORKERS AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL WORKERS, U.K. 1911 - 1951

	1911	1921	1931	1951
Employers and Proprietors	18.8	20.5	19.8	20.0
White collar workers	29.8	37.6	42.3	44.5
a. Managers and administrators	19.8	17.0	13.0	15.2
b. Higher professionals	6.0	5.1	7.5	8.3
c. Lower professionals and technicians	62.9	59.4	58.8	53.5
d. Foremen and inspectors	4.2	6.5	8.7	13.4
e. Clerks	21.4	44.6	46.0	60.2
f. Salesmen and shop assistants	35.2	43.6	37.2	51.6
Manual workers	30.5	27.9	28.8	26.1
a. Skilled	24.0	21.0	21.3	15.7
b. Semi-skilled	40.4	40.3	42.9	38.1
c. Unskilled	15.5	16.8	15.0	20.3
Total occupied population	29.6	29.5	29.8	30.8

Source: G.S. Bain and R. Price 'Union growth and employment trends in the United Kingdom 1964-1970' in British Journal of Industrial Relations Vol 10, November 1972 pp. 366-381, reproduced in C. Hakim, 'Sexual divisions within the labour force', Department of Employment Gazette, November 1978, p. 1267.

TABLE 3

TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP AND DENSITY[1]: MALES AND FEMALES, GREAT BRITAIN[2] 1896-1941

Year	Males Membership (000s)	Density	Female Membership (000s)	Density	Females as a percentage of total membership
1896	1356	14.0	116	2.7	7.9
1901	1781	17.2	124	2.9	6.5
1911	2799	24.5	331	6.6	10.6
1921	5526	46.3	986	18.8	15.1
1931	3820	29.5	749	12.8	16.4
1941	5664	42.4	1384	22.2	19.6

1. Percentage of total labour force union members
2. Trade unions with their headquarters in Great Britain

Source: G.S. Bain and R. Price, Profiles of Union Growth (Blackwell, Oxford 1980) reproduced in J. Lewis, Women in England 1870-1950 (Wheatsheaf, Sussex 1984) Table 12, p. 169.

Table 3 shows the general weakness of union organisation amongst women workers compared to that amongst men. National figures hide marked variations between industries. Indeed, the low level of union organisation amongst the majority of women workers is highlighted by the fact that in 1896, for example, the 90,000 women members of the cotton unions represented no less than five sixths of all organised women workers.[17] Whilst the textile industry as a whole showed a high density of union organisation amongst women, in most female occupations the number of trade unionists was low and in certain areas of female employment, in particular the domestic

17. J. Liddington and Jill Norris, One Hand Tied Behind Us (Virago, London 1978), p. 84.

service industry, union organisation was virtually non-existent. The poor quality of women's conditions of work constantly militated against the development of organisation amongst them. As Mary McArthur, secretary of the Women's Trade Union League in the early 1900s argued,

> ....the low standard of living may be stated to be at once the cause and consequence of women's lack of organisation. This sounds paradoxical, but it is nevertheless true that, while women are badly paid because of their unorganised condition, they may be unorganised mainly because they are badly paid. 18

The rigid patterns of sexual segregation revealed by national statistics, which clearly show also the inferior status of women wage earners in relation to men, nevertheless mask the way in which regional and local conditions and customs created diversity in the shape of the sexual division of labour. In an important essay, which challenged the tendency within much historical research to generalise about women's experience, Sally Alexander, Anna Davin and Eve Hostettler, cite the example of the 19th century mining industry as an indication of diverse patterns of sexual division. They state,

> In East Lancashire the textile industry absorbed the mass of female labour throughout the 19th century, and in Oldham, for instance, male miners fiercely opposed any attempt to introduce women to the pits. In West Lancashire, on the other hand, in towns such as Wigan and St Helens, women were employed at the mines. But conditions could vary even within a small area. The Wigan coalfield was notorious for its employment of married and single 'pitbrow lasses' (working at the pithead sorting coal) but some of its collieries, such as Blundells at Pemberton, would not employ married women at all. 19

It is the evidence of examples such as these, showing diverse patterns of sexual division which suggest at once that such divisions are neither 'natural' nor immutable. Thus, although the hypothesis

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18. Quoted in B. Drake, Women in Trade Unions, op.cit., p. 45.

19. S. Alexander, A. Davin and E. Hostettler, 'Labouring Women: a reply to Eric Hobsbawm', History Workshop Journal, No. 8, Autumn 1979, p. 175.

that biology is a determinant of more general sexual divisions within society has not been without support,[20] it was clearly and convincingly challenged in the literature relating to women's lives published throughout the period under review, just as it has been vigorously opposed in more contemporary work on the sexual division of labour. We are forced to look beyond the physiological differences between men and women for an explanation of the persistence of the sexual division of labour.

The resurgence of the feminist movement from the early 1970s onwards has generated a considerable literature on women's work and the sexual division of labour. But the subject has absorbed female scholars and activists alike from the turn of the century and recent interest has encouraged a rediscovery of earlier work. We are thus faced with a variety of theoretical perspectives and a substantial amount of empirical work on this question. There are many valuable insights in this work which I will refer to throughout this chapter. But I wish to particularly draw on recent innovative research from a feminist perspective which has attempted to conceptualise and articulate the nature of the relationship between, on the one hand,the class relationships inherent in the capitalist mode of production and, on the other hand, the social domination of women by men, an oppressive relationship termed patriarchy in much of the literature.[21]

The value of utilising a model which articulates the relationship between the class relations of capitalism and the gender relations of patriarchy to explore sexual divisions has been convincingly

20. See S Moller Okin, Women in Western Political Thought, (Virago, London 1980)

21. See the collection of essays in L. Sargent (ed.) Women and Revolution; A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism (Pluto, London 1981)

demonstrated in a recent study by Cynthia Cockburn of male printing workers.[22] Cynthia Cockburn uses the concept of a 'sex/gender system' which, she argues, is as consistently effective in shaping men's and women's lives as is the class system. Moreover, the two systems continually interact and have real effects with all aspects of social life. The research highlights the material, social and political effects of the sex/gender system through an exploration of workplace culture and the nature of the consciousness generated amongst men at work. Thus, she argues,

> We should not, I think, be looking for specific locations of sex power, any more than of class power. To say that patriarchal power is exercised only in the family or in directly sexual relations is as blinkered as to suppose that capitalist power is exercised only in the factory. The sex/gender system is to be found in all the same practices and processes in which the mode of production and its class relations are found. We don't live two lives, one as a member of a class and one as a man or woman. Everything we do takes its meaning from our membership of both systems. 23

It is the emphasis on the significance of the sex/gender system, thus stated, which is implicit in the theoretical perspective adopted in this study. A perspective which suggests that in order to explore the social processes which tend to reproduce the sexual division of labour we must examine not only areas of the social structure which are immediately identifiable as arenas within which the trajectory of women's lives are structured but also that we must look afresh at spheres of social life which may appear tangential to this process.

There are four aspects of the social structure which I wish to explore here in terms of their significance as arenas within which the social processes which sustain and continuously reproduce the sexual division of labour are generated: the family, the labour process, the state and the local labour market. In turn, these

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22. Cynthia Cockburn, op.cit.,

23. Ibid, p. 195.

areas of enquiry provide the themes which structure the body of the study. The significance of these themes for our understanding of the sexual division of labour has been stressed in some of the recent literature concerned with women workers. For the purposes of exposition, I will isolate and discuss these themes in turn. However, a central aspect of this study is concerned with demonstrating that the sexual division of labour is sustained by the complex interaction of a variety of social processes emanating from, or inherent within, diverse areas of social life. Moreover, in so far as this study is concerned with working women in Liverpool, it seeks to capture the unique form taken by the interconnection between these social processes in the context of the city's history.

Much of the literature on women's work and women workers has identified the determining influence on women workers and the sexual division of labour of women's role in the family. We can appreciate the significance of this on two levels. In terms of their lived experience, the majority of working class women have, at some time in their lives, devoted a considerable number of hours daily to housework and/or childcare, often with little assistance from other household members. For some women, unpaid domestic work within the family has been the major occupation of their working lives. Others have at some time negotiated the conflicting demands placed upon them as wife and mother, on the one hand, and wage labourer, on the other. The family also exists on another level, as a set of ideas which have defined appropriate roles for men and women within society generally. This ideology reflects <u>some</u> women's material existence as unpaid domestic workers and simultaneously defines <u>all</u> women

as primarily mothers and wives. The consequences for women workers of the dominance of an ideology which asserted that women's 'natural' and proper location was in the home are no less important than the material reality of the time-consuming drudgery of domestic work within working class households in the period under review.

The determining influence on women's lives of the ideas which adhered to the proposition that a woman's proper place was in the home was clearly demonstrated in the intense debates which occurred in the period under review relating to the married woman worker. In the 19th century and early 20th century bourgeois opinion, in particular, regarded the workplace as an unsuitable setting for the woman, and especially the married woman; waged work deterred the woman from her proper duties which lay in the family and the home. Moreover, close contact with men at work threatened to morally corrupt her.[23a] Because of the force of these ideas the problems identified as characteristically facing women workers, such as low pay, long hours of work and poor working conditions, tended to be turned back on women. Women themselves were blamed for the ills which confronted them in the labour market. Clementina Black, writing in 1915, in a report of an enquiry undertaken for the Women's Industrial Council (WIC), an organisation which carried out investigative research on women workers and campaigned on their behalf, articulated the essence of this view. She stated,

> It is a general opinion and especially, perhaps, among persons of the middle class, that the working for money of married women is to be deplored. That such work is sometimes made necessary by poverty will be conceded, and wives who earn because they must are pitied; while wives who work not for their own or their children's bread, but rather for the butter to it, are regarded as at least somewhat blameworthy. 24

23a. See, for example, S. Alexander, op.cit., pp. 8-10; Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', History Workshop Journal, No. 5, Spring 1978)

24. Clementina Black, Married Women's Work (Garland Publishing Inc., New York and London 1980. First published G. Bell, London 1915, p. 1.

In fact, it was an opinion not confined to the middle class, but also held by some working class men and women, trade unionists and sections of the women's movement. Indeed, the Liverpool WIC expressed the following view in a report on women home workers in the city, when discussing the waged work of married women.

> We are far from saying they are always right in doing this. Often it must be a nice point to decide whether the money that is thus brought into the home, and the better standard of food and clothing which it makes possible will or will not counterbalance the disadvantage of the withdrawal of the mother, while at work, from personal attention to her duties. Sometimes, too, there is the danger that when the wife becomes a wage-earner the husband will lose the incentive to industry and sink into idleness and drink. Miss Loane, the experienced author of the 'Queens Poor' says that whenever a married woman tells her that she wants to go out charring because her husband cannot get work, she recommends her to sit down by the fire and cry till he does get it. Probably we have all known cases where it would have been much better if this advice had been followed. 25

But whilst members of the WIC may have held on to the principle of the confinement of the married woman to the home, fulfilling the contemporary ideals of wife and mother, nevertheless they recognised that many working class women were unable to structure their lives in this way. Thus, they added the following proviso to their argument.

> ....so long as the proportion of casual labourers drawing a small, irregular and precarious wage remains as great as it is at present in most great towns and especially in Liverpool, it seems both dangerous and harsh to cut away any resources by which the ill effects of these insufficient wages are at present mitigated. 26

Sections of the predominantly male trade union and labour movement were, at times, less ambiguous on the question. The opinion behind the oft-quoted statement of Henry Broadhurst at the TUC Annual

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25. Women's Industrial Council, op.cit., pp. 15-16.

26. Ibid., p. 16.

Conference in 1877, was apparent in the attitudes of some male trade unionists, and, more importantly, in the strategies of many trade unions throughout the period. Broadhurst stated,

> They (the men) had the future of their country and children to consider, and it was their duty as men and husbands to use their utmost efforts to bring about a condition of things, where their wives should be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition for livelihood against the great and strong men of the world. 27

Once translated into state and trade union policies the material impact on women's lives of this view becomes clear. For example, Hilary Land has shown how it found a focus in trade union support and campaigns for the payment of a 'family wage'; a wage sufficient to support a wife and children and paid to men, who were thus defined as 'the breadwinner' within the household.[28] Whilst for men the aim was, in part, to eliminate cheap female labour from the labour market, the strategy overlooked the fact that many women were not supported by men. Indeed, in many households women supplied the principal income on which others were dependent. Moreover, in many industries the wages earned by men, particularly semi-skilled and unskilled workers, remained low throughout the period. For most sections of the working class the family wage was a myth, a wage never earned. But the popularity of the notion of a family wage, and the trade union struggle to achieve it, lent support to the tendency for women's wages to remain low by defining them as secondary to male earnings, or even inconsequential within the family budget. As Clementina Black pointed out in 1915,

> Despite the current theory that the wages of men are reckoned not on an individual basis but on a family basis, thousands

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27. Quoted in Barbara Brake, Women in Trade Unions, op.cit., p. 16.
28. H. Land, 'The Family wage', Feminist Review, No. 6, 1980, pp. 55-77; see also Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, 'The family wage: some problems for socialists and feminists', Capital and Class, 11, Summer 1980. This later essay indicates the persistence of support for the principle of the family wage into the post World War Two period.

> of men are paid at rates which, even if received - as is very seldom the case - regularly throughout the year, are, in fact, barely sufficient to support properly one adult and one child. While the wages of thousands of women (based theoretically on the needs of an individual) are wholly inadequate to the proper support of one adult person. 29

There was a tendency to overlook not only the needs of those who might be dependent on women's earnings, but to consistently assume that all women were themselves dependent on a male wage. Moreover, the emphasis placed on the family wage obstructed the vision of a political strategy which might seek to break down the pre-existing boundaries of the sexual division of labour. As long as women's wages were deemed unimportant, the concentration of women in low paid areas of the economy was an irrelevance.

In the articulation of the ideology that 'a woman's place is in the home', male trade unionists were to find powerful allies amongst successive governments. And in the disruption of the labour market during the First World War a clear example of the significance of this alliance is apparent. During the war all women, whether married or single, were exhorted to join the war effort by offering their labour as a replacement for that of men conscripted into the armed forces. But, for example, in the agreements drawn up between the government and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers with regard to the munitions and engineering industries, arrangements were made for the restoration of pre-war conditions at the end of the war. In effect, the agreements ensured the exodus of women from the engineering factories after 1918. Indeed, within a year of the end of the war three quarters of a million women workers had left paid employment.[30] In most industries the new female

29. C. Black, op.cit., p. 12.
30. S. Pollard, The Development of the British Economy 1914-1967 (Edward Arnold, London 1962) p. 88; B. Drake, Women in the Engineering Trades, op.cit.

recruits of the First World War were regarded by employers and male workers alike as a temporary expedient rather than as genuine replacements for male workers. There was no recognition, in the long term, of the abilities of women to carry out work traditionally regarded as a male preserve and thus previously considered beyond their capabilities.

In consequence, the circumstances of the war did not result in a significant redefinition of the structure of the sexual division of labour. On the contrary, the following view, starkly expressed by J G Newlove, General Secretary of the Postal Telegraph Clerks Association in 1917 was as influential in the post-war period.

> ....my own view is that no married woman or widow with a family should be employed. I feel very strongly that the widow must be excluded, and the married woman with a family also, even if the husband is one of the unfortunate men disabled in the war. 31.

Some women active in the labour movement also supported the principle of the exclusion on married women from the labour market.[32] This was often linked to a demand for the 'endowment' of motherhood and childhood. Thus, Marion Phillips, General Secretary of the Women's Labour League, put the following argument in 1917 to a group of trade unionists in a discussion about post-war reconstruction.

> Turn next to the mother at work. The case here is not so simple, because passion has played its part in the old discussion of married women's work. I believe that compulsory exclusion has nothing to recommend it; but I believe that economic

31. Some Problems of Urban and Rural Industry: The Reorganisation of Industry, Series II, (Ruskin College, Oxford 1917) p. 54.
32. See J Lewis, 'The working class wife and mother and state intervention', in J. Lewis, (ed.) Labour and Love: Women's experience of Home and Family 1850-1940 (Blackwell, Oxford 1986) p. 105; J. Humphries, 'Class Struggle and the persistence of the working class family', Cambridge Journal of Economics, 1977, 1, pp. 241-258.

> pressure on the mother to earn has nothing to recommend it either! The true solution of this problem has to be found in a revolutionary measure, the endowment of motherhood or childhood, whichever way you like to put it... It would, this endowment of motherhood, give the mother back from the factory to the home, and free her for her desired tasks of home-making... The industrial field would thus be relieved of a peculiarly necessitous and dangerous kind of competitor. 33

The demand for the endowment of motherhood was crystallised in a campaign for the payment of family allowances, tirelessly conducted by Eleanor Rathbone in the decades before the Second World War. According to Eleanor Rathbone the case for family allowances rested on the principle that,

> .... society should include in its economic structure some form of direct financial provision for the maintenance of children, instead of proceeding on the assumption that save in cases of exceptional misfortune, this is a matter which concerns only individual parents and should be left to them, because normally men's wages or salaries are, or ought to be and can be made to be, sufficient for the support of families. 34

This challenged the politics and principles which lay behind the demands for the payment of a family wage to men. Nevertheless, Eleanor Rathbone shared, with the advocates of a family wage, the belief that childcare was principally women's responsibility. As Hilary Land has shown, in an analysis of Eleanor Rathbone's campaign for family allowances,

> Eleanor Rathbone laid much emphasis on the unequal economic relationship between husband and wife but had far less to say about the division of responsibility for child care and housework. She clearly did not wish to pay women to stay at home to be full-time mothers but she did regard child care as women's work. 35

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33. M Phillips, 'Women in Industry', Some Problems of Urban and Rural Industry, op.cit., p. 43.
34. Eleanor Rathbone, The Case for Family Allowances (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1940) p. ix; See also E. Rathbone, The Disinherited Family (Allen and Unwin, London 1947); Mary Stocks, Eleanor Rathbone, (Gollancz, London 1948)
35. H. Land. op.cit.,

The growing economic crisis of the inter-war years and rising levels of unemployment tended to harden attitudes in respect of the married woman worker. A powerful layer of opinion from within the state and the trade union movement openly portrayed her as an unnecessary intruder in the labour market, undermining the opportunities for male workers searching for work. Summing up the atmosphere of the time, Winifred Holtby argued, 'after 1929, jobs became not duties which war-time propaganda taught girls that it was patriotic to perform, but privileges reserved for potential bread winners and fathers of families. Women were commanded back to the home.'[36] The translation of these views into effective legislation was particularly evident in the content and administration of unemployment legislation. For these laws were to have a direct bearing on women's opportunities in the labour market. (see Chapter 6)

Opposition to the wage-earning woman was thus apparent in strategies emanating from across the political spectrum throughout the period, upholding the principle that women's primary responsibility lay not in the workplace but in the family, caring for her home, her husband and her children. Women thus entered the labour market defined by labels unrelated to their abilities as workers, labels which proved to be more enduring than genuine assessments of their capabilities. The effects of this were far-reaching. The wage-earning capacity of all women, whether married or single, was shaped, in part, by this ideology of the family and motherhoood, for it defined women as either dependent, or potentially dependent, on men. The real financial needs of women as wage earners were neglected or minimised in campaigns and policies focussed on increased wage

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36. Winifred Holtby, Women in a Changing Civilisation (John Lane, London 1934) pp. 112-113.

rates. Thus, for example, the question of equal pay for equal work remained a peripheral issue on trade union agendas. Women's capabilities as workers and their contribution to productive activity were similarly downgraded. As workers they were perpetually defined as inferior to men, despite their real value to employers as sources of cheap labour.

These ideas were, of course, founded upon and enmeshed with the reality of many women's lives. Domestic work, combined with constant childbearing, placed such heavy demands upon women in the circumstances of the time that few women could make a commitment to waged work similar to that made by men. Housework in many working class homes was nothing short of drudgery. Even as late as 1940, Eleanor Rathbone was able to make the following observation about the woman working at home -

> The wife who probably began her married life with modern ideas of what the comradeship of married life should be, finds herself left alone, and becomes more and more absorbed in the difficulties of housework in a confined space, with no bathroom and probably no boiler or drying ground, with an old fashioned stove (if any) that wastes coal and needs continual blackleading; insufficient storage for food and coal, so that they must be wastefully bought in tiny quantities; no place for the perambulator (if she is lucky enough to have one) except in the living room; pans, brushes, cleaning materials all insufficient because necessary replacements make too serious inroads on the weekly food money. Child bearing under these conditions makes a heavy drain on her strength. 37

Women who combined the work of mother and wage earner often paid a heavy price in terms of their health and vitality.[38]

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37. Eleanor Rathbone, Family Allowances, op.cit., pp. 17-18; See also Margery Spring Rice, Working Class Wives (Virago, London 1981, First published by Penguin 1939)
38. See Clementina Black, op.cit., Elizabeth Roberts, 'Women's Strategies 1890 - 1940' in J. Lewis (ed.) Labour and Love, op.cit., pp. 237 - 238; Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, One Hand Tied Behind Us (Virago, London 1978) especially Chapter 2.

The material demands placed upon women as housewives and mothers, no less than the ideology of motherhood, meant that many working class women were unable to develop strategies in relation to their work which may have lifted them out of the lowest levels of the labour force hierarchy. For example, the inability of women to commit themselves to a particular workplace for a sufficient number of years meant that opportunities for training or skill development were less accessible to them than to men. And the understandable reluctance of women to take on a double burden of work was reflected in their location in the labour force when they did seek work. As B. Hutchins observed,

> It is a special feature of women's employment that, unlike the work of men, who for the most part have to labour from early youth to some more or less advanced age, women's work is subject to considerable interruption and is contingent on family circumstances, whence it comes about that women may not always need paid work, but when they do they often want it so badly that they are ready to take anything they can get. 39

But there were other social processes, operating within workplaces and within the ever-unfolding labour process, which reinforced the degradation of women as workers. It is to this area of enquiry that I will now turn. There are a number of inter-related questions I wish to address here, all of which are connected with the real experiences of women at work in a precise historical period. First, how did changes in the labour process within specific workplaces and industries affect or relocate women within skill hierarchies of labour? Secondly, and closely related to this, what criteria were used to define skill and skilled workers? Thirdly, to what extent were the strategies and attitudes adopted by employers and trade unions in relation to women effective as determinants of

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39. B.L. Hutchins, Women in Industry, (E.P. Publishing 1978, first published in 1915) p. xiv; See also C. Black, op.cit.,

the sexual division of labour? Fourthly, what was the significance with respect to the reproduction of the sexual division of labour of the relationship between men and women at work? And, finally, to what extent did women's experience of work shape a consciousness which sustained their location within the labour force? The importance of these questions has been stressed in a number of recent case studies of women at work although, as yet, very little historical, empirical research has been structured by analysis along these lines of enquiry.

Much of the recent research on the labour process has taken its cue from Harry Braverman's impressive study, Labor and Monopoly Capital. Braverman's account of the transformation of the capitalist labour process in the 20th century highlights the increasing tendency for work to be deskilled as capital has sought to cheapen the cost of labour and wrest control of the labour process from organised skilled labour.[40] Braverman's work has been subjected to a considerable amount of criticism,[41] but its enduring value is undoubtedly its emphasis on the significance of an analysis of the labour process for an understanding of the development of capitalism and, moreover, in terms of my interests here, its recognition of the changing sex composition of specific occupational groups. Braverman deals with a general tendency towards deskilling and the routinisation of work but, as many critics have pointed out, in specific industries and workplaces at precise historical periods, this tendency has been complicated and countered by worker resistance, the prevailing

40. Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital (Monthly Review Press, New York and London 1974).
41. For a discussion of some of these critiques see Tony Elger, 'Braverman, capital accumulation and deskilling' in S. Wood (ed.) The Degradation of Work op.cit., pp. 23-53.

economic conditions within industries and the impact of non-economic factors, for example, ideologies in relation to gender. Such criticisms suggest, at once, the value of looking more precisely at changes in the labour process within concrete historical situations. As Angela Coyle has argued, in a study of the clothing industry: 'Deskilling is not an abstract formula, and in clothing, as elsewhere, the range of strategies available to management to effect cheapening of production occur in the context of economic constraints and labour resistance.[42]

Angela Coyle is primarily concerned with uncovering the reasons for the persistent concentration of female clothing workers in low paid work, categorised as unskilled. Through an examination of the development of the labour process, she reveals that the,

> ....strategies employed by management to exert a downward pressure on wages (and along the way avoid equal pay) combine with union strategies to resist that, to have the effect of reinforcing sexual divisions within the labour process. So that although the actions of management and male workers derive from quite different imperatives, they can have short-term coincidence of interests in keeping female labour segregated in certain jobs. 43

The research suggests that in examining the development of changes in the labour process and their effects on women workers there should be a recognition that behind the strategies adopted to push through or resist them lie ideologies of gender division. Women and men do not enter productive activity on equal terms; women

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42. Angela Coyle, 'Sex and skill in the organisation of the clothing industry', in J. West (ed.) Work, Women and the Labour Market (RKP, London 1982) p. 10.

43. Ibid. p. 10.

are defined as inferior to men through gender divisions operating outside the workplace. But once at work, ideological notions of the contrasting value of male and female labour continuously reproduce sexual divisions to the detriment of women workers.

A closely related question concerns the way in which skill is itself defined. A great deal of research concerned with women workers (and with male workers) and the sexual division of labour implicitly accepts that the categorisation of women's work as predominantly 'unskilled' is based wholly on objective criteria, such as training, apprenticeship or competence. Recent feminist research has suggested that we must question the extent to which skill distinctions are based on such objective criteria. Barbara Taylor and Anne Phillips, drawing on a number of case studies of specific workforces, argue that: 'Skill has been increasingly defined against women - skilled work is work that women don't do.'[44] The evidence of the case studies they survey indicates,

> .... the extent to which skill has become saturated with sex. It is not that skill categories have been totally subjectified: in all cases some basis was found in the content of the work to justify the distinction between men's and women's work. but the equations - men/skilled, women/unskilled - are so powerful that the identification of a particular job with women, ensured that the skill content of the work would be downgraded. It is the sex of those who do the work, rather than the content, which leads to its identification as skilled or unskilled. 45

This theme is also taken up by Peter Armstrong in research on a footwear and an electrical fittings factory. Armstrong shows that whilst women tend to be excluded from work formally recognised as skilled in these workplaces, they are nevertheless employed in

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44. A. Phillips and B. Taylor, 'Sex and Skill: notes towards a feminist economics', Feminist Review, No. 6, 1980, p. 85)

45. Ibid., p. 85.

work 'which is skilled in a real sense.'[46] These insights suggest that any study of women workers must carefully distinguish between the value placed on women's work, a value which invariably locates it at the lower levels of skill hierarchies, and the genuine abilities and skills of women workers.

These essays point, as does Angela Coyle's work, to the significant role played by male-dominated trade unions in defining certain jobs as skilled, securing for men the monetary and other benefits of defining the work that men do as skilled and thus contributing to the reproduction of a sexual division of labour which disadvantages women workers. In essence the workplace is analysed not simply as an arena within which labour confronts capital, but also as a place where the relationship between male workers and female workers is at times one of confrontation and struggle, the outcome of which have effects for women workers. The importance of this was recognised by Barbara Drake in her work, Women and Trade Unions, written in 1920. Drake's research convincingly showed the significant role played by men and male trade unionists in restricting both the areas in which women were employed and the development of organisation amongst them. She argued,

> Men trade unionists are accused of a policy of sex privilege and prejudice, especially by middle class women. The charge, unfortunately, has a basis of truth. A belief in the divine right of every man to his job is not peculiar to kings or capitalists, and democracy is hard to practice at home. The comparatively favourable working conditions enjoyed by men in organised trades have been mainly built up by their own exertions in the past, and they are not disposed to share these advantages with a new host of women competitors. Trade unionists are, in fact, no better than other men. 47

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46. P. Armstrong, 'If it's only women it doesn't matter' in J. West, op. cit., p. 32.

47. B. Drake, Women in Trade Unions, op.cit., p. 220.

Further, she stated,

> Men's refusal to recognise women, meanwhile, has the disastrous effect of delaying organisation, so that women develop a 'non-union' instead of a 'union' tradition, and employers a vested interest in 'cheap and docile' female labour. 48

For the period surveyed in this study, Barbara Drake's observations suggest a crucial component of the enquiry. In Liverpool, as elsewhere, women were excluded from union membership as a result of union rules drawn up by men in many industries and, in some unions, until as late as the second decade of the 20th century. But even in those unions which always recruited women workers, all the available evidence suggests that, in effect, women were peripheral participants in these organisations and their interests as workers were given a low priority and, in some instances, systematically ignored. Many women were thus denied the opportunity and the means with which to counter social processes which downgraded their value as workers, or which re-defined the sexual division of labour to their disadvantage. This tendency was fuelled by the development of antagonistic relationships between male and female workers in some industries as men sought to defend areas of skilled work from encroachment by cheap female labour. Women workers came to represent 'a problem' to male workers and, so conceived, this ran counter to the development of collective organisation and struggle. As we unravel the factors which inform these encounters between men and women in specific workplaces and industries we also reveal social processes which tend to reproduce sexual divisions in the occupational structure.

The final question raised in this section concerns the consciousness generated amongst women at the workplace and its relationship to

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48. Ibid., p. 221.

the process whereby sexual divisions of labour are continuously reproduced. In an historical study of this kind, which lacks the detail of oral testimony, an analysis of consciousness inevitably remains particularly incomplete. Nevertheless, there are some general points to be made which, where appropriate, will inform the examination of women's work and women workers in Liverpool which follows. Essentially, the aim is to stress that the workplace is one arena within which women's consciousness and identity was shaped and, in turn, to view this consciousness as effective in terms of women's response to exploitation at work. That is, to counter the argument, commonly put forward in studies of women workers, that women's identity as workers is shaped wholly through their experiences and position within the family. For example, Marilyn Porter has argued, with regard to women's consciousness,

> ... Their place in the labour market and their response to it derived from their prior identity as 'housewives'. Their low pay, their lack of union involvement, their transitional role as workers, can all be explained in terms of their family responsibilities in the sexual division of labour. 49

Here I wish to argue that, on the contrary, we must apply to women's workplace experience the same kind of analysis we might pursue in relation to men's work; an analysis which recognises that men's consciousness is shaped by relationships and activities encountered in the workplace. For, by the same token, men also have a specific relationship to the family and have assumed specific roles within it. Just as we cannot fully understand men at work if we conclude our analysis 'at the factory gate' so we cannot analytically confine women to the 'kitchen sink'. Both aspects of our lives as men

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49. Marilyn Porter, 'Standing on the edge: Working class housewives and the world of work' Jackie West (eds.) Work, Women and the Labour Market, op. cit., p. 132.

and women - family and work - and the sense we make of them, constantly interact to shape our consciousness. Moreover, just as men are located within a variety of workplace situations, a variety which generates different responses to exploitation at work etc., so too are different groups of women workers confronted with diverse experiences at work. Thus, for example, the working class female domestic servant, working alone in a one-to-one relationship with her upper class employer may share more views and attitudes with the male chauffeur working for the same employer than she does with the woman cigar maker who works alongside hundreds of other women in a large factory.

In examining women's workplace experiences, then, we need to understand the variety of factors which might influence their consciousness and affect their identity as workers and as women. And, in turn, to argue that women's experiences at work and the sense they make of them actively inform the social processes through which sexual divisions of labour are sustained. Here we might consider such factors as the size of the workplace, the nature of the work itself, the proportion of male to female employees, the organisation of supervision within the workplace, the strength of, and involvement in, trade union organisation, the method of recruitment, wage rates and the security of employment. Just as we might assess the impact of such aspects of working life on men's consciousness and perspectives as workers, so too the precise structure of the workplace relationships in which women are involved have a bearing on the strategies they adopt in relation to their work.

So far I have considered the questions that might be posed to analyse the way in which women's role in the family and the ideologies and practices which inform changes in the labour process and women's experiences at work generate social processes which continuously reproduce the sexual division of labour. The third theme I wish to explore concerns the extent to which the policies and practices of the state sustained and reproduced sexual divisions of labour which disadvantaged women.

This question has attracted very little attention in empirical studies concerned with the location of women in the occupational structure. However, a number of writers have pointed out the important role played by the state in structuring women's lives. One crucial area in which this has been achieved has been through policies in respect of the family. As a number of studies have shown, state intervention has taken the form of support for a particular ideal in the organisation of the household; a family form based on a male breadwinner and a dependent wife. For example, Land and Parker have argued that family policy has been based on the assumption of,

> ....an unequal economic relationship between men and women, the man's duty to participate in the labour market is reinforced and although the woman may take paid employment too, her first duty is caring for her husband, children and sick or elderly relatives. 50

Policies such as the married man's tax allowance and the formulation of the social security system provide contemporary examples of the way in which this dominant ideology with regard to women's role has informed social policy.[51] It is based on a conception of the roles and responsibilities which are assumed to arise from

50. H. Land and R. Parker, 'Family policies in Britain: the hidden dimension' in J. Kahn and S.B. Kammerman, Family Policy (Columbia University Press, New York 1978) p. 17.
51. H. Land, 'Sex role stereotyping in the social security and income tax systems' in J. Chetwynd and O. Hartnett, The Sex Role System (RJP London 1978).

marriage, rather than on a view of the obligations of parenthood. As Mary McIntosh has shown,

> From the day of his marriage, for instance, a man can claim a 'married man's tax allowance' regardless of whether his wife works or of whether there are any children or adults in need of care in the household. The same principle of married women's dependence runs right through the social security system and, again, is not related to motherhood. 52

Similarly, it has been demonstrated that sex-role stereotyping underpins the legal system. Thus, for example, divorce court registrars have tended to look favourably on wives whom they regard as having fulfilled their 'wifely duties' within the home. Their decisions with regard to the maintenance of children and the division of property reflect this.[53] And because family law assumes that the wife will devote her energies to housework, Katherine O'Donovan explains that,

> .... families choosing to maximise their income in response to market forces will find that although there are no legal rules requiring the wife to undertake housework and child care, a myriad of structures with legal bases provide disincentives for the husband to do so. 54

These ideas also governed the response to women applying for Poor Law relief in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The first effect of this was the spurious calculation that women's monetary needs were less than those of men. Relief scales were always differentiated on the basis of sex, whereby women were entitled to a few shillings less than men of the same age. But the calculation that women could draw on the earnings of a male breadwinner for subsistence bore little relation to the genuine circumstances of many women, not least in Liverpool, where underemployment and unemployment amongst men elevated many women to the role of principal wage earner.

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52. Mary McIntosh, 'The Welfare State and the needs of the dependent family' in Sandra Burman, Fit Work for Women (Croom Helm, London 1979) p. 165.
53. Katherine O'Donovan, 'The male appendage - legal definitions of women' in S. Burman, op. cit., p. 144.
54. Ibid., p. 145.

The surveys of Booth and Rowntree in the East End of London and in York at the turn of the century uncovered a similar reliance on female earnings within working class households.[55] As Pat Thane has shown, the assumption behind Poor Law policy that, 'the stable two-parent form was the norm, and that women were to be treated not as autonomous individuals but as dependent upon their men' resulted in a failure to tackle chronic poverty amongst women; a failure to deal with their genuine needs. Instead, a keen interest was taken in their morals and skills as housewives. For example, women employed as 'cross-visitors' by Boards of Guardians were briefed, 'among other things, to ensure that deserted wives and widows and unmarried mothers were not cohabiting with men who could be held responsible for their support. They were appointed in increasing numbers between 1870 and 1941.'[56] By the same token, the children of widows were, in some parishes, separated from their mothers and committed to the workhouse since, it was argued, these children were deprived of 'the value of true home life.'[57]

Such ideas governed the administration of poor relief in Liverpool. Thus, the extent to which a woman conformed, as a mother and housewife, to a bourgeois model of this role was significantly more important in determining the level of relief given to her than her real needs. Indeed, in Liverpool women came under particular scrutiny in respect of their way of life, as the following extract from the 1910 report of the Poor Law Commissioners indicates.

> In three cases relief was stopped because of the birth of an illegitimate child. In two of these it was renewed at a later date. In the third the baby was but three days old at the time the house was visited. The woman of this case had for long

55. See P. Thane, 'Women and the Poor Law in Victorian and Edwardian England', History Workshop 6, Autumn 1978, p. 33.

56. Ibid., p. 40.

57. Ibid., p. 46.

> been receiving relief, though it was known she was of bad character. She lived in an insanitary cellar, in one room, and had three boys, the eldest eleven and the youngest seven years of age. In some cases relief has been finally discontinued because of the immorality of the mothers, and in some food has been given instead of money because of drunken habits. Drink alone has not been treated as a cause for refusing to continue out-relief, though women have often been warned by the Board and had their relief stopped for a week or two for this reason. 58

In consequence a survey of the living conditions of widows in the city, carried out by the Women's Industrial Council in 1913, provided a tragic catalogue of cases of poverty, despair, illness and hopelessness.[59]

Implicit in the assumptions with regard to women's role in the family which have informed the development of social policy and the legal system is a view which defines women's relationship to the labour market. As Hilary Land has argued,

> These assumptions favour men in the allocation of wages and jobs in the labour market as well as maintaining a distribution of resources and services in the home which is to their benefit... the emphasis on a woman's responsibilities being first and foremost in the home puts her at a disadvantage in the labour market, weakens her right to paid employment .... and even if she is working outside the home puts pressure on her to continue to bear and rear the next generation of citizens and workers. 60

Indirectly, then, social policy and the legal system have delineated women's position and status within the workforce.

At times the state has intervened more directly to define the spheres of women's employment. For example, the protective legislation applied to women workers in respect of the trades in which they could work, their hours of employment and the statutory requirements

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58. Quoted in E.F. Rathbone, Report on the conditions of Widows under the Poor Law in Liverpool (Lee and Nightingale, Liverpool 1913)
59. Ibid., The report clearly touched a raw nerve, for the Guardians' response was to claim it was slanderous, stating that it emanated 'from a lot of willy women.' Liverpool Echo, 12th March 1914.
60. H. Land, 'The Family Wage', op.cit., p. 74.

with regard to the time which must elapse between childbirth and the recruitment of a mother to waged work, limited the workplaces and times at which women could be employed.[61] In the late 19th century and early 20th century feelings ran high amongst the supporters of this legislation and those who opposed it.[62] But whatever the justice of their causes, the legislation was objectively discriminatory in relation to women - there were no comparable laws applied to male workers - and it directly circumscribed the parameters of the sexual division of labour.

This more direct intervention by the state in respect of women's employment, which had the effect of defining the boundaries of the sexual division of labour in certain industries and trades, was also apparent in aspects of the state education system in the period under review. The emphasis in the education of girls on curricula based around the teaching of domestic routines was designed to inculcate in working class girls bourgeois notions of good housewifery, but it also prepared them for careers in domestic service. Similarly, government training schemes for women in the early 20th century focused almost exclusively on training in domestic service. This work was considered to be particularly suitable for working class women and every effort was made by national and local government agencies, such as Employment Exchanges and Juvenile Employment Committees, to channel women and girls into it. Indeed, from the early 1910s, the identification of a servant shortage encouraged the deployment of increasing state resources into achieving a

61. See A.M. Anderson, op.cit.,
62. See, for example, Ray Strachey, The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain (Virago, London 1978, first published 1928) pp. 232-240; See also references to the Open Door Council, who argued for the removal of all restrictions to the employment of women, in Distribution of Women in Industry, op.cit., Introduction.

correlation between the demand for and supply of female servants.[63] There was an intense pressure on working class girls to pursue this career throughout the first three decades of the 20th century.

The evidence from the studies cited suggests the important role played by the state in reproducing a family form which defines women's primary functions within the home. Social policy has also played a part in restricting the areas of the economy in which women are employed and in strengthening their identification as workers with certain occupations. In Chapter Six I explore these themes in respect of the state's response to female unemployment between the wars, with particular reference to unemployed women in Liverpool. Without wishing to pre-empt this later discussion, a number of general points can be made here which underline the significance of this area of enquiry to our understanding of the mechanisms which sustain and reinforce sexual divisions within the occupational structure.

As was the case with poor relief, the equal treatment of men and women under the provisions of the Unemployment Insurance Scheme was constrained by a fundamental assumption that women were supported by male breadwinners. Certain laws attached to the scheme, in particular the Anomalies Act passed in 1931, provide clear examples of the way in which women were viewed primarily as housewives and treated as a 'special case' in respect of unemployment benefit. The Anomalies Act was blatantly formulated in a discriminatory manner to have a disproportionate effect on married women claimants. Married women were disallowed benefit under its terms if they became

63. J. Lewis, 'In search of real equality: women between the wars', in Frank Gloversmith (ed.) Class Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s (Harvester Press, Sussex 1980) p. 213.

unemployed after marriage, whatever their previous contributions to the Insurance Scheme. Prior to the passing of the Act the scheme based the assessment of the benefit due to all men and women on their previous contributions to the Insurance Fund. This Act was the clearest demonstration of the assumptions with regard to women's role which informed social policy in respect of the unemployed. But there were other rules and regulations attached to the payment of unemployment benefit, which were applied in a way which, as I will show in Chapter Six, discriminated against women and denied them the right of financial independence from men.

For inclusion in the category 'unemployed' it was not sufficient to be simply out of work. But the criteria used to assess women's claims can be shown to have been based on subjective notions of their proper place, whatever their circumstances. In effect, the state refused to accept 'unemployed' as a definition of all women who lost their jobs, thus sustaining the view that waged work was of secondary importance in women's lives. Women's identity as genuine waged workers was denied or undermined and this tended to confirm women's low status within the labour market.

Whilst the content and administration of unemployment legislation rested on and reinforced an ideology of sexual inequality, it also operated in material ways to confine women to specific places within the labour market. In particular, women's value as a source of cheap labour to employers was sustained by the benefit system. Levels of benefit and poor relief paid to women were usually so low as to tempt them into low paid work.[64]

64. Mary McIntosh has made this point in respect of the present social security system. See 'The state and the oppression of women', in Annette Kuhn and Anne Marrie Wolpe, Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production (RKP, London 1978) p. 264.

Moreover, the way in which the administrators of the benefit system sought to define 'suitable' job vacancies, channelled women into particular areas of the economy. In the context of mass unemployment, the emphasis on the available vacancies for domestic servants took on a particularly coercive aspect by linking it to the benefit system; women unwilling to take up this work were frequently disallowed benefit.

I now turn to the fourth and final theme of this study, which concerns the importance of situating the analysis of women's employment and women's lives within the context of the local economy and local labour markets. I have earlier alluded to the way in which specific local conditions have created diverse patterns in the sexual division of labour. The more general social processes which structure women's relationship to the labour market and their status and value as workers are countered by the unique circumstances existing in particular towns, cities or regions. A study focused on a single community thus offers the possibility of uncovering social processes inherent within the specific structure of a local economy which represent mechanisms which sustain and reproduce the sexual division of labour.

I have already argued that throughout the period under review the prevailing view with regard to married women workers was one which condemned, or at least disapproved of, their involvement in wage earning jobs. The proper place for married women was in the home. But a number of recent studies have indicated the way in which local economic conditions forced working class men and women to abandon this notion, since family survival depends on a combination

of male and female earnings. The contrasts which existed in married women's participation rates in waged work across the country were often closely linked to the state of the local labour market for men's labour. For example, in the three major weaving towns of Lancashire - Blackburn, Burnley and Preston - 'the married women's double shift was commonplace' in the 19th century.[65] However, as Jill Liddington and Jill Norris have pointed out,

> In the spinning towns of Rochdale working mothers were less common. Husbands were more likely to be miners, mule spinners or engineers, and to earn sufficient to keep their wives at home, and the wages women could earn preparing the cotton for spinning were lower than those of the northern weavers. In Bolton, which specialised in fine spinning, and in Oldham, which concentrated on the coarser yarn, more than two-thirds of unmarried women worked, but less than a fifth of the married ones. 66

That is to say, in towns where men were regularly employed, ideals of family life, built around a male breadwinner and a dependent wife at home, could often be realised within working class families.

In other parts of the country, however, where men's trades were characterised by irregular and casual employment, women's wages were often vital to the family budget. This was the case in 19th century and early 20th century Liverpool and similarly in the East End of London in the 19th century. But whereas in Lancashire, for example, the labour market offered opportunities for relatively well-paid work for those women who sought it, this was not the case in Liverpool and London. In these cities whilst the casual and underemployment of men encouraged women to seek waged work, they entered a labour market which was severely restricted, a labour market unable to absorb the supply of female labour. Gareth Stedman

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65. Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, One Hand Tied Behind Us (Virago London 1978) p. 58.

66. Ibid., p. 59.

Jones has shown that the main consequence of this for women workers in Victorian London was very low wages. Thus Jones argues,

> ....the weakness of women's industrial position stemmed partly from the fact that the supply of labour was not primarily dependent upon the demand for it, but rather upon the state of the demand for her husband's labour. 67

In other words, one crucial component of women's industrial position - their low wage rates - was partly sustained by the conditions prevailing in the predominant male industries. This was also the case in Liverpool throughout the period under review, as I will argue in Chapter 3.

In some communities women were forced to seek more discreet ways in which to add to the family purse in order to balance the need for money, over and above the husband's wage, against the proscriptions placed on their waged work by husbands and the prevailing culture. Trevor Lummis has described how, in the early 20th century, the wives of East Anglian fishermen engaged in various forms of homework, such as letting rooms in the holiday periods, mending nets at home and taking in washing. One of Lummis' female informants describes how, in the inter-war years, she,

> ....let like the devil here. Me and my children (two) used to sleep out in the shed when my husband was away. If he come home and I had people he used to have to sleep in the front room on the floor. And he used to mutter, he used to jaw like mad. I'd think to myself my word I wish he weren't at home. 68

Men who were opposed to their wives working argued that it was because, 'it let the home go'. But, as Lummis speculates,

> It is possible that the high percentage of women earning money in their homes, muted what might have been a stronger attitude. As the extracts indicated, a number of women were determined to earn money in spite of their husband's opposition. 69

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67. Gareth Stedman Jones, Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1971) p. 84.
68. Trevor Lummis, Occupation and Society: The East Anglian Fishermen 1880-1914 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985) pp. 128-129.
69. Ibid., p. 130.

One implication of Lummis' study is the way in which, whilst women's wage work was vital to the household budget, it was frequently hidden from official records of economic activity, and even, at times, hidden from a woman's husband. Moreover, whilst the views held by individual men and dominant within a particular community discouraged the employment of women, women themselves were forced to seek sources of income beyond the husband's wage. But the type of work they pursued reflected a diplomatic negotiation between the need for money and the prevailing expectations of them as women.

There are few other studies which have attempted to link the nature of women's waged work in a particular geographical area, and the quality of the conditions in which they worked with the nature of the dominant male industries. More usually, in studies of towns or regions which, like Liverpool, were based around and took their character from industries which employed predominantly male workers, 'the family' is the focus through which questions about women's lives are asked.

Lady Bell's study of Middlesborough in the early 1900s, a town in which the only large industry - the iron trade - 'offers absolutely no field for women in any part of it', is a rare example of a study in which women's lives are given a significance almost equal to those of men. Lady Bell devotes two chapters of her book to the 'wives and daughters of ironworkers'. For Bell it is the competencies of women as domestic managers which commands her main interest. Thus, she argues,

> The key to the conditions of the workman and his family, the clue, the reason for the possibilities and impossibilities

> of his existence, is the capacity, the temperament and, above all, the health of the woman who manages his house; into her hands, sometimes strong and capable, often weak and uncertain, the future of the husband is committed, the burden of the family life is thrust. 70

The theme, a preoccupation of the bourgeoisie of the time and typically overlain with moral judgements is, nevertheless, pursued in such a way as to provide an insight into the way in which the trajectories of women's lives were shaped by the standard of living generated by the dominant male industry. The hardships which characterised women's lives are vividly revealed.

Iron workers were regularly paid workers, but the income they brought into the home still left many families teetering on the brink of poverty. As Lady Bell shows the impact of the low wages of men fell particularly heavily on women's shoulders. In a household described as 'delightful' by Lady Bell, the wife of Peter F, a mother of seven children, was,

> ....a delicate woman, always ill and ailing for some time before and after the birth of her children, (but who) succeeded in spite of incessant weakness and ill-health in organising her house with care and skill .... These people had £2 5s a week, and sometimes more, a good income,no doubt, for a man living in a four-roomed cottage. 71

Mrs F had the benefit of receiving the full income earned by her husband with which to feed and clothe her family, but many women were less 'fortunate', forced to 'struggle along' on only a proportion of the husband's wage, the remainder of which he kept for his own amusements. Lady Bell highlights the necessitous lives of many working class women, even in those households in which men earned a reasonable and regular wage, by underlining the factors which distinguished men's and women's lives. Constant childbearing under

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70. Lady Bell, At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town (Virago, London 1985, first published 1907) p. 171.

71. Ibid., p. 176.

harsh conditions, the tragedy of stillbirth and the early death of an infant, and the lack of time and resources to allow a woman to recover her health and stamina between pregnancies, defined the lived experience of the iron worker's wife, in contradistinction to his own. As Lady Bell concludes,

> There are only a certain proportion of women in any class who have that particular gift of administering funds rightly, and the number is still further diminished by the fact that the mainspring of the woman's capacity, her health, is unduly strained by the incessant demands upon it we have described. 72

Lady Bell's study is perhaps exceptional in the emphasis it places on the significance of an understanding of women's lives to an appreciation of working class life within a town dominated by a male industry. In other, more recent, studies of specific communities the detail of women's lived experience is less tangible and vivid. Contemporary sociology has focused on specific issues in relation to the family, which have structured the questions asked in relation to women. Thus, in Coal is Our Life, a study of a Yorkshire mining community in the early 1950s, the focus is on the function of the family,

> ....as a mechanism for perpetuating the social structure, not only in terms of biological reproduction, but in terms of the production of the social personalities required by such a community as Ashton. 73

The lives of the men and women of Ashton and the roles they assume within the family are said to derive from the framework of Ashton's social relations centred on the colliery and to fit perfectly with

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72. Ibid., pp. 244-245.

73. Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques and Clifford Slaughter, Coal is Our Life (Tavistock, London 1969) p. 245.

the needs of such a community over time. The two sexes are described as occupying distinct spheres of social life. The man's life is defined by his work and the cultural and political activities which stem from it. He is more or less absent from the domestic scene, except to sleep and eat. His leisure time is spent largely in male company. The woman's life is, in contrast, defined by the expectations of her within the family. In her role as wife and mother she is responsible for all domestic tasks, the care and discipline of children and the management of money. She has little involvement in pleasurable leisure activities outside the home. The pressure of the cultural mores of the community force her into this domestic-centred role. Thus, the study argues,

> There is among housewives a good range of personality types at the age of marriage, but it is not difficult to notice every day how they gradually adapt themselves to the family and weekly round of household duties and the behaviour thought correct for a wife. 74

In Ashton, we are told,

> One does not encounter women with ideas about general questions, or interested in cultural activities or the running of organisations. 75

And each generation of women reproduces itself around this model.

> Young women in Ashton see their future in terms of being married and running a household; they have no prospects of professional or other social interests and activities outside the home. The normal state of affairs in working class families where the wife is a housewife and the husband a breadwinner is accentuated in Ashton, where the main industry cannot employ female labour and other jobs for women are scarce. The wife's confinement to the household, together with the acceptance of the idea that the house and the children are primarily her responsibility, emphasise the absence of any joint activities and interests for husband and wife. 76

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74. Ibid., p. 207.

75. Ibid., p. 210.

76. Ibid., p. 182.

The lives of men and women, so described, have fuelled the popular image of the working class family for those who exist outside it. Based on observation and testimony and, no doubt, founded on some truth, the authors of Coal is Our Life are so keen to fit these men and women into roles which prove their functionalist argument that no-one appears to exist beyond the boundaries of stereotype. We are left wondering what occupations single women pursued in Ashton and the way in which the experiences they had at work may have shaped their views and aspirations. Were any women engaged in paid work after marriage? Perhaps, as was the case in East Anglia, the married women of Ashton engaged in home work of some kind. We are told that a young widow had, 'since the death of her husband worked very hard' and earned good money. But she is the exception who proves the rule and is thus of no intrinsic interest to the authors of the study.

Despite these criticisms, however, we share in the wider aim of this study of attempting to locate women's lives within the context of the culture and economy of a particular locality. The limitations of Ashton's labour market, focused around the colliery, clearly intensified the tendency for women to relinquish paid work on marriage. And the ethos generated amongst men working at the pit not only defined the essence of masculinity, but implicitly defined a female world and femininity, a world outside the pit. The social processes tending to confine the married woman to the home extended beyond the boundaries of this particular community, but the experiences and ideologies generated within the locale, and the limitations of its economy, clearly had as significant a bearing on women's lives as on men's lives.

This suggests one final aspect of the local labour market which bears enquiry. That is, to question the relationship between, on the one hand the culture and identity shaped at work amongst men in the dominant industry and, on the other hand, women's lives as workers and as wives and mothers. A number of studies have posed the way in which men's work defines aspects of their maleness, their masculinity. For example, Paul Willis has argued,

> Manual labour is suffused with masculine qualities and given certain sensual overtones for 'the lads'. The toughness and awkwardness of physical work and effort - for itself and in the division of labour and for its strictly capitalist logic quite without intrinsic heroism and grandeur - takes on masculine lights and depths and assumes a significance beyond itself. Whatever the specific problems, so to speak, of the difficult task they are always essentially masculine problems. It takes masculine capacities to deal with them ... The brutality of the working situation is partially re-interpreted into a heroic exercise of manly confrontations with the task. Difficult, uncomfortable or dangerous conditions are seen, not for themselves, but for the appropriateness to a masculine readiness and hardness. 77

Similarly, Cynthia Cockburn has shown how the struggles and confrontations of male printing workers at work are informed not only by class relations but by the sex/gender system. For example, the craft workers' struggle to resist capital's attempts to dilute his skill also has a 'sexual basis.' As Cockburn argues,

> In all that men are saying about skill and status they are saying something, too, about sex and gender. There are large scale tensions and power struggles among men and between men as men. Men identify work itself, the fact of waged work outside the home and family with masculinity. Second only to warfare, work is the arena in which men wrestle with each other for status and survival. 78

The work of both Cockburn and Willis highlights the importance of examining the way in which a masculine culture and identity, shaped at work amongst men, has implications for women as workers and wives, implications beyond the workplace itself.

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77. Paul Willis, Learning to Labour (Gower, Aldershot 1983) p. 150.
78. C. Cockburn, op.cit., pp. 132-133.

In any town dominated by a single industry, the culture generated within the major industry inevitably spreads beyond the workplace, informing the attitudes and practices adopted by people in other spheres, such as political organisations and the family. This study is concerned with women workers in Liverpool. But this section of the workforce is not an isolated group. The day-to-day interactions between men and women which, I will argue, helped to shape women's lives, were informed, in part, by men's experiences at their <u>own</u> workplaces and the sense they made of these experiences. If the assertion and delineation of the essence of masculinity was an element of men's working experiences in Liverpool, this consciousness reflected, too, on women's lives, shaping the expectations of them at work and in the home and defining the parameters of the female world.

CHAPTER THREE

LIVERPOOL, CASUALISM AND WOMEN'S LIVES

Throughout the period under review the life blood of Liverpool's economic development lay in the trade associated with the port. Its industrial structure reflected this: port-based service industries totally overshadowed a stunted manufacturing sector. And some of the most important manufacturing industries which had established themselves on Merseyside were directly linked to the trade through the port. Sugar refining, cigar and cigarette manufacture and ship building were typical examples. But the docks acted as a human magnet in an unbalanced and limited labour market. Men involved in the handling, stowing and transportation of cargo in and around the docks constituted the single most important grouping of male workers within the local working class.

This chapter seeks to explore the sociological significance of the predominance of dock workers within the occupational structure of the city. It is particularly concerned with the implications for women's lives of the importance of dock work and further, questions the extent to which the social processes which sustained and reproduced the sexual division of labour emanated from this primary economic activity of the city. It looks first at the conditions of life in dockside Liverpool and explores the material consequences for women of the casual recruitment of male dock workers. How were women's lives, as wives, mothers and workers, shaped by casualism and poverty? Secondly, it examines the nature and conditions of work at the docks and seeks to establish relationships between, on the one hand, the consciousness and identity generated amongst

men at work and, on the other, the sexual division of labour. But, to begin, I will briefly outline the details of the structure of the local labour market and the sexual division of labour within it.

TABLE 1

MALE WORKFORCE

SUMMARY OF OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE: LIVERPOOL 1911-1931

OCCUPATIONAL GROUP	1911		1921		1931	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Transport	74963	33.4	74741	30.2	75783	28.3
Commercial and Local Gvt. (including Clerks)	27071	12.1	22765	9.2	23009	8.6
Dealers and Shop Assistants	18288	8.1	21114	8.6	30135	11.3
Personal Services	9492	4.2	8297	3.4	11141	4.2
Professional	6616	3.0	4893	2.0	5553	2.1
Building and Construction	18291	8.1	13652	5.5	18889	7.0
Metals and Engineering	20619	9.2	25563	10.3	22327	8.3
Other Manufacturing	32354	14.4	36126	14.6	28763	10.7
Other (including general labourers)	16890	7.5	40098	16.2	52070	19.5
total men occupied	224584	100.0	247249	100.0	267670	100.0

Source: Calculated from Census, Occupation Tables

From the turn of the century until the 1930s there were never less than 74,000 men engaged in the transport industry of the city, which was primarily focused in and around the port. As Table 1 shows, the industry accounted for around 30% of local male workers up to the 1930s. The key group of waterfront workers were dock labourers. Other groups of workers connected with the port included seafarers, warehouse workers, porters, carters, bargemen and clerks.

It is difficult to provide precise figures on the number of dock labourers. At the time of the 1911 census just over 22,000 men returned 'dock labourer' as their occupation. However, the number of men seeking work as dockers was periodically inflated as a result of the fluctuating demand for labour in other local industries. Unskilled labourers normally attached to other industries, for example building workers, seafarers, clerks, and others all sought work at the docks when their own trades were depressed.[1] Moreover, porters, warehouse workers and messengers, who would not be returned as dock labourers in the census, also intermittently sought work as dockers.[2] The dock worker's registration scheme, first introduced in 1912, which was part of a campaign to eliminate a drifting fringe element of workers from dock employment, issued 24,300 tallies in 1922. Nevertheless, workers from other trades still floated in and out of dock work through the period.[3] Thus the number of local men with some experience of, and financial dependence on, dock work during their working lives was considerably in excess of the number of registered dockers. But dock workers were a dominant presence in the town not simply in terms of numerical strength. In a very real sense they symbolised, along with seafarers, the essence of Liverpool. Work on the docks shaped the standard of living, way of life and consciousness of a significant section of the local working class. And the culture generated by the conditions and nature of work on the waterfront radiated into the life of the city as a whole. There was no other industry which had a comparable impact on the character of the city. Liverpool was its port

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1. E.L. Taplin, Liverpool Dockers and Seamen 1870-1890, University of Hull, Occasional Papers in Economic and Social History, No 6, p. 9.
2. Eleanor Rathbone, 'Report of an enquiry into the conditions of dock labour at the Liverpool docks', Proceedings of the Liverpool Economic and Statistical Society, 1904, p. 33.
3. F.G. Hanham, Report of an Enquiry into Casual Labour in the Merseyside Area, Henry Young & Sons Ltd., Liverpool 1930, p. 18 and p. 31.

and all other economic activities were secondary to this.

Other important areas of male employment in the city were also within the service sector. As Table 1 shows, taken together, clerical work and work in the retail trade employed over 45,000 men in 1911, and over 53,000 men in 1931. In contrast, manufacturing industries were relatively insignificant as sources of male employment. The only industries employing comparable numbers of men to those employed in any of the service industries were the metal working trades, in particular ship repair, and the building industry. Thus, whilst the clothing, food, drink, tobacco and chemical industries had a presence in the city, taken independently, as areas of male employment they were of minor importance.

TABLE 2

FEMALE WORKFORCE

SUMMARY OF OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE : Liverpool 1901-1931

OCCUPATIONAL GROUP	1901[1]		1911[1]		1921[2]		1931[3]	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Personal services (Indoor Domestic Servants)	37512 (23069)	44.1 (29.1)	38129 (21555)	39.9 (22.5)	31202 (16191)	29.0 (15.0)	37746 (20046)	30.9 (16.4)
Dealers & Shop Assistants	7416	8.7	9610	10.1	15822	14.6	19202	15.7
Clerical & Local Government	2521	3.0	5053	5.3	12003	11.1	13339	10.9
Professional	6582	7.7	7057	7.4	7470	6.9	7909	6.5
Manufacturing Industry	26227	31.0	30243	31.6	28789	26.6	24594	20.2
Other	4783	5.6	5473	5.7	12794	11.8	19285	15.8
total women occupied	85058	100.0	95563	100.0	108080	100.0	122075	100.0

Source: Calculated from Census, Occupation Tables
1. 10 years and over; 2. 12 years and over; 3. 14 years and over.

Consistent with the pattern which existed in all industrial areas in Britain, the Liverpool economy displayed a rigid sexual division of labour. And throughout Britain women workers were disproportionately concentrated in particular service industries as opposed to manufacturing industries. [To this extent Liverpool was not unique.] But the pecularities of the Liverpool economy, in particular the singular importance of waterside employment, accentuated this pattern. In the absence of a significant manufacturing base, thousands of women were unable to fund any alternative to employment in some form of personal service. Liverpool thus had the peculiar distinction of having a huge army of women domestic servants, cleaners and laundry workers not only in the 19th century but well into the 20th century. In 1891, 29,000 women, or 44% of the total female labour force, worked in waged domestic work. As Table 2 shows, by 1931 there were nearly 38,000 women in Liverpool earning their living in this way.[4] Other service sector occupations, such as clerical and shop work were to grow in importance as areas of female employment over the period. In 1891 there were 640 female clerks in Liverpool. By 1921 there were 12,000 and by 1931 over 13,000, or 11% of the female working population. Similarly, in 1931 there were over 19,000 women working in the wholesale and retail distributive trades, 13,000 of whom were shop assistants. (See Table 2)

This concentration of women workers in a narrow range of service industries was mirrored in the manufacturing sector. As Table 3 shows, in 1911 for example, 47% of women working in workshops and factories were employed in just one industry, the clothing industry. Indeed, in that year 87% of women factory workers were concentrated in just four industries: clothing, food and tobacco, paper and printing, and sack making and mending.

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4. In fact this figure would be much higher if all those women who worked on a casual basis as cleaners and in other domestic jobs, such as home washing, were taken into account.

TABLE 3

DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN WORKERS WITHIN MANUFACTURING INDUSTRIES:

LIVERPOOL 1911-1931

Occupational Group	1911		1921		1931	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Clothing	13196	46.8	9336	32.4	8541	34.7
Food, Drink & Tobacco	5683	20.1	7430	25.8	4464	18.2
Paper & Printing	3237	11.5	3292	11.4	3184	13.0
Textiles (mainly sack making & mending)	2320	8.2	2354	8.2	2836	11.5
Metals & engineering (including electrical engineering)	917	3.3	2152	7.5	2870	11.7
Furniture	516	1.8	1278	4.4	770	3.1
Chemicals	1357	4.8	1053	3.7	168	0.7
Skins & leather	425	1.5	189	0.7	231	0.9
Precious metals	341	1.2	144	0.5	149	0.6
Other	215	0.8	1566	5.4	1378	5.6
Total women in Manufacturing Industries	28207	100.0	28794	100.0	24594	100.0

Source: Calculated from Census, Occupation Tables

Placed in the context of the northern industrial towns of Britain, these distinctive features of both the male and female labour markets are exceptional. But even compared with other ports in the U.K., none revealed the same exaggerated dependence on either waterfront employment or domestic service. London, for example, had an equally underdeveloped manufacturing sector in the late 19th and early 20th century. However, from around the time of the First World

War factory based employment developed rapidly in the London area and throughout the whole period London displayed a far greater diversity in its occupational structure.[5] Similarly, Glasgow, also a port and a city of comparable size to Liverpool, did not reveal the same overdependence on service industries. Thus in 1911, for example, 17% of men in Glasgow were employed in the transport industry compared with 33% in Liverpool. Whilst 21% of women worked in waged domestic jobs in Glasgow, compared with 40% in Liverpool.[6]

Women's lives, no less than men's, were fundamentally shaped by the imbalance within the local economy, an imbalance which gave such pre-eminence to the economic activities associated with the port. The dependence of thousands of male workers on casual employment at the docks created extreme poverty and, in its wake, ill-health and poor housing. The effects of this were experienced acutely by women.

Casualism and Poverty

William Beveridge defined casualism as 'a system in which there are rapid and irregular fluctuations of work at a number of different centres, which are met by the engagement for short periods of irregular hands who, in part at least, are taken on by chance as they present themselves.'[7] In these terms, dock labourers, warehouse workers, porters, carters, ship repair workers, building and local authority labourers, shop assistants, seafarers, clothing workers, workers in food factories and cleaners were all variously subject to some

5. See Gareth Stedman Jones, Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1971.
6. Census, Occupation Tables
7. William Beveridge, Unemployment: A Problem of Industry, 1901 and 1930, Longmans, Green & Co., London,. 1930, p. 77.

form of casual recruitment in Liverpool. As Gareth Stedman Jones has clearly shown in his study of Victorian London, the basis on which casualism was able to flourish there was the over-abundant supply of unskilled labour.[8] Similarly, in Liverpool there were few industries which required large numbers of apprenticed workers and thousands of men and women without any formally recognised skill. Casualism remained the dominant form of recruitment throughout the Liverpool economy into the 1930s.

The most important effect of casualism on the local working class was poverty. It was a poverty graphically described by Beatrice Webb in an essay concerning the dockers of the East End of London at the turn of the century.

> Extremes meet and contrasts are intense. There is magnificence in the variety and costliness of the multitudinous wares handled by the most decrepit and poverty-stricken worker - a hidden irony in his fate, touching all things and enjoying none. All the necessaries and most of the luxuries of our elaborate civilisation pass familiarly through the dock labourer's hands, or under his feet. The fine lady who sips her tea from a dainty cup and talks sentimentally of the masses, is unaware that she is tangibly connected with them, in that the leaves from which her tea is drawn have been recently trodden into their case by a gang of the great unwashed. 9

The irony and detail in the scene Beatrice Webb describes could equally have been observed in Liverpool. For the thousands of people of Liverpool dependent for their living on the trade through the port, unemployment, underemployment and poverty were familiar facts of life. The wealthy philanthropists of the city offered aims to the 'deserving' poor, who were denied the dignity to exist without charity. It was the practice of the casual recruitment

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8. G.S. Jones, op. cit., p. 67.

9. Beatrice Potter, later Webb, in Charles Booth, eds., Life and Labour of the People of London, First Series, Poverty. Augustus M. Kelley, New York, Revised Edition 1902, reprinted 1969, p. 17.

of labour which left dockers and many other local workers poverty-stricken and stamped them with the stigma of pauperism and degradation. Indeed, it was not until the Second World War that there was any hint of prosperity for a large proportion of the local working class who had, until then, lived a virtually hand-to-mouth existence. Thousands of men and women in Liverpool experienced the misery of a grinding, relentless poverty which pursued them from the cradle to the grave. Here my central concerns are with the way in which the casualism intrinsic to the dominant male industry was influential in shaping women's lived experience and, further, how it structured women's location within the occupational hierarchy of the local labour market.

At the docks casual recruitment was based on a minimum contract of half a day. Dockers were recruited at numerous 'stands' along the dock road held in the early morning and at midday. But at no time was there sufficient work to fully employ all those who presented themselves for work. As a result few dockers were able to secure enough work over the course of a week to maintain an adequate standard of living. The availability of work was dependent on a number of factors, from the weather and tides, to seasonal fluctuations in the import and export of different commodities, and the general state of trade. The amount of work available, then, varied from day to day, week to week and season to season. But over and above these factors, even at the busiest times the supply of labour was in excess of demand. At slack times thousands of dockers were 'unable to get more than a day or two, or less a week.... irregularity of employment among workers (was) as inseparable

as concave and convex.'[10] A study of the conditions of work at the docks in 1904 stated that, 'estimates given us by a number of wharfingers, foremen, and labourers all agree in putting the average employment of a dock labourer at not above three days a week with overtime.'[11] The study formed part of the evidence used to support the introduction of a scheme for the registration of dockers - an attempt to reduce and rationalise the excess supply of labour. The scheme, introduced in 1912, involved the issuing of tallies to 'bona fide' dockers, i.e. those men who regularly sought work at the docks. In theory, tally holders were then given preference for work over non-tally holders. However, the operation of the scheme did little to alter the levels of unemployment and underemployment amongst dockers. Thus, a further study, carried out in 1930 on behalf of the Ministry of Labour and the Liverpool City Council, found that approximately 75% of tally holders had lodged claims for unemployment benefit in 1929.[12] And although the number of tallies issued gradually decreased between 1912 and 1930, other factors contributed towards an increase in the levels of unemployment and underemployment. In particular, Britain's falling share of world trade from the early 1920s onwards and technological advances in the methods of handling cargo at the docks ran counter to any efforts to fully employ those presenting themselves for work. By 1932 an average of only 58% of tally holders were paid wages each week and approximately 28% of dock labourers' families were found to be living below the poverty line.[13] In other words, each week 8,000 dockers were unable to find any work.

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10. E. Rathbone, 'dock labour', op. cit., p. 33.
11. Ibid., p. 33.
12. F.G. Hanham, op. cit., p. 78.
13. D. Caradog Jones, eds., Social Survey of Merseyside, University Press of Liverpool, Liverpool 1934, Vol. II., pp. 132-133.

Evidence provided by the inter-war Social Survey of Merseyside indicated the way in which deprivation was concentrated within the households of the unemployed and the casually employed. Thus the Survey found that whilst these two groups of people represented 21.8% of all families sampled on Merseyside, they contributed 'between them 63.2% of the total of families below the poverty line and 34.8% of the total of overcrowded families.'[14]

The extent of deprivation and the poor standard of living within the dockland communities appalled many observers of the time. Indelible images of poverty and its attendant hardships, from slum housing to poor health and premature ageing and death remain the dominant memory of all those who recall Liverpool before World War Two. Writing in 1934, J.B. Priestley observed the grey reality of the city.

> You see it in London. You see it in Liverpool, miles of it. Docks and slums, docks and slums. We are an island people; even yet we owe nearly everything to the sea; our foodstuffs are brought in ships and our manufactures are taken away in ships; but when you visit most of our larger ports you see nothing but slums.... It was hard to believe that by taking ship here you might eventually reach a place of sharp outlines, a place where colour burned and vibrated in the sunlight, that here was the gateway to the bronze ramparts of Arabia, to the temples and elephants of Ceylon, to flying fish and humming birds and hibiscus. 15

More prosaic, but as deeply felt, are the recollections of Harry Livermore, a local solicitor, who arrived in Liverpool from Newcastle in the early 1930s.

> I was so shocked by the conditions that existed here.... You

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14. D. Caradog Jones, Vol One, p. 170; With regard to the definition of poverty employed by the survey, the report argues: 'Few will venture to criticise the scale as too high or claim that any family with an income insufficient to reach such a level is not indeed in poverty.' Vol. One, p. 150.
15. J.B. Priestley, English Journey, Penguin Harmondsworth, 1977, pp. 244-5.

> saw children in bare feet - that was quite common in the poorer districts. You saw women in filthy weather without coats, just simply a shawl wrapped around them.... The courts around St Annes, Crispin Street, were really cul de sacs - about fifty families living in these courts with one outside loo.... And when that got stopped up the health hazards were enormous. If you went round there once - well, it was a shattering experience. 16

The housing conditions in which dockers lived were shocking even to the population of Liverpool itself. In his autobiography James Sexton recalled a municipal election in the late 19th century in which he had stood as an Independent Labour Party candidate.

> I made the housing problem the chief plane of my platform. We went to the expense of having a lantern display which contrasted the pitiful, horrible dens in which dockers had to live with the houses of their employers. It aroused a storm of indignation and denunciation. But alas when polling day came the dockers, almost to a man, voted against me, the reason being, as I discovered afterwards, that they resented this exposure of their poverty. Never before have I had such a vivid illustration of prisoners hugging their chains. 17

Throughout the whole period inner city Liverpool contained some of the worst slum housing in the country and it was on a scale far more extensive than in most other cities. Indeed, Dr Hope, the Medical Officer of Health in Liverpool in 1906, argued that there was 'no city in Christendom', so far as he knew, and certainly no city in Europe, 'which could produce anything like the squalor found in some of the back streets of Liverpool.'[18] Dockers and their families tended to live in rooms within privately owned court houses. Some even lived in cellars. Typical housing conditions in which casual labourers lived were revealed in a study of 1909. For example, a family of eight - father, mother, five children

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16. Interview with Harry Livermore, January 1981, Solicitor, Born Newcastle, 1908.
17. James Sexton, Sir James Sexton, Agitator: The Life of the Dockers MP, Faber and Faber, London 1936, p. 167.
18. Quoted in League of Welldoers, Our Slums, Special Commission Report on Poverty in Liverpool (Archive of the League of Welldoers).

aged between ten years and 1½ years, and a niece aged ten - lived in a house 'in a very dingy and neglected court, which seems to be perpetually overflowing with dirty water and household refuse. The house is ill-lighted and dilapidated. The miserable little living room has a table, a wooden sofa frame, and a couple of broken chairs as sole furniture.' The report stated that the house 'gives a dirty impression without being really dirty.' This family occupied just three rooms.[19] Similarly, a family of nine - mother, father and seven children aged between 20 years and 5 years - lived in a three roomed cellar, consisting of:

> .... a small kitchen and two tiny bedrooms - one a mere cupboard. This they shared with a married daughter and her husband. When asked how eleven persons managed in such a space Mrs P said she really could not say how they did manage. The window curtains were always clean and tidy, and the cellar had an outward air of cleanliness, but did not bear closer inspection.[20]

Abysmal housing conditions such as these were still the commonest type of accommodation for dockers' families in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus in the early 1920s, 1,000 families were still occupying cellars condemned as unfit for human habitation by the Liverpool Corporation Act of 1908 and 11,000 families in the city were living in just one room.[21] As late as 1935, a Ministry of Health survey found 315 cellars still occupied, in which a total of 911 people lived, 196 of whom were children. Most were in the inner city areas.[22] Similarly, in 1936 the Pilgrim Trust reported: 'One thing which will remain in the memory of anyone going around the Liverpool unemployed will be the appalling housing conditions.' There was,

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19. Liverpool Joint Research Committee on the Domestic Conditions and Expenditure of the Families of Certain Liverpool Labourers, How the Casual Labourer Lives (Northern Publishing Co. Ltd., Liverpool 1909, p. 65.
20. Ibid., p. 44.
21. Figures from the 1921 Census of Population, quoted in Liverpool Daily Post, 14.4.1927 and 25.6.1927.
22. City of Liverpool, Council Proceedings, 1935-6 Vol. Two, pp. 1746-1755.

'an almost unending series of houses falling to pieces, long ago condemned as unfit for human habitation.'[23] As slum clearance programmes got under way in the late 1920s and 1930s the degrading living conditions in Liverpool were made clear. According to the Town Clerk, giving evidence to the Ministry of Health on proposals for slum clearance in St Anne's ward in 1928, it was 'difficult to find words to describe the horrible conditions in this area.' A population of 2,876 occupied just 434 houses, many of the 'houses' being of only one or two rooms. And such housing went hand in hand with disease and ill-health. The death rate in the area was 22.5 per 1,000 population in the first seven years of the 1920s, compared with 13 per 1,000 in the city generally. The infant mortality rate was 158.8 per 1,000 live births, compared with a rate of 100 per 1,000 in the city as a whole.[24]

Malnutrition and ill-health constantly haunted the population of the inner city. Thus, all the evidence indicates that the following story, relating to a family living in 1908, could have been observed in thousands of households in the city in every decade between 1890 and 1940.

> A bare footed child about five years of age, received her supply of bread and jam (from school) and was followed home through the rain to the cellar in which she lived. The Medical Officer, on entering the cellar, found two other children, who attended different schools, who had also arrived with their bread and jam, and the three of them were proceeding to divide the meal with two others who were not of school age. The mother stated that they did this when their father was out of work. Latterly he had been in hospital but was returning to work the following day. She also stated that she had had thirteen children, seven of whom had died in infancy and early childhood. 25

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23. Pilgrim Trust, Men Without Work, Cambridge University Press, 1938, pp. 94-5.
24. Liverpool Daily Post, 2.5.1928.
25. Liverpool Trades Council, Annual Report, 1908-1909.

Insanitary housing conditions encouraged epidemics of infectious diseases to sweep through dockland neighbourhoods. Measles, whooping cough, diphtheria and influenza claimed thousands of lives every year. For example, in 1912 there were 877 deaths from measles and 272 from whooping cough.[26] And in one week alone, in January 1929, there were 140 deaths from flu.[27] Choleriac diarrhoea was also epidemic in the slum areas leading to an extremely heavy toll in infant lives. Between 1903 and 1913, 9 - 10,000 children died from this condition in Liverpool, most before they had reached their first birthday.[28] Official research was constantly revealing the tragic consequences of poverty. For example, in 1900 an enquiry into the circumstances of 1,082 families in which the death of an infant had occurred during the year found that of the 4,574 children born to these families, 2,229 had died; an infant mortality rate of 487 deaths per 1,000 live births. A similar enquiry in 1913 studied 1,500 families. It found that of the 7,429 children born alive to these families to that date, 3,441 had died in the first year of life. 205 babies were stillborn.[29] As Table 4 shows, very high infant mortality rates persisted into the 1930s in areas such as Exchange, Abercromby, Everton and Kirkdale. In Exchange, in the late 1920s, the infant mortality rate was almost twice the national rate which then stood at 69 deaths per 1,000 live births.[30] And in 1940 the rate for the city as a whole was still as high as 84.[31] As long as the slums and poverty remained the claim on infant life remained excessive.

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26. City of Liverpool, Council Proceedings, 1916/17, p. 716.
27. Liverpool Daily Post, 23.1.1929.
28. 'Report on the Causes of choleraic diarrhoea in children with special reference to investigations in Liverpool during the last seven years,' in City of Liverpool, Council Proceedings, 1913/14, Vol. 2, pp. 1871-1889.
29. Report of the Medical Officer of Health, Infant & Maternal Welfare Scheme, in City of Liverpool, Council Proceedings, 1915/16, pp. 589-629.
30. D.Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol 3, p. 480.
31. Medical Officer of Health, Annual Report, 1940, p. 9.

It was precisely the casual recruitment of dock labourers which compelled them and their families to live in the slum housing of dockland Liverpool. Dockers needed to live within walking distance of the stands at which they were recruited for a number of reasons. First, because they needed to keep abreast of local information on the availability of work at particular docks. People would inform each other of the chances of work and such vital information would be spread through informal networks in the neighbourhood.

TABLE 4

INFANT MORTALITY RATES: LIVERPOOL 1901 - 1931

Deaths per thousand live births

District	1 1901-1903	1 1911-1913	2 1915-1919	3 1927-1931
Scotland	219	179	155	)
				) 129
Exchange	233	191	171	)
Abercromby	138	150	128	119
Everton	176	152	132	97
Kirkdale	168	141	133	97
West Derby W	161	129	113	)
				) 74
West Derby E	134	103	90	)
Toxteth	176	141	)	
			) 118	85
Sefton Park	118	83	)	
Wavertree	137	96	86	63
Garston	120	124	109	N/A
Fazakerley*	-	107	105	85
Woolton+	-	-	71	58
City	169	137	123	92

1. Source: City of Liverpool, Council Proceedings, 1915/16, pp.589-629.
2. Source: Medical Officer of Health, City of Liverpool, Annual Report, 1920, p. 71.
3. Source: Social Survey of Merseyside, Vol. 3, p. 480.

* Incorporated 1905. + Incorporated 1913.

Secondly, to meet the statutory requirements, effective from 1920, of eligibility for unemployment benefit dockers had to attend both the morning and the midday stands. Those living any distance from the docks, but unable to find work at the morning stands, would be forced to wait around without shelter until midday. Finally, dockers living out of town would not only incur travelling expenses beyond their means but would have insufficient time to move between stands looking for work if considerable time was spent travelling between home and the docks.

Because it was so necessary to live near the docks the programme of building corporation housing estates on the outskirts of the city in the 1920s and 1930s did little to improve the quality of life of the vast majority of dockers and their families. Some took the opportunity to move from the slums, only to find that the high rents and the problems associated with living further afield forced them back to the dockland. A survey of tenants at one of the new estates in Norris Green, carried out by the Liverpool Personal Service Society in 1929, highlighted the problem. On the estate they found,

> Many children visibly suffering from malnutrition so severe as to produce boils, anaemia, colic etc.; badly broken boots, insufficient underclothing, hence bad attendance at school; many houses stripped almost bare of furniture, everything having been pawned or sold to pay the rent; many verminous houses (women saying nothing left to pay for soap); many tenants deeply in debt to money lenders, endeavouring to pay several shillings weekly interest in addition to high rents; fathers, sons and daughters engaged in or in search of work either obliged to walk several miles in and out of town on worn-out boots, or pay 4d a day tram fares; general mood one of sullen anger, deep depression or apathetic resignation; general verdict summed up in one woman's remark, "We may have a posh house but the children are clemming (starving)". 32

32. Liverpool Daily Post, 2.1.1929.

The Society indicated that many families were doing moonlight flits back to the slum areas to live in single rooms. The report concluded: 'Our housing policy has done much for small families, especially of clerks and artisans but almost nothing for unskilled labourers, especially those with large families.'[33] Casual labourers, then, were effectively trapped in the slum areas.

It is clear that the poor housing and poverty in the inner city engendered a great deal of ill-health and despair. But a body of evidence suggests that in such circumstances women suffered disproportionately compared with other family members in terms of their health and well-being. There are a number of material factors which explain the differential impact of poverty on men's and women's lives. First, it was common for women in poor families to sacrifice their own nutritional needs in order to better feed and clothe their husbands and children.[34] This was part of the custom and practice of the time of being a wife and mother. In order to ensure the best possible living conditions for those for whom they cared women tended to place as a low priority their own needs. As managers of the household budget women had the power to allocate resources in this way.[35]

Clear evidence of widespread malnutrition and consequently ill-health amongst working class mothers was provided by a study of 1,250 married working women carried out nationally by the Women's Health Enquiry Committee (WHEC) in 1939. The WHEC revealed the

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33. Liverpool Daily Post, 2.1.1929.
34. See Margery Spring Rice, Working Class Wives (Virago, London 1981; first published by Penguin Books 1939;) Margaret Llewelyn Davies, Life as we have known it (Virago, London 1979).
35. Pat Ayers and Jan Lambertz, 'Marriage Relations, money and domestic violence in working class Liverpool, 1919-1939' in Jane Lewis, ed., Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family 1850-1940, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1986, pp. 195-223.

prevalence of women denying themselves food in order to properly feed their families. Such self-denial during pregnancy tended to exacerbate ill-health after childbirth. A series of pregnancies, combined with a poor diet, left many women invalids and old before their time. The WHEC cited the example of Mrs D. of Liverpool, the wife of a seafarer with nine children living at home. She paid 15/- rent for a seven-roomed house and had a total income of £3 8s 0d.

> ....she subsists entirely on tea and toast and margarine with an egg at weekends and a kipper twice a week. She has had fifteen pregnancies of which two were still-births and two children died from pneumonia... She goes out charring 'as I couldn't possibly manage otherwise'. She suffers from rheumatism for which she rubs on an ointment; kidney trouble for which she was in hospital six weeks but 'couldn't stay longer owing to children at home' and anaemia for which she takes Doctor William's pills. The visitor says 'I sometimes wonder to see Mrs D. alive at all, her children range from 19 to 4½ and as far as I can see she never rests or eats. 36

Similar evidence with regard to malnutrition amongst the women of Liverpool had been highlighted by the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws in 1909. Thus the evidence of the factory inspectorate of the city had stated,

> We were impressed by the statement of a medical superintendent that many of the patients admitted to the infirmary are suffering from absolute want of nourishment, particularly girls employed in factories and the wives and daughters of dock labourers. In one of the tobacco factories the committee of a benefit fund have found it needful to supply food and clothing to employees whose debility has, in the opinion of the doctor of the fund, been due to lack of these things. 37

Childbearing and childbirth were an added strain on the health of women in the circumstances of the time. It is widely accepted

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36. M. Spring Rice,op.cit., p. 161.
37. Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and the Relief of Distress, 'Report by Mr A.D. Steel-Maitland and Ms Rose E. Squire on the Relation of Industrial and Sanitary Conditions to Pauperism, App. Vol. XVI, Cd. 4653 (HMSO 1909) p. 73.

that a good diet and sanitary housing are vital elements in ensuring the health of a woman during her childbearing years. Indeed, in the 1930s the British Medical Association clearly specified the minimum diet necessary to maintain the health of a pregnant woman and her unborn child.[38] The Social Survey of Merseyside was able to indicate, however, that in those families whose income fell below the poverty line there was simply not enough money to provide such a diet.[39] High infant mortality rates reflected this, as did a high incidence of maternal morbidity. Thus in the late 1920s it was found that 30% of women attending gynaecological departments in Liverpool hospitals were suffering from some form of maternal disablement.

> A major share of these problems were attributed to the poor state of general health of the women involved, or to physical deformities resulting from malnutritional defects in early life. More searching investigations suggested that the high incidence of anaemia and toxaemia among mothers in depressed areas, as well as high incidences of death and disease among infants, could be related to poor standards of health and especially deficient nutrition. 40

Birth control advice and facilities were not widely available to working class women in the period.[41] And in Catholic families artificial birth control was resisted on religious grounds. Both factors combined to result in women having pregnancies throughout

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38. J. Lewis, op.cit., p. 223.
39. D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol 1, p. 220.
40. C. Webster, op.cit., p. 122.
41. Jane Lewis, 'In search of real equality: women between the wars' in Frank Gloversmith (ed.) Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s (Harvester Press, Sussex, 1980)

the childbearing years. Thus, families of nine, ten or more children were common in dockland Liverpool. The burden on women's health of constant childbearing under harsh living conditions undermined the stamina and vitality of many. Childbirth was often a lonely, health-threatening and tragic experience. As one man remembers of his mother,

> Nearly every year I used to look at my mother, she was pregnant again. I was that sensible enough, because I'd say, 'Here's another one for me to nurse', and that's the way it would go. We had - in one case, things were so bad you'd hardly credit this one. We were living in a street called Garden Street, off Smithdown Lane. Those days you'd get the bailiffs and they'd just throw your things outside on the street and leave them out there and you'd have to go and find other accommodation. But on this occasion we got another, we went into it more or less as squatters....at the bottom of Garden Street....and I'll always remember we had one baby died. It must have been about three or four months old. And we had a cane cradle by the fireside and my mother couldn't get the money to bury the child. And I can remember this, this is as true as I'm speaking to you, the maggotts were crawling out of its face....before we could get an undertaker.... I'll never forget that sight, the maggotts crawling out of the dead baby's face. That's how bad things were. 42

But despite such evidence the relationship between poverty and ill health has proved to be an extremely contentious issue.[43] Official acceptance of any casual link between low income and ill health was largely absent throughout the period. It was a highly charged political issue, particularly in the 1930s, which governments preferred to bury under a mound of confusing statistics and lies. Thus while a body of evidence pointed to a widespread sickness amongst working class mothers this rarely went hand in hand with an official admission that greater prosperity would relieve many women of their suffering. Instead, it was alleged that women themselves were ignorant of the principles of good housekeeping and sound

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42. Interview with Billy Regan, November 1980, Retired docker, Born Liverpool 1900.
43. See Charles Webster, 'Healthy or Hungry Thirties?', History Workshop Journal, 13, Spring 1982.

nutrition. It was their own shortcomings which were to blame for ill-health. In fact, many surveys of the time were able to indicate that the poorest sections of the population were simply without the income necessary to purchase a diet sufficient to maintain good health.[44] Moreover, recent research has convincingly argued, with regard to the inter-war years at least, that government bodies conspired to present statistics in such a way as to prove a growing improvement in the general health of the population.[45]

It was often small scale local research studies which highlighted the discrepancies between official statistics and the reality of lives framed by poverty; research which invariably provided overwhelming evidence of the particularly damaging effects of poverty on women. Thus, the Joint Research Committee study of the households of casual labourers in Liverpool stated that,

> The facial expression and carriage of many of the poorer women in and after middle age (i.e. in that class from about thirty onwards) suggest that their condition is one of chronic suffering, so habitual that they are scarcely conscious of it, due to extreme anaemia, weariness and the various small ailments that result from self-neglect, over-exertion and under-nourishment during the years of childbearing. On the whole one is more astonished at the amount some of them accomplish in their houses with so poor equipment and at the high level of devotion, patience and cheerfulness they reach than at the deficiencies of others. 46

Whilst women's physical health suffered greatly as a result of casualism and poverty, their mental health could also be impaired. Trying to stretch insufficient resources, making ends meet, was a stressful and worrying preoccupation. Women invariably assumed

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44. Ibid., p. 121; Wal Hannington, Unemployed Struggles 1919-1936, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1936, Ch. XVI; D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol 1; M. Spring Rice, op. cit.
45. C. Webster, op.cit.,; Jane Lewis, 'Women between the wars', op.cit.
46. Joint Research Committee, How the Casual Labourer Lives, op.cit., p. xxiv.

responsibility for managing the household budget but the fact that men's income could fluctuate dramatically from week to week placed intense pressures on them. As Eleanor Rathbone argued,

> It is by the wives and children that the hardship of irregular earnings are felt most keenly. Low earnings are, of course, an evil in themselves, but quite apart from the amount the mere irregularity exercises a demoralising influence on family life and habits.... How is the wife of an unskilled labourer to plan out the expenditure of a weekly income that zig-zags in this bewildering way? Exceptionally thrifty couples will, of course, average it and let the earnings of the busy weeks eke out those of slack ones. But what more usually happens is this:- The standard of family life is fixed by the amount earned in the slack months. In other words, that is the sum which the man falls into the habit of giving his wife for housekeeping, and what is earned over it is kept as pocket money. 47

Most women were forced to rely on credit from the pawnshop and neighbourhood moneylenders in order to eke out an existence. The use of the pawnshop by working class families was, of course, prevalent throughout Britain during this period, but neighbourhood money-lenders were less widespread. It was precisely in the most poverty stricken areas that parasitic moneylenders flourished. Their insidious methods, however, forced many families into increasing debt and failure to pay could result in harassment and physical violence, which was invariably directed at women. As Frank Baker explains,

> There was quite a lot of small-time money lenders in this area. They drove quite a lot of people to their grave really. Perhaps people would borrow a pound and pay back a shilling a week for 21 weeks, though invariably she would encourage the person to borrow another pound before the time was up. You'd get caught, you see, and you'd never be out of debt. There was no security - she'd only lend to people she knew and each little community would have its own money lender. She would know everybody and everybody would know her. If she had a defaulter, well, in those cases she'd have her cronies, wouldn't she, who'd make things uncomfortable. It was mainly done through women. The women, kind of, ganged up on one person.... it would be nothing to find, if you were defaulting on a debt, a bucket of muck on the steps or halfway up the lobby, you know, the contents of the lavatory. To be truthful about it, it was shit and it would be smeared all over the

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47. E. Rathbone, 'Conditions of dock labour',op.cit.,p.54; See also How the casual labourer lives, op.cit., case studies of household budgets.

> the place. When that happened the woman would promise to pay double the next week and probably go without dinner, the kids too. That was the way it was. 48

The anxiety experienced by women who incurred mounting debts and harassment was often borne alone. Evidence suggests that women kept such transactions secret from their husbands for fear of a violent response.[49]

The poor physical health and mental stress suffered by women as a direct consequence of the poverty created by casualism, was compounded by the problem faced by women in the labour market. I will explore in detail the nature of the local female labour market and women's work in Chapters 4 and 5. However, it is important to stress here the direct relationships which existed between the casual employment of dock labourers and the nature of married women's work. For it was the unemployment and underemployment of casual male workers which invariably forced women, already overburdened with housework and childcare, to seek waged work. As a study of women homeworkers to the Liverpool clothing industry found: 'In times of slackness and unemployment the wives of dock labourers and the daughters of artisans cast about them for ways of supplementing the family income.'[50] In desperation women would do virtually anything to earn money. But they entered a severely restricted labour market, oversupplied with female labour. Indeed, such were the limitations of the labour market that the observation made towards the end of the 19th century that 'there are more wretched women, fewer honourable occupations for women and poorer wages in this city than in any other part of the country,'[51] was applicable throughout

48. Interview with Frank Baker, April 1978, Flour mill worker, born Liverpool; See also Pat O'Mara, The Autobiography of a Liverpool Irish Slummy (Martin Hopkinson, London 1934) p.66.
49. P Ayers & J Lambertz,op.cit.;How the Casual Labourer Lives,op.cit.
50. Investigation Cttee of the Liverpool Women's Industrial Council, Home Work in Liverpool, Northern Pubg. Co.Ltd.,Liverpool 1908,p.12.
51. Liverpool Review, May 26th 1888.

the period under review. Many married women were simply unable to find remunerative work. This was clearly stated in the study of the households and budgets of casual workers in the city carried out in 1909.

> Many of the women, in spite of the young children with which they are burdened, would gladly do more work if they could get it, but the supply of unskilled workers such as they are is far in excess of demand. 52

But those women who did find work often faced an intense exploitation of their labour.

Only 9% of married women were recorded as economically active in Liverpool in the 1911 census and they represented 12% of the female labour force. Similarly, in 1921, 8% of married women were recorded as working, representing 10% of female workers.[53] But these low, official participation rates concealed the extent to which married women engaged in casual, low paid employment. Many women did such jobs as washing, ironing, cleaning, sewing and hawking in order to earn a few shillings.[54] Such work offered pitifully low wages. Thus, located within a very specific labour market, women entered a vicious circle in which the value of their labour was constantly cheapened by the sheer numbers of women available for work. Moreover, jobs such as washing and hawking were heavy and physically demanding. And work carried out in the home, such as sewing, often involved exceptionally long hours of work, as the following account bears witness.

> The hired sewing machine is quite an institution in the Liverpool slums. One woman with five children and a husband who had only averaged one and a half days work per week at the docks

52. Joint Research Committee, How the Casual Labourer Lives, op.cit., p. xiv.
53. Census, Occupation Tables.
54. See E. Mahler and E. Rathbone, 'Payment of Seamen', Liverpool Courier, January 23rd and 24th 1911.

> for about three months had just finished her stitching at 11 o'clock one night when I passed the court in Eldon Street. 55

The casualism intrinsic to the principal male occupations of the city encouraged the development of an inflated supply of married women workers to the labour market. In turn, this was the basis on which an intense exploitation of married women workers was able to flourish. Married women had their vitality crushed by a double burden of work and were invariably denied the dignity of payment of a wage sufficient to maintain even one person. Women thus paid a heavy price for undertaking waged work - work in which the very poorest working conditions prevailed - and simultaneously caring for a large family. Their mental and physical health was often severely impaired during their childbearing years. Lack of nourishment and care condemned many women to premature ageing and early death. As the WHEC report stated, 'it is the cumulative effects of years of ever-increasing toil which even if it results in no definite disease (or none that they can specify) crushes the vitality of so many working mothers and reduces them so often by the age of forty or fifty to a grievous and irremediable state of health.[56] Such material consequences of the impoverishment resulting from casualism reveal the direct link between the conditions of work in the predominant male industry and women's lived experience.

At the Docks

But it was not simply the material conditions of existence generated by work at the docks which linked women's lives to men's employment. Dock employment generated a specific workplace culture which, I will argue, had a bearing not only on men's sense of themselves

55. Our Slums, op.cit., p. 22.

56. M. Spring Rice, op. cit., p. 50.

as workers, but also shaped their identity as men, their masculinity. In turn, this consciousness was articulated beyond the workplace and, in terms of my interest here, had a significant bearing on the sexual division of labour.

To state that dockers were men is to state an obvious fact. But it is interesting to note that while male workers in many industries, almost exclusively male before the First World War, reluctantly accepted women workers to replace men drafted into the forces between 1914 and 1918, this was not the case at the Liverpool docks.[57] The response to an attempt in March 1916 to employ women as porters in the Harrison sheds at the South End was a refusal by male dockers to work. The men only resumed work when the 'experiment' was abandoned.[58] In the North End women were employed as porters during the war by the Leyland Line, but under agreements with the men that they be restricted in number and confined to certain types of work.[59]

The swift and unequivocal response of the dockers in the South End to the employment of women workers is evidence of the subjectivity which informs the process whereby gender division is reproduced within the occupational structure. The woman docker transgressed the accepted boundaries of the sexual division of labour; boundaries which are partly defended by a consciousness which defines appropriate masculine and feminine activity. The dockers projected their sense of themselves as men, or their masculine identity, to insist on a specific relationships between occupation and gender and were prepared to use their collective power to maintain this gender division.

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57. One of the very few occupations open to women at the docks was as cleaners in ships' accommodation.
58. Liverpool Echo, 14th March 1916.
59. Liverpool Echo, 14th, 16th, 17th & 22nd March 1916.

Clearly there are a number of reasons why particular sections of workers have used collective action to exclude others from their occupational grouping. Racism, nationalism, religious sectarianism, the struggle to maintain the relative privileges of craft status and the assertion of the value of certain skills above others, have all been used as bases on which particular occupations have become the preserve of a specific section of the working class.[60] In the period under review the fear that male wages would be lowered because of the cheapness of female labour was invariably invoked as the most important reason to exclude women from specific occupations. But whilst all such struggles involving the question of who should hold certain jobs contain an objective element, more or less acceptable depending on one's politics and point of view, these struggles also reveal that subjective criteria and self identity are part of the process by which occupational groupings are structured. When the Liverpool dockers struck work and refused to welcome women as their colleagues, what was revealed was that at the heart of the matter lay their own concepts of masculinity and femininity. Dock work was men's work and the docks a man's world - an environment in which women were alien and unwelcome. And whilst in factories and workshops up and down the country it was discovered, during World War One, that women could perform 'men's work', women were rarely accepted as genuine or permanent replacements for male workers; they remained outsiders, a necessary but temporary stand-in.

Here I wish to examine the culture generated amongst men at work at the docks and question how it might engender this masculine identity. That is, to explore the extent to which dockers' experiences

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60. See F. Parkin, The Social Analysis of Class Structure, Tavistock, London, 1974, pp. 1-17.

at work informed the social processes which tend to reproduce a specific sexual division of labour and to circumscribe the boundaries of the female world.

Casualism is the key to understanding the culture generated amongst workers at the docks. It was invariably described by bourgeois observers as an unnecessary, degrading and demoralising evil. Charles Booth, writing in 1893 on the casual workers of the East London docks asked, 'Why should we suffer the evil of a system of employment which discourages honest and persistent work and favours the growth of a demoralised and demoralising class of bad workers and evil livers?'[61] For Booth casual workers were 'parasites eating the life out of the working class.' More measured, but in the same vein, were the comments of Lawrence Holt, Lord Mayor of Liverpool in 1930.

> It is manifest that the practice of carrying out the industry of Merseyside so largely by casual labour has brought in its train economic waste, besetting poverty, much physical and moral degradation, as well as almost insoluble difficulties of social ordering and civic government. 62

All dockers were stigmatised by such views, if not by the poverty in which they were forced to live. Moreover, the stand system itself was degrading and dehumanising. Hundreds of men herded together like cattle and forced to thrust themselves forward in order to draw attention to themselves. It could be an intensely demoralising experience, as one man remembers.

> You'd muscle up where the ship was and then the boss would come out for you. But always the hand on the shoulder. And unless he put his hand on your shoulder you weren't one.

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61. quoted in T. Simey, ed., The Dock Worker: An Analysis of Conditions of Employment in the Port of Manchester, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 1956, p. 2.
62. F.G. Hanham, op.cit., Foreword.

> As a matter of fact, a friend of mine was only talking the other day - he said he remembered the first time he went to the oil boats in the Brunswick and (the boss) came out and he hasn't got room for one man and he's the man left. Can you imagine what that feels like? 63

Nevertheless, dockers were to resist consistently proposals and policies aimed at decasualisation. According to David Wilson, the reason for this persistence,

> ....lies primarily in the fluctuating nature of dock work and the stubborn belief among employers and labour leaders, that the free call was the only practical method of matching the supply of labour to the demand. In short, casualism was regarded as inevitable. 64

Furthermore, the men saw in casual recruitment the possibility to exercise an independence denied to many other groups of workers. They were theoretically free to choose when and where to work. Thus, according to Eleanor Rathbone, 'there can be no doubt that the sense of being "their own masters" enjoyed by men who are engaged only by the day affords them, at least while they are young, some compensation for the irregularity of their earnings.'[65]

But whilst some men were able to view the casual system in this positive way, the objective result of the practice was an intense vulnerability in the labour market. There were no guarantees of work, even for the most regular attendant at the stands. The key issue for the docker thus became that of maximising his chance of recruitment. It was on this basis that a complex hierarchy of workers established itself at the waterside, as men were forced to promote their own abilities in contrast to those of the next man. Age, strength, skill at certain operations, knowledge of

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63. Interview with Billy Regan, op.cit.
64. David F. Wilson, Dockers: The Impact of Industrial Change, Fontana, London 1972, p. 23.
65. E. Rathbone, 'dock labour', op.cit., p. 54.

specific commodities, religion, nationality, family ties, familiarity with the foreman and union membership all became bases on which dockers sought to distinguish themselves from other dockers. In so doing divisions between dockers became entrenched. Recalling the 1890s, James Sexton, Secretary of the National Union of Dock Labourers in Liverpool, argued that the Liverpool docks had 'a caste system quite as powerful as India's'. The significance of these divisions between dockers altered little over the period. Vulnerability continued to define the docker's working life into the 1930s.

Despite the generally low regard in which waterside workers were held by the public at large, as has been frequently pointed out, the common label of 'unskilled dock labourer' is inappropriate as a description of the dock worker. Many jobs at the docks required a considerable degree of skill and knowledge.[66] This was particularly the case for those who worked on board ship, stowing and unloading the cargo and rigging the gear which lifted the cargo in and out of the hold. In the 19th century, before power winches were introduced, loads improperly secured through incorrect rigging could, and often did, cause fatal accidents amongst the men receiving the goods for stowing in the hold of the ship. Moreover, skill was required to make good faulty winches and ropes which were often the only tackle available to move the cargo. Sexton himself was one of the thousands of men who suffered serious injury as a result of

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66. See, for example, James Sexton, op.cit., p.67; E.L. Taplin, The Dockers' Union: A Study of the NUDL 1889-1922, Leicester University Press, 1985, pp.12-16; John Lovell, Stevedores and Dockers: A Study of Trade Unionism in the Port of London 1870-1914, August M. Kelley, New York, 1969, p. 31.

'an incompetent man at the winch and a defective hook at the end of the rope fall.'[67] In his case the accident resulted in a fractured skull and cheek bone and the loss of an eye as a sling of bags of grain broke loose from the hook and crashed into him. With the introduction of power winches and cranes to move the cargo on and off the ships the intensity of work increased. A combination of speed and skill became essential to avoid accidents and complete the work in the specified time.

The stevedores, who stowed the goods in the ship's hold, had the complex task of handling weighty, often cumbersome goods and packing them evenly: a skill described by a docker in the following way.

> ....it's a work of art to be a stevedore, to start working on a ship.... They had eight men down below and... the two stevedores, they took charge. They supervised the cargo coming in and the stowing of it. And it was a code of honour that you wouldn't put a package on the other one's side. There was an imaginary line down the centre of the ship's hold - one fella would be on the starboard side and one stevedore would be on the port side - and it was a code of honour that you never put any cargo on the other one's side. If you saw a hole suitable to put one of your cases in you'd ask the other fella's permission... You'd never go on the other fella's side, 'Get on your own side' they'd say to you.... He was jealous of his own side, keeping his own side level...[68]

The special skills of the stevedore and others who worked on board ship and the dangers to which they were subjected were recognised in higher wages than those paid to the porters who handled the goods on the quay. Stevedores proper in Liverpool have been described as 'a small class of highly skilled specialists,'[69] but the expertise

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67. James Sexton, op.cit., p. 74.
68. Interview with Billy Regan, op.cit.
69. J. Lovell, op.cit., pp. 43-4.

required of ship workers in general gave them a high status within the dock workforce. Having said this, however, many of those who worked on the quayside could hardly be described as 'unskilled'. For example, 'fruit porters judged and classified the fruit delivered on the quay, making a catalogue for brokers in the fruit market who traded on the basis of it.'[70] Indeed, knowledge of the properties of particular commodities was essential for their proper handling and preparation for warehousing and sale. The master porters who employed quay workers at Liverpool undertook work for a limited number of merchants, thus establishing themselves as specialists in the handling of specific commodities. By the same token, workers tended to seek work regularly with the same master porter in order to build up a reputation of competence at a particular job and thus enhance their chances of recruitment. 'Employees of these small masters were thus permanently identified with some specific sector of dock work, and they became highly proficient workers in their field of employment.'[71] Porters with this kind of experience acquired a superior status amongst their workmates.

A complex and seemingly infinite pattern of division developed within the dock workforce because of the variety of goods which came through the port and the diverse skills involved in handling and stowing them. But dockers were forced to take these divisions seriously; their very livelihood depended on the ability to prove skill and competence at a particular operation. The competitive atmosphere encouraged by the stand system, which compelled men to fight for the attention of the foreman, was intensified by the

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70. E.L. Taplin, The Dockers Union, op.cit., p. 13.
71. J. Lovell, op.cit., p. 48.

nature of the work itself. It was a matter of self-interest to promote the special qualities required for certain jobs and thus emphasise the divisionsbetween them. In so doing, these divisions became part of the way in which dockers came to regard and interact with one another. James Sexton's recollection of his days as a docker bear testimony to this.

> The hand busheller of grain - now displaced by the elevator - looked with scorn upon the man who did the donkey work on the quay; the grain carrier who could easily sling a four bushel sack weighing a couple of hundredweight across his back and shoulders and run along a swinging plank, thought himself the master workman of the ages; the stitcher of the bags used in the bulk salt trade, a veritable artist in his craft, had a most colossal contempt for the man who merely handled bags filled at the salt factory, whilst the tallyman who weighed and checked the bags considered himself the best and most important of all the 'casual dock labourers.' 72

Similarly, the contempt in which regular, 'bona fide' dockers held the so-called 'casual casuals' (i.e. those workers who, periodically displaced from other industries, had only a tenuous connection with dock work) was engendered, in part, by the importance of this skill hierarchy to the culture at the docks.

Very closely linked with the status distinctions which grew up on the basis of skill, was the way in which the demonstration of strength and stamina was applauded within the fraternity of dockers. Most jobs at the docks were heavy and physically demanding, but workers employed at certain jobs were particularly revered for their strength and fearlessness in the face of danger. As has been mentioned, workers on board ship faced a severe endurance test, being required to 'work at speed, in cramped and precarious positions for long hours.'[73] Their high status was secured on

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72. James Sexton, op.cit., pp. 111-112.

73. J. Lovell, op.cit., pp. 39-40.

this basis as much as by virtue of their competence at the job. Other workers were similarly renowned for capabilities which, within our culture, are inextricably linked with images of masculinity. Thus James Sexton described coal heavers as 'wonderful, magnificent fellows', because of his admiration for the way in which they demonstrated exceptional stamina.

> I think the coal heaver was really the pick of a fine lot of men. His work was arduous, requiring the strength of Hercules - a fact which gave him infinite pride in it - and it was also one of the most dangerous ... They earned good money, but they earned it, every halfpenny of it and they paid for it too. Few men were able to stand the strain for more than five years, which is considerably less, I believe, than was the working life of a fire brigade horse. 74

Salt heavers, too, were respected as hard working, powerful men.

> ....like his industrial cousin the coal heaver, he earned and deserved and needed, the allowance of from six to ten pints of beer a day which was permitted under Father Nugent's temperance pledge. Being what were known in the vernacular of the port as 'good earners', salt and coal heavers alike were greatly desired by the other sex as life partners. 75

The status which derived from men's ability to withstand dangerous and arduous working conditions came to infuse men's sense of themselves and their day-to-day relationships with each other. It was this consciousness which defined a core aspect of the culture at the docks, to the extent that dockers took an ambiguous position over the question of safety at work. Thus, the serious accident which befell James Sexton encouraged him to become a life-long campaigner for improved safety regulations at the waterside. But his enthusiasm for this cause was not always shared by other dockers. As Eric Taplin has argued, the docker who demonstrated his fear of danger not only lost favour with the foreman, but also lost status with his workmates.

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74. J Sexton, op.cit., pp. 112-113.
75. Ibid., p. 110.

> It was the mark of an experienced man that he knew how to look after himself; the risk of personal accident was borne with equanimity. A man who complained could be branded as an agitator whose agitation threatened the jobs of men. As well as trying the patience of the foreman he would soon be awarded a derisory nickname by his fellow workmates. 76

The importance which dockers attached to their expertise and physical prowess was one means by which to insist on their dignity as workers; a dignity which casualism and the cursory attitudes of foremen effectively denied them. Indeed, the indignities to which dockers could be subjected are revealed by the extent to which the recruitment process became based on forms of petty corruption. Foremen sought favours from men, such as drinks and cigarettes, in exchange for work, 'and the mythology of dockland maintains that men allowed the foreman to sleep with their wives' in order to secure work.[77] Those men unwilling to court favour in these ways paid for it in their wage packets, as one man explains.

> My father was a docker. Unless you wanted to buy the chargehand a pint, polish his boots for him, you were lucky to get work. My father wouldn't bow down to anybody so he was very, very casually employed. The only time my father got work was when there was plenty of work. If work went a bit slack on the docks my father never got taken on... He was one of those people who had principles. In his way he was a very proud man. 78

But others were forced to demean themselves in some way in order to secure work. Men turning grey, for example, often dyed their hair in order to present themselves on the stands in as youthful and virile a way as possible.[79] Physical appearance was paramount in the scramble for jobs which took place at the waterside.

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76. E.L. Taplin, The Dockers' Union, op.cit., p. 59.

77. D. Wilson, op.cit., pp. 53-4.

78. Interview with Frank Baker, op.cit.,

79. Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and the Relief of Distress, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix Vol IV, Cd. 4835 (HMSO) 1909, p. 3.

The casual recruitment of dockers and the nature and conditions of work on the waterfront, forced dockers to emphasise the skill divisions between them and to project their strength and fearlessness in the face of danger. A man who could prove his strength and competence enhanced his chances of recruitment. But in this process, a hierarchy of workers was established based on qualities which are intimately linked with the expression and demonstration of masculinity in our society. Men came to stress their abilities in a competitive manner. There was a rivalry in men's relationships at work, one with another, a rivalry in which women had no place. That is, the consciousness of hierarchy which informed men's daily experiences at the dockside was not about skill and strength alone, but also about men and masculinity. It was a consciousness which contained ideas of appropriate masculine behaviour and achievement. The docks was a man's world, where men sought to distinguish themselves from each other in terms of their abilities as men.

It is not possible to draw clear and direct links between, on the one hand, this culture and men's assertion of their masculine identity, and, on the other hand, women's lives. The response of men to the employment of women at the docks is one of the few clear examples of how the dockers' view of the docks as a man's world was translated into action which had a direct bearing on women. And clearly, neither men's consciousness nor their definitions of the appropriate boundaries of the sexual division of labour derive solely from their experiences at work. Nevertheless, this was a consciousness which arranged the behaviour, priorities and places for men and which subjectively put women in a different terrain. When women

strayed into this man's world they were forcefully reminded that they were out of bounds. Women were assumed to be unable to display the qualities most prized amongst the dock workforce. Just as the docker scornfully regarded the 'casual casuals', men whose history and experience, it was assumed, failed to equip them with the qualities required of workers on the waterfront, so women's skills and abilities were defined as laying elsewhere - in other occupations and in the home. The differences and divisions between men were, thus, significant in shaping male consciousness and male identity; in producing and reproducing a model of masculinity which implicitly constructed a model of femininity.

These divisions between men were important to them. They were not only about the dignity which men sought from their work, but they also fashioned a man's behaviour in a context much wider than the docks. The docks, like all workplaces, was a place where men asserted their value as workers, but it was also an arena within which men created their identity as men.

The consciousness which developed amongst the dock workforce in no sense challenged a sexual division of labour which confined women to specific areas of the economy. On the contrary, it meshed perfectly with the assumptions of a society which drew sharp lines of distinction between the male and female worlds. The casual employment of men in and around the port of Liverpool thus has a significant bearing on women's lives. It not only partially shaped the material conditions of women's existence, but it generated, also, a workplace culture which reinforced and tended to reproduce the sexual division of labour.

CHAPTER FOUR

WOMEN'S WORK AND WOMEN WORKERS (1)

Throughout the period the Liverpool labour market failed to expand significantly beyond the parameters set by the importance of the port within the local economy. For thousands of working class men in the city there was no alternative to port-based work as a source of livelihood. Few men could aspire to an horizon of employment beyond the docks and, indeed, many men who did pursue other occupations were periodically forced onto the dock stands in search of work during periods of depression in their own industries. The peculiarly irregular and casual nature of dock work condemned thousands of local men and their families to harsh lives defined by chronic poverty.

It would clearly be inappropriate to underestimate the hardship which characterised the lives of working class men in Liverpool at this time. Nevertheless, as I have argued in Chapter 3, a body of evidence clearly shows that in many households women bore a particularly heavy burden of suffering and deprivation. The responsibilities of family life, in particular for child care, meant that many women were dependent on the inadequate and irregular wages of men, supplemented by credit from the pawnbroker and the money lender. Whilst for some good times were interspersed with leaner times, it was not always the case that women benefitted from busy and more prosperous periods at the docks. As Eleanor Rathbone argued, when giving evidence to the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws,

> From personal observation and statements made to me by many

> persons, I gather that it is a very usual custom among working class families to give a fixed sum each week to the wife for household expenses. When the wage is fluctuating this sum tends to sink to the smallest amount usually earned, all above this sum being spent by the husband on his pleasures. 1

But not all women, married or single, were totally dependent on male earnings. On the contrary, in many households women were the principal wage earners on whom others were dependent. However, many of the problems which confronted local male workers were also the reality for female wage earners. A limited range of job opportunities, casualism, seasonal work and an absence of skilled, well-paid work combined to undermine women's ability to maintain themselves and their dependents. Over and above this, women workers faced forms of oppression and exploitation specific to them, the crucial effect of which were to depress the remuneration for 'women's work' to a rate far below that for 'men's work.' I refer to 'men's work' and 'women's work' for, as in all industrial centres in Britain in this period, a crucial characteristic of Liverpool's employment structure was a clearly defined sexual division of labour. On the whole men and women worked in distinct occupations in the context of a hierarchical labour market in which women were invariably placed at the bottom in terms of a series of factors from wages, conditions of work and organisation to status and dignity.

This chapter, and the following chapter, examine the characteristics of the female labour market and the nature of women's waged work in Liverpool. Further, they seek to explore the extent to

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1. Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, Appendix Vol VIII, Minutes of Evidence, 11th November 1907, Cd. 5066, (HMSO 1909) p. 263.

which social processes and relationships occurring at the workplace are part of the mechanisms by which the sexual division of labour is continuously reproduced to women's disadvantage.

In this chapter I have selected for examination a number of industries in which women, both married and single, typically worked in Liverpool in order to highlight some general features and consequences of women's industrial experience in the city. The study of women's work in these industries reveals, above all, the poverty of the Liverpool woman worker. There were few occupations which offered an income sufficient to raise women's standard of living above the subsistence level. And, in this regard, it is important to stress the high proportion of families in which the wages earned by women, whether they were wives or daughters, were not simply a crucial supplement to another wage but were the main income on which other family members were supported. Many women worked in 'sweated trades', for long hours and in insanitary workshops, or in low paid domestic work. Trade union organisation was weak amongst women and, whatever their skills, their status as workers ranked low. These material aspects of women's working lives reflect the realities of gender division and fuel the process by which the sexual division of labour itself is reproduced. It is this latter issue which this chapter also seeks to address. That is, it explores the workplace in terms of its significance as an arena within which the sexual division of labour is continuously reproduced. To what extent did women's day-to-day experiences at work, the consciousness generated amongst women in the workplace and their low status and low income become part of the very process by which a sexual division of labour was able to remain such a persistent and largely unchanging

feature of the Liverpool economy?

The most significant source of female employment during the whole period was the personal service industry. The domination of the economy by the port, which created trades employing exclusively male workers, alongside a stunted manufacturing sector, provided the ideal conditions in which an unusually large personal service industry could flourish. Massive unemployment and underemployment amongst male workers forced married women into the labour market in search of work in a city in which, by custom, the married woman worker was frowned upon. Few were offered work other than as office cleaners, laundry workers and daily domestic servants in private households. And for many young single women the only work easily attainable in the city was as a resident maid. In 1891 of the 66,000 women recorded by the census as involved in waged work 44% of them, i.e. 29,000 women, worked in domestic service jobs.[2] But the percentage of women employed in this sector in Liverpool remained very high throughout the first three decades of the 20th century. Thus in 1931 nearly 38,000 women, or approximately one third of the local female workforce, were still engaged in domestic work. And more than 20,000 of these women worked as resident maids in private households.[3] Thousands of women in the city remained trapped in a sector of the economy which echoed with working relationships reminiscent of the 18th and 19th centuries. In Manchester, by way of contrast, where the size of the female labour force was roughly comparable, only 20% of women workers were employed in this sector in the early decades of the 20th century. And in 1911,

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2. Census, Occupation Tables
3. Ibid.,

for example, whereas in Liverpool there were over 20,000 resident maids employed, in Manchester there were 14,000.[4] Indeed, as an industrial centre Liverpool was unique in this sense. Working class women were available in their thousands to supply even the most modest household with a servant. It was the underdevelopment of the city's manufacturing sector which created the inflated supply of domestic servants and which lay at the heart of the poor conditions of employment for all women workers in the city.

In the manufacturing sector there were few well-paid jobs for women, the majority falling into the category of 'sweated trades'. In the early decades of the 20th century the clothing industry was the most significant of these. In 1901, for example, out of approximately 26,000 women working in factories and workshops, 50% were employed in the clothing industry. The majority of the remainder worked in the food, tobacco and paper industries and as sack makers and menders.[5] For the majority of working class women the boundaries of the female labour market altered little over the period. Women workers remained concentrated in an extremely limited range of industries.

However, from around the time of the First World War the expansion which occurred in two sectors of the economy - clerical work and the retail trade - was to be significant for sections of the female workforce. Of these, the expansion of clerical work was particularly important in that a huge increase occurred in the demand for female clerks and typists. For some women, although by no means all, clerical work offered conditions of work qualitatively superior

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4. Ibid.,
5. Ibid.,

to those in virtually every other occupation open to women. However, in this period, female clerks were rarely recruited from working class homes. Some were well-educated women, often with knowledge of a foreign language; the daughters of professional men. The majority were drawn from lower middle class families, the homes of clerks, artisans and small traders.[6] Clerical work was, thus, not a new opportunity for all girls. Some who might previously have entered domestic service or dressmaking now sought work in offices.[7] But certainly the daughters of families living in the inner-city had little chance of securing work in this field.

The growing demand for female shop assistants, particularly in the inter-war years when large, city centre department stores were established, was also a development of mixed fortune for women. The long history of appalling working conditions in the retail trade in Liverpool and elsewhere was not easily overcome by the growth in the trade. Excessively long hours of work, the exploitation of female apprentices and the requirement to live-in persisted into the 1920s. And the growth in the size of shops created new problems for the shop worker, superimposed on the old. Many women were employed on a casual or part-time basis in the 1920s and 1930s and very long hours of work were by no means eradicated.[8] Both of these expanding areas of employment tended to recruit young, single women, whilst the job opportunities for most married women and older women remained as limited as in the period prior to 1920.

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6. Anna Davin, 'Telegraphists and Clerks', Society for the Study of Labour History, Bulletin No 26, 1973.
7. See G. Anderson, Victorian Clerks (Manchester University Press, 1976) pp. 57-8.
8. See Evidence of Miss Janet McCrindell, Select Committee on Shop Assistants, Minutes of Evidence, Vol. III (HMSO 1931) p. 329; D. Caradog Jones, The Social Survey of Merseyside (Liverpool University Press, 1934) Vol. II, p. 214.

The period also witnessed significant changes in a number of manufacturing industries in which women had typically worked in the late 19th and early decades of the 20th century. In particular, the clothing, tobacco and sack repair industries were to enter a period of decline as sources of female employment from the 1920s onwards. Many women subsequently faced redundancy and unemployment. Moreover, changes in the labour process and the scale of production in these industries served to tie women more securely to low paid, low status levels within the workplace hierarchy. Chapter 5 looks more closely at the implications for women workers of these developments. It traces the changing employment conditions for women workers in the clothing industry up to the 1930s and explores aspects of the inter-war depression in relation to women workers.

In the period between 1890 and 1939 an increase occurred in the proportion of women in the labour force but this did not herald a general improvement in the employment conditions faced by them as wage earners. Whilst discernible improvements occurred for some women, others remained trapped in abject working conditions and workplace relationships. There continued to be a dearth of dignified, adequately remunerated 'women's work' throughout the whole period and, despite expansion, the female labour market remained extremely limited, consistently falling short in providing work for all those women who sought to earn a living. Women's work remained tainted with the label 'inferior' up to the 1930s and women continued to be significantly poorer than men. Indeed, many wage earning women failed to secure an income sufficient to maintain an independent existence.

Factory Work : The Tobacco Industry

In 1909. Edith Donnelly was employed in the cigarette cutting department of a Liverpool tobacco factory. She was 19 years old and since the death of her parents had become the main breadwinner in her family, supporting her brother aged 15 years and her two sisters aged 13 and 10 years. She earned eight shillings a week, working from eight o'clock in the morning to six o'clock at night,out of which she paid 3s 6d for the three rooms in which she lived with her brother and sisters. The steam in the room in which she worked had affected her health. After four years at the tobacco factory she was suffering from a chest complaint. Her circumstances were far from unique. Out of nine young, single women interviewed in a tobacco factory in 1909, five were the chief breadwinners in their families. Only one woman had a father in regular work. Thus, for example, the five shillings a week 17 year old Jane Hughes brought home from the factory were crucial to maintain her family. Her father, a labourer, was only able to find work for two or three days a week. Her mother was ill following the recent death of her fifth child. Jane's 14 year old brother was unable to get work as he had no shoes to wear, and she had two younger brothers aged 12 years and 7 years to support.[9]

Most of the women interviewed were suffering from some form of illness, such as anaemia, rheumatism and neuralgia. One 18 year old had recently recovered from pneumonia, complicated by scarlet fever. But despite these tragic stories, work in the industry was considered to be one of the more superior openings for working class girls at this time.

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9. Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix Vol XVI, 'The Relation of Industrial and Sanitary Conditions to Pauperism', Cd. 4653 (HMSO, 1909) Appendix IV, pp. 273-274.

The port of Liverpool was, by the early 1920s, conducting a larger trade in tobacco than all other U.K. ports put together and was the key port for the massive trade in American raw leaf. Practically the whole of the Albert, Stanley and Wapping dock warehouses were given over to the storage of tobacco in 1922. And there were several other bonded warehouses at Birkenhead at this time. As was the case for the majority of Liverpool's manufacturing industries, trade in a commodity was the key impetus to the establishment of a factory industry. Women first became employed in the local manufacturing industry in 1850 at Copes factory in Lord Nelson Street. By 1862 the entire workforce at Copes was female except for the foreman and a boy worker.[10] Other factories soon followed suit in the replacement of men by women, in one factory as a result of a dispute between management and men over the numbers of boy apprentices. By the late 19th century the industry was dominated by female workers, although supervisors continued to be male into the 1930s.

In 1902 there were 3,155 women tobacco workers employed in Liverpool.[11] This level of female employment remained relatively consistent into the 1920s. Large, mechanised plants such as those of the British American Tobacco Company (B.A.T.), employing 2,000 men and women in 1934, and Ogdens, employing 2,500 workers, dominated the industry by this time.[12] However, it was from the mid-1920s onwards that a period of decline began. The 1931 census records just over 2,000 women tobacco workers and many were by this time

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10. Liverpool Citizen, January 21st 1891; For a history of Copes in the 19th century see Liverpool Citizen, 11th April 1888 and Liverpool Review, 20th April 1886.

11. A. Harrison, Women's Industries in Liverpool : An Enquiry into the Economic Effects of Legislation Regulating the Labour of Women (University Press of Liverpool, Liverpool 1903) p. 16.

12. The Ambassador of Commerce, 1924, p. 29.

unemployed. In 1961 there were only 790 women and 270 men involved in the industry.[13] The proportion of men employed in the industry had remained relatively constant in the period between 1911 and 1931 at around 18% to 20% of the workforce.[14] However, from the mid-1920s men began to secure greater security of employment whilst thee was an intensification of unemployment amongst women. The increasing use of machinery in the manufacture of cigarettes led to the displacement of many women who had formerly done the work by hand. Moreover, in some departments men began to replace women as companies introduced regulations which forced women to resign on marriage.[15] By 1951, 27% of the industry's workers were male.[16]

There were three key and inter-related factors which could be said to give women's work in the tobacco factories of Liverpool a superior label within the range of local women's trades. First, cigar making involved a seven year apprenticeship, thus conferring on some women tobacco workers skilled status and giving journeywomen a rate of pay higher than that which prevailed within the female labour market locally. Few women's trades in the city placed women workers other than in the category of unskilled, even though it can be demonstrated that special skills requiring training were involved in a range of jobs carried out by women. But it was the very fact that certain departments of tobacco factories were structured around an apprenticeship scheme which institutionalised a category of skilled women workers. Secondly, work in the tobacco industry, whilst not immune from seasonal lay offs and short time in some departments, was far more regular than most work available to women

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13. Census, Occupation Tables.
14. Ibid.,
15. M.L.M. Reid 'Unemployment among insured women on Merseyside 1923-1932', (Unpublished dissertation, University of Liverpool, 1934)
16. Census, Occupation Tables

in Liverpool. The majority of women were guaranteed a regular, weekly wage. Thirdly, the industry offered to women some of the highest rates of pay in the locality. In general, conditions in the industry compared favourably with those elsewhere.

Nevertheless, an article in 1900 in the Women's Industrial News, the journal of the Women's Industrial Council (W.I.C.), described Liverpool's female cigar makers as 'of a low class', 'rough and occasionally rather dissipated looking.'[17] How could it be that an apparently well-placed group of women workers could be described in this way? Eleanor Rathbone, the author of the article, enjoyed, of course, a comfortable, middle class existence and this inevitably created a distance between her and the women workers of whom she wrote. Indeed, the vast majority of studies of women workers at this time were researched and written by people who were socially far removed from their subjects of enquiry. It is important to question the extent to which this social distance informed her image of the tobacco workers. Middle class observers of working class life were keen to draw a distinction between so-called 'rough' and 'respectable' people within the working class. This partly reflected the way in which the principles laid down by the Poor Laws sought to divide working class people into two categories - 'the deserving' and 'the undeserving'.[18] Those people viewed as hard working, sober and thrifty, but who occasionally fell upon hard times, were considered to be genuinely deserving of poor law

17. E.F. Rathbone, 'Women cigar makers in a large provincial town', Women's Industrial News, September 1900. Although the town is not identified in the article, its content and the involvement of Eleanor Rathbone in the Liverpool W.I.C. at the time make it extremely unlikely that the town could be anywhere except Liverpool.

18. See Chapter 6 where this is discussed more fully.

relief. Any evidence of dissolute conduct was thoroughly condemned by the administrators of the Poor Laws, the organisers of charitable organisations and others connected in some way with the poor working class. Indeed, this ideology dominated the 19th century and much of the 20th century and shaped the stance taken by the middle and upper classes to the working class as a whole. Leaving aside the political implications of such categorisations, we have to question the extent to which it was possible for those without first hand experience of working class life to draw such distinctions between people, for a poverty-stricken appearance was often assumed to provide evidence of a dissolute existence.

It is clear, however, from the evidence provided by the interviews with tobacco workers cited earlier, that the industry did not provide an escape from the generally poor conditions of life which prevailed in Liverpool throughout the period. In these terms Eleanor Rathbone's comments require consideration. For, dissipated or not, many female tobacco workers were clearly very poor. There are a number of factors which explain this. One important factor was that however well paid tobacco workers were compared with other female workers in the city, in many households their wages were the principal income available to support parents and siblings, or a husband and children. As has been shown in Chapter Three, male wages, although paid at a higher daily rate than female wages, were generally low on account of widespread underemployment. In such circumstances female workers, bringing home a regular weekly wage, often became the main breadwinner. But their rate of pay was rarely sufficient to support others. Evidence given by the Factory Inspectorate to the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws in 1909 made precisely

this point.

> In Liverpool, where casual labour for men predominates, the women are frequently the chief wage earners. The man's rate of pay is not low, but the work is intermittent. The women's rate is very low, but the work is regular. 19

Thus, having regard to the household as a unit and the customary sacrifices made by women of their own needs it becomes less surprising that female tobacco workers appeared 'rough' and of a 'low class'. Indeed, Eleanor Rathbone stated, 'it is impossible to look at them without suspecting that their standard of living is a very low one.'[20]

A further factor tending to degrade the status of female tobacco workers derived from the prevailing ideology with regard to married women workers. Until the 1920s, the tobacco industry was the only skilled area of work which employed any considerable number of married women locally.[21] It was not the custom in Liverpool for married women to work in factories, and the wives of artisans or men regularly employed were unlikely to take up such work. Thus, in terms of the traditions of the city and ideology of the period, the married woman factory worker inevitably lost status and tended to acquire the label 'rough' - her work was an indication of her poor family circumstances. Such women were assumed to be, as one cigar maker put it, 'unfortunate in their husbands.'[22]

But perhaps the most crucial reason for the poor appearance of the female tobacco worker was the fact that whilst the industry offered opportunities for well-paid, time served employment, such conditions were by no means universal. Indeed, in 1894 it was

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19. Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix Vol. XVI, op.cit.,p.72
20. E. Rathbone, 'Cigar makers', op.cit.,
21. Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix Vol. VIII, op.cit., p.264; A. Harrison, op.cit., p. 14.
22. E. Rathbone, 'Cigar Makers', op.cit.,

argued that the industry 'differs from most in which women are employed by the very wide range between the skill required in its lowest branches and that which can be utilised in its highest.'[23] On this basis, in the late 19th century and early decades of the 20th century, wage rates for women ranged from a mere 2 shillings a week to over 21 shillings a week. Thus, the Royal Commission on Labour of 1894 recorded the following variation in wage rates for a 50 hour week, in a study of 1,400 women and girl workers employed in a number of tobacco factories in the city:

Percentage of women and girls earning:

under 6s	6s - 8s	8s - 10s	10s - 12s	12s - 15s	15s - 18s	18s - 21s	21s - 36s
38.8	19.0	15.1	13.5	7.1	3.3	2.0	1.2

The figures show that 72.9% earned less than 10s a week, whilst only 3.2% earned over 18s a week, that is 44 women out of 1,400. 543 women earned less than 6 shillings a week.[24]

A key factor limiting the wages paid to many girls and women was, ironically, the apprenticeship scheme itself. Wages also varied according to the department in which a woman worked. In the early 1900s female apprentices to cigar making began their apprenticeship, at age 13 or 14 years, on wages as low as 2 shillings a week. In the following year they were put onto piecework but until the seven year apprenticeship was completed their piecework rate was only half that paid to journeywomen for the same work. Thus, for example, in the second and third years of an apprenticeship a girl might be earning only seven or eight shillings a week.[25] In essence,

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23. Royal Commission on Labour, 1893-4 (c. 6894 - XXIII) Vol. XXXVII, Part 1, 'Report of Miss Clara E. Collett on The Conditions of Work in Liverpool and Manchester', p. 68.
24. Ibid., p. 68.
25. A. Harrison, op.cit., pp. 45-6.

the long apprenticeship secured for employers a constant supply of cheap labour and many women failed to complete the seven years and benefit from the higher piecework rates. On the full rate a time-served cigar maker in her early to mid-twenties, making between 1,000 and 2,000 cigars a week, could earn more than £1 a week in some factories. But in the 1890s only 10% of women were earning this amount, whilst 42% of cigar makers earned less than 10 shillings a week.[26] The vast majority of cigarette makers were even more poorly placed. Nearly half of these women earned less than 6 shillings a week in 1893, and only 5% earned over 18 shillings a week.[27] This was at a time when a dock labourer in Liverpool earned between 4s 6d and 7 shillings a day, depending on his job.[28] In other departments of tobacco factories the wages of women ranged between 4 shillings and 12 shillings. Thus the 'strippers', who removed the leaf from its central rib by hand, an operation requiring considerable dexterity and speed, although not an apprenticed trade, earned a maximum of as little as 9 shillings a week in some factories in 1900. And 'bundlers' and 'sorters', who sorted the cigars into lots according to the colour of the leaf and tied them into bundles, earned on average between 4 shillings and 11 shillings a week.[29] By the early 1900s the hand-made cigar, skillfully shaped wholly by hand, was being superseded by the 'mould cigar'. This more mechanised work involved a process whereby the 'bunch' of tobacco leaves was pressed into shape in a wooden mould for 24 hours. Piecework rates for this work could be as much as 1 shilling or 1s 6d less per 100 than the rate paid for hand-made cigars.

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26. Report of Miss Clara Collett, op.cit., p. 68.
27. Ibid., p. 68.
28. Eleanor Rathbone, 'Report of an enquiry into the conditions of dock labour at the Liverpool docks', Proceedings of the Liverpool Economic and Statistical Society, 1904. p. 23.
29. E. Rathbone, 'Cigar makers', op.cit.,

From the early 1900s increasing mechanisation in all branches of the industry began to transform many operations formerly carried out entirely by skilled hands. And as the manufacture of cigarettes began to dominate the industry, and cigar making entered a period of decline, so much of the skill and status attached to the work was undermined. Women's wage rates were not maintained in the face of these developments.

The changes which took place in the industry are highlighted by the conditions which existed in the early 1920s within the factory of B.A.T., a tobacco manufacturing firm established in Liverpool in 1902. By this time the B.A.T. factory was intensively mechanised. In the stripping room women sat on either side of conveyor belts, stripping the leaf as it passed. The leaf then travelled first into cutting machines, in which it was finely cut, then into large ovens and coolers where the excess moisture was removed from the tobacco, and finally into the cigarette machines which produced cigarettes at a rate of 500 per minute. The finished cigarettes were then packed either by machines or by women into packets and cartons, before passing 'down more chutes, along more travelling bands, past rooms with still more endless bands surrounded by girls with ready-gummed labels for tins or boxes, until the cigarettes, now completely packed in their outer containers, finally descend to the ground floor to be put into wooden cases for despatch to the ends of the earth.'[30] The manufacture of cigarettes had been completely transformed from the time when women made hand-made cigarettes by rolling cigarette paper on a stick, pasting it, then filling it with precisely the right amount of tobacco leaf, work requiring considerable skill.

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30. Ambassador to Commerce, 1924, p. 29.

By the 1920s women were involved in only one relatively skilled process in cigarette manufacture - the stripping of the leaf. The majority worked in unskilled work such as packing and labelling. And with the introduction of increasingly complex machinery men began to displace women workers in a number of departments. In particular, men began to be employed as machine operators and maintenance engineers, securing higher rates of pay than those paid to women workers.[31] Simultaneously, the more traditional factories manufacturing cigars, such as Cope Brothers, entered a period of decline.

High female wages were not maintained in the industry in the face of these transformations. In 1916, girls starting work earned only 4 shillings a week. But even the most highly skilled women, those making cigarettes by hand, by this time few in number, could expect to earn no more than 15 shillings a week. Most women in the tobacco industry at this time earned less than 12 shillings a week. In contrast, the average earnings of male tobacco workers were 26 shillings a week.[32] And there were other consequences for women workers of increased mechanisation. From the early 1920s unemployment amongst female workers began to rise despite the expansion of the productive capacity of the industry during the inter-war years. Thus, whereas unemployment in the industry accounted for only 0.1% of male unemployment in Merseyside in 1927, it accounted for nearly 6% of female unemployment in that year.[33] By 1932, 15% of insured women tobacco workers were unemployed.[34]

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30. Ambassador to Commerce, 1924, p. 29.
31. Information from Interview with Mr Rose, Personnel Manager, B.A.T, Liverpool, 6th June 1978.
32. Ed. F.J. Marquis, Handbook of Employments in Liverpool, Liverpool Education Committee, 1916.
33. M.L.M. Reid, op.cit., p. 34.
34. D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol II, p. 258.

This underlying trend of rising unemployment had, in fact, been apparent from around 1910. With the initial introduction of cigarette making machines the displacement of women who made cigarettes by hand was partly offset by their employment as assistants to the men placed in charge of the machines, and by the need for more female hand packers as the production of cigarettes increased. After 1910 hand packing was gradually replaced by machine packing and although these machines were operated by women, large numbers of female hand packers were gradually made redundant. From the late 1920s women began to be employed as the operators of cigarette making machines also, but the general trend of increasing automation was one which constantly displaced female labour. Women, therefore, became concentrated in unskilled work, particularly in the packing departments, while skilled mechanical work in the industry became the preserve of men.[35] After the Second World War even the stripping of tobacco leaf was carried out by machinery. For example, at B.A.T. the 300 women formerly employed as 'strippers' were replaced by machinery supervised by 40 men.[36]

Unlike some groups of time-served male workers, faced in this period with fundamental technology changes which transformed the skill content of a particular job, female cigar and cigarette makers were apparently unable to preserve any of the advantages of their former status. This would perhaps have been possible with the aid of strong union organisation. The experience of workers in the British car industry provides a case in point. Thus although

35. A Study in the factors which have operated in the past and those which are operating now to determine the distribution of women in industry, CMD. 3508 (HMSO, 1930); This information is confirmed for Liverpool by the interview with Mr Rose, B.A.T., op.cit.,

36. Interview with Mr Rose, B.A.T., op.cit.,

the skill content of many car factory jobs was removed in the period from the inter-war years onwards, strong union organisation was instrumental in maintaining the material benefits of skilled status for workers then de-skilled. And these same workers tended to retain a craft consciousness, despite their employment in semi-skilled operations.[37] Evidence concerning trade unionism amongst Liverpool's women tobacco workers is extremely thin, but there is no indication of any strong organisation representing women's interest.[38] On the contrary, in 1900 it was reported that there were no trade unionists among female cigar makers locally, although the National Union of Cigar Makers had formerly recruited women in Liverpool.[39] In 1925 women were for the first time admitted to the Tobacco Workers Union. But how these two organisations developed in Liverpool and the precise nature of their relationship to women workers locally is unclear. What is clear, however, is that women lacked the organisational strength necessary to restrict the number of female apprentices admitted to the cigar making trade in the early 20th century.[40] If we view the ability of a group of skilled workers to restrict access to their trade as a basis on which to raise the value of their labour, female tobacco workers in Liverpool were clearly poorly organised. In the restructuring of the industry which took place during the inter-war years the interests of its skilled women workers appear to have been largely ignored.

Having said this, the work continued to offer women a higher rate of pay and better working conditions than any other factory industry

37. See Jonathan Zeitlin, 'The emergence of shop steward organisation and job control in the British car industry,' History Workshop, 10, 1980; Linda Grant, 'Women in a Car Town: Coventry 1920-1945' in P. Hudson and R. Lee (eds.) Women's Work, Family Income and the Structure of the Family in Historical Perspective, (Manchester University Press, forthcoming.
38. The records of the National Union of Cigar Makers and the Tobacco Workers Union were destroyed in a fire.

in Liverpool in which large numbers of women were employed. Companies like B.A.T. and Ogdens had long waiting lists of women wishing to work for them in the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, by the early 1920s the conditions in the factories of both these companies reflected paternalist management policies and modern factory design. Ogden's, for example, had a surgery for employees with a doctor in daily attendance, a large canteen, rest rooms, a library, a gymnasium and an athletic club. The factory itself was described as 'bright, airy and spacious.'[41] Such working conditions represented a huge improvement on those prevailing in the late 19th century and early 20th century. For example, in 1909 the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws highlighted the widespread ill-health amongst Liverpool's female tobacco workers. The chief effects of the work on women's health were 'chest complaints and other (illnesses) connected with the nervous and digestive systems.'[42] In fact, when women were first introduced into tobacco factories many suffered fits as a result of close contact with tobacco leaf. Later, more deadly diseases were diagnosed as developing as a direct consequence of the work. Thus it was not uncommon for women to contract phthisis (consumption) as a result of inhaling dust from tobacco.[43] The tragedy of young women aged 20 or 21 years suffering and dying from consumption directly attributable to their occupation cannot be under-estimated. Another illustration of the poor conditions

39. E. Rathbone, 'Cigar makers', op.cit.,
40. Ibid.,
41. Ambassador to Commerce, 1924, p. 29.
42. Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix Vol. XVI, op.cit., p. 71.
43. Ibid., 'Cases investigated illustrating effects of occupation on health', pp. 272-274.

of employment in the period before World War One, although less tragic in its consequences, was the system of fines operating in most factories. In the 1880s women who were five minutes late for work were fined 1d. Those 10 minutes late risked a half day lock-out. For a 14 year old girl, for example, earning only 4s 6d a week, such punishments were not only degrading but would have a crucial effect on her standard of living.[44] Clearly the abolition of fines and the elimination of some of the health hazards attached to the work in the period after 1910 must be applauded. However, such developments were largely in line with general improvements taking place in the conditions of factory work throughout Britain in a wide range of industries. Placed alongside the losses women sustained in the industry in terms of wages and skilled status it would be inappropriate to rank these improvements as of specific benefit to women workers. All workers in the industry benefitted from them. Rather the fact that the industry continued to be regarded by commentators on local industry, and by women themselves, as exemplary within the range of local women's industries is more an indication of the poor conditions existing elsewhere.

If we apply the kind of objective criteria which might be used to assess the status of a group of male workers, the skilled woman cigar and cigarette maker appears to fall short on every front. Her wages did not compare favourably with those paid to skilled men in other industries. For example, in 1916 an apprenticed fitter earned 39 shillings a week.[45] And the skill she brought to the work did not give her the status traditionally conferred on time-served male workers. Skills such as 'lightness of touch' and 'dexterity'

44. See, for example, Report of Miss Clara Collett, op.cit., Case of Witness 442, p. 69.

45. F.J. Marquis, op.cit., p. 71.

were typically used to define her work and these skills were regarded as 'natural' feminine traits, rather than being the outcome of experience or training. Moreover, women lacked the organisational strength necessary to safeguard any advantages which accrued to them as skilled workers. The fact that women were introduced into cigar making in at least one factory in Liverpool in an attempt by management to wrest control of recruitment away from organised male workers is significant in this respect. For although we can only speculate about this period, women workers undoubtedly provided a workforce which management found easier to manage in its interests. The failure of women cigar makers to take control over the number of girl apprentices admitted to the trade is testimony to this. In the long term, as the industry was restructured and subject to increasing automation, the advantages held by skilled women in the trade over women workers in other local industries largely evaporated. Wage rates were not maintained and women became concentrated in the least skilled sectors of the industry.

The fundamental transformation of the industry, from being one of the few areas of skilled factory work available to women to a declining source of unskilled work, was representative of more general changes taking place in Liverpool over the period between 1890 and 1939. The transfer of women out of apprenticed trades into work regarded as unskilled was an enduring feature of the changing structure of the local female labour market. And this was to have important implications for the standard of living and status of Liverpool's women workers as a whole. For, whatever the actual skill content of women's work, it was largely the case that only work formally recognised by training or apprenticeship

as 'skilled' had attached to it any material advantages over other work. The losses in skill status sustained by one group of workers added to a catalogue of losses in other industries, fuelling the popular conception of an equation of 'unskilled work' and 'women's work'. In this sense changes in the structure of the labour force in the tobacco industry must be seen as a component part of the process by which women's work has come to be regarded as unskilled, and is remunerated on that basis. And the loss of status experienced by women in the industry must, equally, have had a bearing on women's self-identity as workers. The consciousness generated amongst women faced with a continual downgrading of their abilities made the possibility of a challenge to a sexual division of labour which gave little credit to women's skills even more remote.

Work in Warehouses: Sack Making and Repair, Rag and Cotton Picking

If work in the tobacco industry offered some of the most prestigious factory jobs available to women in Liverpool, sack repair and cotton picking should be placed at the other end of the scale. As a report in 1901 stated concerning these women's trades,

> We are familiar with the bare-headed, striped-shirted girls to be seen in large numbers about the city .... there are perhaps no harder working or worse paid members of the community than these women. 46

In these industries conditions of work and wages were extremely poor not only in relation to those industries in which men worked but also compared with those in which other women worked. Neither of these occupations were strictly factory jobs, rather the work was carried out in warehouses near the docks.

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46. Liverpool Review, 3.8.1901

There is little documentary evidence available concerning the women who worked as rag and cotton pickers in Liverpool. However, in the late 19th century and early 20th century Liverpool was a centre for the trade in used fabric and damaged cotton. Rags and cotton waste, used in ships' engine rooms in large quantities, were sold through ships' chandlers operating at the port. Rags came into the port from abroad and from tailoring and dressmaking workshops in the surrounding area and cotton waste came from the Lancashire cotton mills. The job of the rag sorter was to sit,

> .... in the midst of a formidable pile of boxes, with a large box of rags taken from the mixed heap in front of her ... She sorts the rags into some eight or a dozen different kinds... All the time she inhales foul dirt with every breath. 47

At this time, 1901, rag sorters worked, on average, an eleven hour day at a rate of pay of 1s 4d per day. During the day a fast worker could sort three hundredweight of rags but slower workers were obliged to work overtime, with no extra pay, in order to complete this amount of work. Similarly, cotton pickers handled and sorted bales of cotton waste damaged by fire or water. Once sorted, women would lay the damaged cotton over steam pipes in 'cotton kilns', and every half hour they would damp the cotton and turn it. The heat in the cotton kilns was said to resemble that in a Turkish bath and this excessive heat combined with the foul-smelling atmosphere created by steaming, damp cotton was conducive to a great deal of ill-health and disease amongst the women involved in the trade.[48] The work was very irregular, depending on the number of shipments of cotton through the port, but once a load had arrived the women were expected to work considerable periods of overtime, often through

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47. Liverpool Review, 3rd August 1901.
48. Ibid.,

the night and into the early hours of the morning.[49] The Factory and Workshop Acts which, by 1891, restricted the hours of work of women to a maximum of 12 hours within a specified period between 6 am and 10 pm were regularly breached. For example, in the early 1890s, one employer had been convicted three times for employing women at the kilns at night. Similarly, in 1891, one cotton dealer was fined 20 shillings and costs for employing two women in a cotton kiln at midnight, and another was fined 25 shillings and costs for employing five women at 3 am.[50] Women's wages in this work averaged between 5 and 7 shillings a week in the early 1900s.[51]

Married women and widows made up the majority of the workforce in this industry and it is undoubtedly this factor which largely explains the very poor wage rates. Such women were, on the whole, desperate to secure an income and employers were able to exploit this desperation to the full. As was the case in other industries employing predominantly married women, for example, the manufacture of jam and other confections, wages tended to hover around subsistence levels. The irregularity of the work exacerbated the situation and condemned the worker to extreme poverty. For example, in 1910, a widow aged 37 years who worked in a warehouse as a cotton picker earned only 9 shillings a week for a full week's work. But she rarely worked a full week. When on short time she supported her four children by sewing at home and taking in washing. This family of five lived in just two cellar rooms.[52] Similarly, a rag sorter, the wife of a casual labourer who was himself underemployed, was forced to live in a 'verminous half cellar dwelling' with her husband

49. Liverpool and vicinity Trades Council, Annual Report, 1890-91.
50. Report of Miss Clara E. Collett, op.cit., p. 67.
51. Liverpool Review, 3rd August 1901.
52. S. Newcome Fox, 'Liverpool' in Clementina Black eds. Married Women's work (Garland Publishing Inc., New York and London 1980; First published in 1915.

and two children since their combined earnings left them in extreme poverty.[53]

Such poor rates of pay, irregular working and unhealthy working conditions also prevailed in the warehouses in which women were employed as sack makers and repairers. By the late 19th century, Liverpool had cornered the market in the buying, selling, mending and reconditioning of second hand jute bags. These were the bags which arrived in the port containing commodities such as oil seed, palm kernels, grain, sugar and various minerals. By 1923 around 40,000 bags passed through the port each day and merchants had developed a business in buying the bags, once emptied of their goods, and then organising for their repair. They were then re-sold, both in the domestic market and abroad.[54] Although the majority of the bags were originally made in Calcutta, some were also made in the U.K., particularly in Dundee, but also in Liverpool. In 1926, in Liverpool, around 3,000 people were employed in the handling, repair and manufacture of the bags.[55]

In the period before the Second World War it was the repair side of the business which was important in Liverpool and in which large numbers of women were employed. In 1902, around 1,600 women worked as sack repairers in Liverpool and Bootle.[56] At this time the day rate of pay in the industry for women workers was a mere 1s 5d for a working day from 7.30 am to 6 pm on Mondays through to Fridays, and 7.30 am to 2 pm on Saturdays. But apart from a small nucleus of women who secured regular work, most women were only employed for two or three days a week. For example, in 1910 a married woman

53. Ibid., p. 191.
54. Mersey, Vol 3, 1923, pp. 10-11.
55. E.E. Thornton, 'Liverpool's share of the Jute trade', Cox's Liverpool Annual and Year Book, 1926, p. 71.
56. A. Harrison, op.cit., p. 16.

working as a sack repairer who could earn 7 shillings to 8 shillings for a full week's work had earned only 2s 6d in the week before she was interviewed, and 4 shillings in the week before that. Her circumstances are representative of those of most women who worked in the industry. She was married to a casual labourer, permanently underemployed, and she had five children to support. The family lived in cellar rooms for which they paid a rent of 3 shillings a week.[57] Short-time working was occasionally offset by periods of overtime. At such times women often took work home to mend, although instances of women working all night at warehouses were periodically reported to the Factory Inspectorate.[58] The work was laborious and often heavy; sacks had to be moved and lifted onto carts by the women workers and those taking 50 or so sacks home to mend carried a weight of around 40 lbs. In the warehouses women menders sat 'on low forms sewing with a kind of stiletto with a hook at one end for the string.'[59] Facilities were generally poor. Not only were the warehouses cold and draughty and sometimes verminous, but there were no canteens or rest rooms such as those in the tobacco factories. Instead women ate the dinners they brought with them surrounded by the filthy sacks they worked with. The following portrait of a woman who mended sacks at home, written in 1906, is a telling reminder of the arduous lives and poverty faced by women involved in work of this kind.

> I have in mind the case of an old woman - a corporation tenant. When I saw her she was stitching away as if for her dear life at a sack, which she was mending, sending the big darning needle in and out as quickly as her thin hands could ply it. She told me it was possible to mend 500 sacks a week. The pay is 1s per 100 and out of the 5 shillings she might earn she has to pay 2 shillings for carriage.... The rent is 2s 6d.... Fortunately parish relief swells her worldly wealth to 3 shillings. 60

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57. S. Newcome Fox, op.cit., p. 191.
58. A. Harrison, op.cit., p. 20.
59. Ibid., p. 67.
60. Our Slums, Special Commissioners Report on Poverty in Liverpool, 1906, Archive of the League of Well Doers.

The low pay and irregular working which characterised rag and cotton picking and sack repair meant that many widowed and divorced women employed at these jobs were periodically forced to supplement their earned income with parish relief. In the late 19th century and early 20th century women, faced with such circumstances, were often admitted to the workhouse, where mothers were separated from their children and women were subjected to the degradation of being defined a pauper. The officials who administered parish relief and supervised workhouse inmates paid scant regard to their dignity as workers. The comments of Miss Thorburn, a member of the Select Vestry of Liverpool, regarding working women admitted to the workhouse in the early 1900s are testimony to this. She stated,

> Then there are the respectable ins and outs who really work at bag making or mending, at the cotton, at chip selling or at hawking when there is work to be got, and who turn to the workhouse regularly and cheerfully whenever it fails. These women are rough and noisy, and they are so ignorant of domestic work or sewing that they are of little use in the work of the place. A large proportion of them are Irish. When they quarrel their language is more than strong, but I doubt whether they really understand or mean what they say. Many of these are fond of children and kindly to others. 61

In the early 1920s unemployment amongst female sack menders was widespread. Already used to irregular work, the menders suffered from the general depression in trade which reduced the number of sacks coming into the port. Moreover, foreign importers of sacks repaired in Liverpool began to organise their own repair services and other companies began to buy cheap quality new bags in preference to having old ones repaired. Changes in the methods of shipping certain commodities also reduced the opportunities for work. For example, the introduction of bulk transportation of grain led to a decline in the number of sacks passing through Liverpool. All these factors combined to create 'severe' unemployment amongst

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61. Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix Vol IV, Minutes of Evidence, 'Evidence of Miss J.S. Thorburn', Cd. 4835 (HMSO, 1909) p. 10.

this group of women workers in the inter-war years. By 1932, 21% of female sack repairers were unemployed.[62]

Nevertheless, sack repair and sack making survived as Liverpool industries into the post-war period. But the conditions of work appear to have altered little between the 1890s and the early 1950s. Attempts had been made to improve them. For example, in 1928, Ellen Wilkinson tabled a question in the House of Commons, asking the Home Secretary whether he was aware,

> ....that the terms of the Sacks (Cleaning and Repairing) Welfare Order, 1927, have not been given effect in Liverpool, where a large number of women are employed under wretched conditions in old warehouses; that several employers are making no attempt to provide overalls, dining room accommodation etc., for the workpeople. 63

Similarly, in 1930 the Daily Worker described the bag warehouses in Liverpool as,

> ....like dungeons, where girls and women are allowed the sum of 6d an hour for mending, stowing, loading and unloading heavy bundles of sacks. After a few hours at this work the women become choked with grain and mineral dust and their clothing swarms with weevils and similar insects. 64

According to this report the work was so arduous that many girls failed to complete a day's work. But in the early post-Second World War period conditions remained reminiscent of those in the 19th century. Thus a woman starting work in Liverpool in 1956 recalls her early days in the industry as follows:

> I started work in 'Boag's Baggie', which was in the Liverpool 5 district. I was put on a darning machine and darned holes in second hand sacks for £2 16s per week. There was no canteen and we had our tea breaks sitting on the bundles of smelly sacks. I only worked there for six weeks and left to earn more money in another baggie across the street, as they paid £4 10s a week, although the work was much harder and you really sweated to earn your money. We worked nine hours a day, starting at 8 am, with an hour for dinner and a fifteen minute break mid-morning and afternoon. 65

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62. M.L.M.Reid, op.cit., p.68; D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol II, p.263.
63. House of Commons, Official Report (Hansard) 5th June 1928.
64. Daily Worker, 7th March 1930.
65. Second Chance to Learn, Women's History, Women's Lives, (Liverpool, n.d.) p. 2.

How could such appalling conditions of work prevail for so long in this industry? To understand this we have to return again to the nature of the industrial structure of Liverpool and, in particular, to appreciate the severe limitations of the female labour market. As has been shown in Chapter Three, the irregular earnings of many men forced married women, already overburdened with housework and childcare into the labour market. But the jobs available to women were constantly oversupplied with female labour. Married women, faced with a customary opposition to their waged work but desperate for an income tended to be offered work only in the poorest paid jobs in the area. As long as the supply of young, single women available for work outstripped demand, older and married women with no recognised skills were left with little choice other than to take up such work. Equally, their bargaining strength over the conditions of work were extremely limited. There was always a supply of married women waiting to take the place of a disgruntled worker. Many of the sack warehouses were staffed by married, widowed and deserted women - unskilled workers whose alternatives for remunerative work were as unattractive, if not more so. Charring, office cleaning, washing, step cleaning and hawking occupied the majority of working class married women and widows at rates of pay often lower than those in the sack warehouses. Only a skilled and experienced clothing worker or cigar maker could hope to escape the confines of this restricted labour market.

Attempts were made to unionise the women who worked in the dockside warehouses. Thus we know from Bessie Braddock's biography that in the first decade of the 20th century her mother, Mary Bamber, a leading militant in the Independent Labour Party and an official

of the Warehouse Workers' Union (W.W.U.) was often 'out before dawn' on the dock road, handing out leaflets to these women and urging them to join the W.W.U.[66] But clearly, as the inter-war reports I have cited indicate, conditions in the warehouses failed to improve. As the industry began to contract from the early 1920s onwards, the circumstances became even less favourable for improvements to take place. The unskilled, married woman worker in Liverpool was, therefore, trapped in a set of circumstances, both at home and in the labour market, which constantly lowered the value of her labour and left her, as a wage labourer, open to extreme exploitation.

Office Work: Female Clerks and Typists

The poor conditions of work faced by women workers in the manufacturing sector of the local economy, typified by the conditions in the tobacco and sack repair industries, were partially offset by developments which took place in the service sector. Here I will look at the significance for women workers of the expansion of opportunities for employment in offices which took place between 1890 and 1939.

In 1890, just 1% of women workers in Liverpool were office workers; by 1931 they accounted for 12% of the local female labour force. This was a huge increase from less than 1,000 women clerks in 1890 the number had grown to over 13,000 by 1931.[67] This development in the local female labour market was repeated across the country. In 1901, 1% of the female labour force in England and Wales were clerks and typists but by 1951 the figure was 20%.[68] The phenomenal

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66. Millie Toole, Mrs Bessie Braddock, MP, (Robert Hale, London, 1957) Chapter One.

67. Census, Occupation Tables

68. J. Lewis, Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Division and Social Change, (Wheatsheaf Books, Sussex 1984) Table 10, p. 156.

growth in the number of office workers in the early decades of the 20th century was a development characterised, above all, by a massive rise in the number of female workers. Thus, on Merseyside, between 1901 and 1921 the number of clerks rose from 29,640 to 47,887; 81% of this increase was accounted for by women workers.[69] By 1921, 37% of office workers on Merseyside were female.

The commercial basis of the Liverpool economy had supported a substantial male clerical workforce in the late 19th century. In 1871, the 54 steamship companies operating out of Liverpool employed over 1,000 clerks. Marine insurance companies also had large clerical staffs. Other clerks worked in small counting houses which employed, on average, four men, or in dockside warehouses. In total, it was estimated that there were 15,330 clerical workers in Liverpool in that year.[70] By 1901, 19,194 men worked in the commercial occupational group in the city and they represented 9% of the occupied male workforce.[71]

The increasing number of office staff reflected both the growing importance of the city as a commercial centre and more general changes in the nature of office work. The growth in the size of many commercial enterprises and the expansion of insurance, banking and other financial organisations increased the demand for clerical workers. Furthermore, office work became more detailed. For example, accounting became increasingly exacting, elaborate costing and filing systems came into use and large firms began a more thorough collection of statistics. Simultaneously, machinery was introduced into offices, particularly the typewriter, and a division of labour

69. D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol II, p. 325.
70. From B.G. Orchard, The Clerks of Liverpool, (1871) quoted in G. Anderson, op.cit., p. 10.
71. Census, Occupation Tables

began to develop which organised the growing amount and complexity of office work by breaking it down into a series of separate processes. The all-round clerk, capable of carrying out all the functions necessary to run a small office was being gradually superseded by a series of workers, each proficient in a particular branch of the work, such as the typist, the filing clerk, the bookkeeper, the correspondence clerk etc.[72] It was in the context of these changes that women began to be employed in offices in the late 19th century. In particular, women learnt to operate the typewriter and other office equipment. In Liverpool, and elsewhere, typists were overwhelmingly female and, as the 20th century progressed, a growing number of women were employed as secretaries, shorthand writers, telephonists, telegraphists and low level clerks in local government, but particularly in commercial enterprises.

Whilst the number of clerks was growing, the demise of the 'professional' male clerk, who followed an apprenticeship and rose through the hierarchy of the office, was already apparent by the mid-19th century. Thus, in 1871 whilst in the majority of firms the number of apprentices was far lower than the number of clerks, in some larger offices such as those of the marine insurance companies and cotton brokers, office lads and apprentices began to outnumber qualified clerks. By the late 19th century many apprentices were being dismissed once they had completed their time and, along with office lads, began to represent a source of cheap labour. Genuine apprenticeships leading to secure jobs were constantly declining.[73] Nevertheless, for the majority of male clerks at this time the office offered employment which elevated him above the mass of workers. Clerical

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72. See Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century (Monthly Review Press, New York and London 1974, pp. 293-358.

73. G. Anderson, op.cit., pp. 53-4.

work held out the prospect of promotion, a rising salary and, above all, job security, all of which were extremely rare in most other occupations in Liverpool.

It is through an understanding of the working conditions and social aspirations of male clerks in the late 19th century and early 20th century that it becomes possible to understand the significance for men, and for women, of the introduction of female workers into offices at this time. Male clerks were traditionally drawn from the families of the lower middleclass andthe skilled working class, and they have been generally characterised as ambitious. Those clerks unable to achieve genuine upward mobility, of which there were many, nevertheless strove to present themselves and live out their lives as thrifty, sober and 'respectable' members of the community; a cut above the artisan and wholly distinct from, and superior to, the casual labourers of the city.[74] The ethos within offices was one of loyalty to the employer and deference to authority. Relationships were often intensely formal. The following description of the routine at an office at the London Docks before the First world War evokes the atmosphere typically found in Liverpool also.

> In spite of the grim surroundings there was an old world charm about our relations one with another. The youngest clerk was addressed as 'mister'. Slapdash abbreviations or nicknames were never used. A clerk's Christian name was, rightly his personal property not to be bandied about by 'the little friends of all the world' that infest modern publicity. Each morning on arrival, an employee shook hands with the clerks in his immediate circle. If, during the day, he went to another part of the large office, this would be treated as an occasion and he shook hands with the appropriate clerk and his colleagues. Before he left at night it was courtesy to shake hands once more.[75]

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74. G. Anderson, op.cit., Chapter Three.

75. Colonel R.B. Oram, The Dockers Tragedy (Hutchinson, London 1970) pp. 7-8.

The increase in the size of offices and the growing division of labour, alongside the increasing employment of young workers in preference to older, time-served clerks threatened to undermine not only the ethos of the office but also the clerk's status and standard of living. The employment of women occurred in the context of, and was representative of, these fundamental changes taking place in office administration. To the male clerk, already struggling by the late 19th century to maintain his superior social and economic status within the city's community, cheap female labour appeared to threaten both his customary understanding of the workplace and his ability to survive. Unsurprisingly, the introduction of female workers into offices was widely resented amongst male clerks.

It it impossible to accurately assess the extent of the resentment amongst male clerks to the introduction of female labour. But as an indication of the depth of feeling evoked amongst some men, we can quote from correspondence published in the Liverpool Echo in November 1911. The following is one such letter.

> Your co-respondent on this subject seems to think that the female clerk should receive the same wages as the male clerk for similar work. Surely, to say the least of it, this is a gross piece of audacity on the part of that comparatively small, but bombastic, section of clerical labour. Seeing that they are so fond of comparing their product of labour as equal to that of the male clerk, I would suggest that these intrepid 'typewriter pounders', instead of being allowed to gloat over love novels, or do fancy crocheting during the time they are not 'pounding', should fill their spare time washing out offices and dusting same which you will no doubt agree is more suited to their sex, and maybe would give them a little practice and insight into the work they will be called upon to do should they so far demean themselves as to marry one of the poor male clerks whose living they are doing their utmost to take out of his hands at the present time. 76

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76. Liverpool Echo, 23rd November 1911.

This derision directed at the female clerk underlines the extent of the transformation taking place in clerical work at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century and the consequent sense of precariousness felt among male clerks. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to exaggerate the threat to male labour which these changes represented. Male clerks continued to dominate the clerical labour force into the 1930s. There was no straightforward replacement of male labour by female labour. It was rather the quality of men's employment conditions, which had traditionally set them apart from the mass of workers in Liverpool, which deteriorated with the changes in office administration. In particular, there was a tendency to eliminate career structures. As has been said, young, inexperienced but cheap male labour was increasingly favoured by employers from the mid-19th century. As a result some older male clerks, looking forward to further promotion at age 35 or 40 years were finding this promotion path cut off. Some then faced unemployment. Thus, in 1916, the Liverpool Education Committee suggested to boys that they exercise caution before embarking on a career in this work.

> Determination and application to work in the early years of employment were never so necessary as today, when so many clerks find themselves at the age of 35 earning but 35/- a week, without prospect of any rise, and with increasing insecurity of tenure as their age increases. In short, while there are clerkships which carry good remuneration and heavy responsibilities, there are so large a number of positions offering only small weekly wages, that boys of good education and reasonable ambitions should carefully weigh their prospects before entering this branch of commercial life. 77

It was the increasing routinisation of office work which encouraged these changes. The employment of women was just one facet of this process of change.

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77. F.J. Marquis, op.cit., p. 47.

As long as male workers considered office work an occupation exclusively their own the hostility directed towards the woman worker is understandable. Nevertheless, as the Liverpool Branch of the National Union of Clerks (N.U.C.) recognised, there were inherent dangers in keeping women at arms length.[78] Thus in 1911 a representative of the local N.U.C. argued,

> The low status of the male clerk is due to the fact of the female clerk working for less wages than her competitor, therefore, whether the product of female labour be equal to male labour or not, to raise the salary of the male we must also raise the salary of the female and value her work as equal to that of the male. If the male clerk be so unwise as to be antagonistic to or ignore the female, he will make her his rival and in time she would prove herself so powerful as to oust the male out of his position. It would not be much use for any union of male clerks to demand living wages when employers could get females to do the same work for less money. There is only one remedy for present and future evils and this is for males and females to join together in one union. 79

It becomes clear, however, that this attempt to persuade the male members of the N.U.C. of the advantages of equal pay and a joint union was less a voice in support of the equal rights of women and much more a pragmatic response in the face of a perceived threat to a male preserve. For what became lost in the debate were precisely the very poor conditions under which many women office workers worked.

There is no doubt that in Liverpool the opening up of the clerical labour market to women was in many ways a boon to them. Office work provided a genuine alternative for women to domestic service,

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78. There were a number of organisations representing male clerks in Liverpool. The first was the Liverpool Clerks Association,established in 1861. It had a membership of 6,105 in 1926. It was essentially a friendly society, administering benefits to its members (See Cox's Year Book, 1926, p.227). The NUC was a trade union. There are no membership figures available, although it was described as 'weak and ineffective' as a union. (G. Anderson, op. cit., see also D.C. Jones, op.cit. Vol II, p.331) Other clerks joined the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks, or trade based organisations, such as the Railway Clerks Association or NALGO.

79. Liverpool Echo, 18th December 1911.

an occupation becoming increasingly unpopular. There were also many young single women amongst the families of artisans and the lower middle class who had previously been kept at home until marriage, the available occupations being regarded as unsuitable for them. It was the element of gentility attached to clerical work which made it attractive to these social layers.[80] Whilst in the 19th century the early female recruits to clerical work were largely educated, middle class women, as the demand for female clerks, and particularly typists, grew so young women began to be drawn into this work from a wider social layer. However, working class girls with only an elementary schooling would have found it extremely difficult to secure a post. Indeed, the Liverpool Education Committee discouraged such girls from applying, arguing: 'It is not advisable for girls who have only attended an elementary school to become typists, as their education is not sufficiently advanced to render them competent. A girl leaving a Secondary School at 16 years of age is at about the right age for beginning.'[81] Office work continued to be regarded, then, as a 'genteel' occupation and the typist was widely considered to be socially superior to the so-called 'rough' factory worker. This superior status was not, however, universally reflected in good wages and conditions. On the contrary, many female clerks and typists worked under very poor conditions. The vast majority of the new women clerks and typists were concentrated at the lower end of the office hierarchy. They were not located within any career structure and thus had little chance of promotion. Rather they were filling the new jobs created by the expansion and transformation of office work.

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80. See A. Davin, op.cit., pp.7-9.

81. F. Marquis, op.cit., p. 173

Most women who entered office work found that the conditions of work were poor. Some female typists complained of the practice of piece work payments, whereby a payment was made per 1,000 words typed. When no work was available no payment was made. Others were employed on temporary contracts at very low wages. In consequence a Liverpool typist stated, in 1911, that whilst a proportion of women typists were 'comfortably situated, earning regular salaries under fairly good conditions....the lot of the rest is pitiable.'[82] Unfortunately, there is a dearth of evidence on the precise working conditions of female clerical workers in the early 20th century in Liverpool. However, the comment by the female typist above seems to be borne out by the observations of Mr Frank Leslie, Chairman of the Liverpool Juvenile Employment Committee. In 1914 he stated that 50 girls had applied for a job advertised in March for a female typist at a wage of just 4 shillings a week. In his view hundreds of girls in Liverpool were willing to work at these very low wages.[83] As in other areas of the economy, the surplus of women in the labour market tended to depress wages. A rate of 4 shillings a week was, however, exceptionally low for clerical work. Typists working for the city council, for example, were earning, in 1914, between 12 shillings and 34 shillings.[84] Such wage rates compared favourably with those paid in other areas of work. It is important to bear in mind, however, the youthfulness of the majority of female clerks and typists, a factor which tended to place them at the lower end of the pay scale. In 1911, for example, two-thirds of female commercial clerks in Liverpool were aged under 20 years.[85]

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82. Liverpool Echo, 23rd November 1911; See also H Braverman, op.cit., pp. 304-312, with regard to the development of scientific management techniques and piecework payment systems in offices in the early 20th century.
83. Liverpool Echo, March 13th 1914.
84. Liverpool City Council, Council Proceedings,1919-1920,pp.1324-1330.
85. G. Anderson, op.cit., p. 60.

The demand for female clerks increased dramatically in Liverpool, and elsewhere, during the First World War. Many areas of clerical work, such as in banks and on the railways, were newly opened up to women.[86] Some of these gains for women lasted only for the duration of the war. For example, in Liverpool in the 1920s and 1930s there were no women employed as clerks to the railways.[87] But most of the expansion in female clerical employment during the war was sustained after it. For example, in July 1914 there were 28 female clerks and typists employed by the Liverpool City Council; by March 1920 there were 225. In the City Treasurer's department alone there were 56 female clerks and typists employed in 1920, whereas in 1914 there were none.[88]

The trends which have been identified persisted into the 1920s and 1930s. Increasing numbers of women were employed as clerical workers, whilst the conditions of employment for the majority of male clerks continued to deteriorate. Women, especially young single women, paid at lower rates of pay to men, were increasingly favoured as clerical employees. The following table, showing the median weekly wages of clerks and typists, calculated from the household survey carried out by the investigators of the Social Survey of Merseyside in 1932, indicates the cheapness of female labour relative to male labour.[89]

AGE	Under 20	20 - 24	25 - 34	35+	All 20 years and over
MEN	16s 0d	38s 0d	69s 6d	74s	60s
WOMEN	15s 6d	29s 0d	38s 6d	39s	34s

86. See Liverpool Echo, 21st January 1915.
87. Interview with Jim Mottram, April 1979; Retired railway clerk, born Liverpool 1914.
88. Liverpool City Council, Council Proceedings, 1919-1920,pp.1324-1330.
89. D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol II, p. 331.

Few women were, in fact, employed on the higher rates of pay; the majority of female clerks were aged under 20 years. Their wages were, therefore, not exceptional within the context of the local labour market. The youthfulness of the female clerical labour force was maintained by a marriage bar; the employment of married women as clerks was very rare.

Clerical employees were not immune from the pressures on the local economy resulting from the economic depression of the inter-war years. Many of the large shipping companies located in Liverpool pursued rationalisation programmes at this time which led to redundancy amongst clerks. Some companies, such as the United Africa Company, transferred their headquarters from Liverpool to London.[90] In this transfer, taking place in 1929 and following an amalgamation of a number of companies, 1,000 Liverpool clerical staff lost their jobs. Such developments involving the trading companies of the port were to have a particularly devastating impact on male clerks. Thus by 1932 5,000 male clerks, or 10% of the total, were unemployed on Merseyside.[91] The relative advantages to employers of cheaper female labour thus became particularly important in the competitive economic atmosphere created by the depression. But these circumstances tended to encourage a deterioration in women's working conditions also. There was a growing tendency to staff offices with a succession of young women, whilst men over 35 years were faced with redundancy and unemployment. And women were more likely to be employed as temporary staff, liable to be dismissed at a moment's notice during slack periods. According to the Social Survey of Merseyside, referring to the early 1930s, some businesses in Liverpool were by this time

90. Liverpool Daily Post, 1st May, 1929.
91. D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol II, p. 327.

run entirely by temporary staff.[92] In effect, as an area of female employment the superiority of clerical work in the commercial sector over other jobs available to women locally was gradually undermined in this period.

Undoubtedly, one crucial factor which kept the female office worker's wages low and allowed for the continual degradation of her work was women's inability to achieve social recognition of typing as a skilled occupation. This was despite the fact that a fast, efficient typist underwent considerable training and required certificates of qualification to acquire a post. The letter written by the outraged male clerk cited earlier, which referred to 'typewriter pounders' is instructive in this regard. For this man, and many others, and according to social convention, the female typist was a worker wholly distinct from the 'professional' male clerk. She was regarded as occupying a quite distinct place in the office hierarchy from men. In effect she carried with her into the work situation the trappings of her inferior status in society generally. By virtue of this her work was automatically regarded as inferior to that of the male and was paid accordingly. As Barbara Taylor and Anne Phillips have argued, in an essay concerning the relationship between sex and skill, it would be 'interesting to speculate whether the downgrading of the newly created skills would have occurred with so little struggle if the thousands of young women who came to fill the offices in this century had instead been young men.'[93]

In Liverpool, the expansion of clerical work as an area of female employment was, then, something of a mixed blessing. The rates

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92. Ibid., p. 329.

93. B. Taylor and A. Phillips, 'Sex and Skill: Notes towards a feminist economics', Feminist Review, No. 6, 1980.

of pay for the majority of female clerks and typists were far from generous. Only a mature experienced woman could expect to earn more than £1 a week in the 1930s, most earned less than 15 shillings a week. And women did not share in the superior status enjoyed by the male clerk. On the contrary, their skills were consistently downgraded, socially confirming the spurious notion that the sexual division of labour, within which the value of women's labour was ranked low, was a genuine reflection of women's skills and abilities. Furthermore, as was the case for other groups of women workers who entered occupational groups which had traditionally been the preserve of male workers, female clerks encountered men's hostility and derision. The trade unions which represented male clerks were reluctant to recruit women and failed to respond to their poor working conditions, thus allowing the development of a deterioration in the conditions of work for all clerks. Despite the chronic shortage of lucrative employment opportunities for women, the new jobs created in offices did little or nothing to alter the prospects for the majority of working class women. Although the daughters of skilled, working class fathers now had a genuine alternative to domestic work, throughout the period girls from the homes of dock and other casual labourers remained trapped within a labour market largely unchanged. Thousands of women in Liverpool still had no alternative to a career in domestic employment.

The Personal Service Industry

Domestic service was the single most important area of women's employment in Liverpool throughout the whole period. Each year thousands of young women were faced, at the end of their schooling

with the prospect of leaving home and taking up residence in someone else's house. In 1891 there were nearly 20,000 such female servants employed in Liverpool. Indeed, in only one census year (1921) between 1891 and 1931 did the number of women indoor servants fall below this figure. (See Table 2) Other women worked as domestic workers in hospitals, hotels, boarding houses and laundries. Yet more cleaned offices, shops and ships. Whilst some women, forced to work at home, took in washing and ironing from their neighbourhood. Taking the industry as a whole, as Table 2 shows, no fewer than 37,746 women sought to earn their living in this way in Liverpool in 1931. Just as the docks acted as a magnet for men, so within thousands of working class families it was assumed that a daughter would earn her living as a servant and mothers would work as charwomen and cleaners. This was rarely a matter of choice, for there were few genuine alternatives.

TABLE ONE

WOMEN EMPLOYED IN PERSONAL SERVICE SECTOR (INCLUDING SERVANTS)
LIVERPOOL 1891 - 1951

YEAR	NUMBER OF FEMALE PERSONAL SERVICE WORKERS	FEMALE PERSONAL SERVICE WORKERS AS A PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE WORK-FORCE	SERVANTS AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL WOMEN IN PERSONAL SERVICE SECTOR
1891	29,116	43.9	68.6
1901	37,512	44.1	61.5
1911	38,129	39.9	54.0
1921	31,202	29.0	52.0
1931	37,746	30.9	53.1
1951	26,523	21.0	34.0

Source: Census, calculated from Occupation Tables.

More than any other area of employment open to working class women, resident domestic service meshed perfectly with both the oppressive class relationships within British society and the oppression of women as women. Unlike the clerk or the female cigar maker, who entered a man's world and, consciously or unconsciously, challenged the pretensions of masculine exclusivity, domestic work was regarded as the right and proper preserve of women. The cleaning, washing, ironing, scrubbing and caring for others carried out by, and expected of, women in their own homes were widely regarded as 'natural' skills, easily transferred to another setting. And the relationship between mistress and servant was defined far more exactly in the mistress's expectations of the servant than in the wage contract itself. Servants were expected to show '.... humility, lowliness, meekness and gentleness, fearfulness, respectfulness, loyalty and good temper .... symbolised in behaviour such as walking out of the door backwards, maintaining absolute silence while performing their duties, never sitting down in the presence of their employers and never initiating an action or a speech.'[94] The female servant pursued the archetypal feminine occupation and lost status because of it. She was simultaneously defined by her work as inferior to those fortunately wealthy, or at least wealthier than herself. In this objective sense domestic service was essentially degrading and it was in recognition of this degradation that a growing number of women either rejected it as an occupation or rejected the expectations inherent in the mistress-servant relationship.

It would be incorrect to suggest, however, that servants were equally dissatisfied with their work. Conditions varied according to the

94. Leonore Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England', Journal of Social History, Vo. 7, No. 4, Summer 1974, p. 415.

size of the household and the number of servants employed, the position occupied by the servant and the style of management adopted by the mistress. Servants in large households, where a number of servants were employed, were generally more favourably placed than those working as a household's only servant. Larger houses tended to offer better pay, more free time and opportunities for promotion.[95]

In some one-servant households, however, conditions of work were poor. Complaints amongst servants focussed on the excessively long hours of work, the absence of free time and the patronising attitudes of mistresses. As an indication of the expectations inherent in the mistress-servant relationship, the following letter, published in the Liverpool Echo in October 1911, is illustrative.

> It seems to me that the present generation of servants expect to be paid and well paid for doing no work or the minimum of work possible. Their manners are atrocious in many cases and they seem to think that we, as mistresses, are under an obligation to them as servants for the work they do (or do not). What we really want are schools for the proper education of servants, not would-be ladies and gentlemen who think that if they aspirate an 'H' in its place or out of its place they are equal to any of us, but honest, hard working Christians who realise what the Bible teaches: 'Expect servants to be obedient unto their own masters and to please them well in all things, not answering again.' 96

That month saw a flood of letters to the newspaper from many servants, expressing their dissatisfaction with their conditions of work. One woman wrote,

> I am a servant and I know from experience that many mistresses keep their maids working like slaves from morning til night, and they never seem to think that maids want a little time to themselves to mend their clothes. We poor servants ought

95. See summaries of interviews with Dora and Ellen in Second Chance to Learn, Born to Serve: Domestic Service in Liverpool 1850-1950 (Liverpool, n.d.)

96. Liverpool Echo, 2nd October 1911.

> to have clothes made out of material that never wears out.... And as regards servants outings, a mistress writes that it is common practice for mistresses to allow their servants out for a short time each day. I myself have to be content with every alternate Sunday and a day a month. Some people don't think their servants need fresh air. 97

Another woman stated,

> I too am a domestic servant and very hard worked at that. I rise at 6.30 in the morning and retire about 11 o'clock at night and very often 11.30 and 12 o'clock. I get a night a week free (so-called) from 7.45 to 10 pm, every other Sunday from 5 til 10 and one day a month from 1.30 pm to 10 pm. That is all the fresh air I get and I am expected to keep well and strong on it, and always have a smiling face. In addition to this I hardly get time to eat my meals, the only time for a bit of sewing is when I should be in bed .... No wonder the girls won't go into service when they hear of such treatment. Domestic servants are only human, after all. 98

The absence of freedom, which led servants to characterise their working relationship as one of 'slavery', was often contrasted to the apparent freedom open to the woman factory worker. As the market for female labour opened up in the early 20th Century, the benefits of working for a specified number of hours within a more clearly defined contractual relationship were compared with the demands made upon the servant, perpetually 'on call', constantly expected to display humility and deference to her employer.

TABLE TWO

FEMALE INDOOR DOMESTIC SERVANTS IN PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS: LIVERPOOL 1891 - 1951

YEAR	NUMBER	TOTAL FEMALE WORKFORCE	SERVANTS AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL FEMALE WORKFORCE
1891	19,978	66,386	30.0
1901	23,069	85,058	27.1
1911	20,562	95,563	21.5
1921	16,191	108,080	15.0
1931	20,046	122,075	16.4
1951	8,982	126,857	7.0

Source: Census of England and Wales, Calculated from Occupation Tables Liverpool

From the early 1900s to 1921 the number of domestic servants in Liverpool, and elsewhere, began to decline. Working class girls were effectively voting with their feet on the terms of the mistress-servant relationship. It was a response which middle and upper class mistresses, on the whole found difficult to comprehend, since it was clear that for many girls the alternative to a position as a resident maid was a low paid job in a sweat shop or unemployment.[99] The 'servant problem', so-called, was defined by the middle class not simply as a dearth of servants but also as a shortfall of 'skilled servants'.[100] As Clementina Black argued in 1907, when addressing a WIC conference on women's unemployment: "Whenever you appeal to a body of middle class people who are not acquainted with workpeople, they have one stereotyped answer, 'Why don't they go into service? We want more servants'". "What they mean," she stated, "are skilled servants, there are already far too many unskilled women."[101] It is clear that girls for whom a genuine alternative existed were keen to pursue it. The expansion in the numbers of clerical and shop workers corresponded to this shift in employment choice. But for thousands of women such an alternative did not exist. Instead, they sought to escape the requirement to live-in. As Violet Firth stated in 1925,

> No one can deny that girls from working class homes show the strongest possible disinclination to take up domestic service, especially that which includes 'living-in' in private houses. Thereis less disinclination for service in hotels and boarding houses, and still less for daily work; but even at its best domestic service has an evil reputation among those who are in the best position to know its condition, i.e. the servant class themselves. 102

97. Liverpool Echo, 2nd October 1911.
98. Liverpool Echo, 10th October 1911.
99. See Violet M. Firth, The Psychology of the Servant Problem (The P.W. Daniel Co., London 1925) p. 14.
100. Phillip Mighels, 'Solving the Servant Problem', Women's Industrial News, June 1901.
101. Women's Industrial News, December 1907.
102. V. Firth, op.cit., p. 18.

Nevertheless, despite the deeply felt resentment amongst many servants over their working conditions, the spectre of poverty which haunted working class families in Liverpool effectively maintained a supply of servants. An unemployed daughter at home was a financial liability few parents could afford. As long as the opportunities for other work were limited, which was the case until 1939, working class girls were forced to consider a career in domestic service. Indeed, from the early 1920s onwards the effects of the crisis which hit the national and local economy, in particular rising unemployment in manufacturing and other service industries, led to a reversal in the trend showing a transfer of women away from domestic work. In Liverpool, between 1921 and 1931 the number of female personal service industry workers increased by over 6,500, and that of resident female males by nearly 4,000. Unfortunately, trends in the 1930s are less easy to detect as no census was taken in 1941. However, it has been suggested that this area of work continued to expand as a source of female employment throughout the 1930s.[103] This development was given impetus by government schemes relating to female unemployment, which tended to coerce women into domestic service.[104] (See Chapter Six where this is discussed more fully.) In Liverpool domestic service remained the key female occupation into the 1930s. For thousands of women, until marriage, their only experience of waged work was defined by a working relationship more characteristic of the 18th and 19th centuries than of the 20th century; a relationship which offered them few rights and little dignity.

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103. See Pam Taylor, 'Daughter and mothers - maids and mistresses: domestic service between the wars', in John Clarke, Chas Critcher and Richard Johnson, ed. Working Class Culture (Hutchinson, London 1979) p. 121; Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann, Britain in the 1930s (Granada, St Albans, 1973) p. 175.

As in other areas of women's work, the supply of domestic workers outstripped demand. This meant that wages were kept low relative to those paid in other towns and that many families were able to keep servants who would not have been in a position to do so had they lived elsewhere.[105] In the 1930s most resident domestic servants in Liverpool worked a 62 hour week, usually from 7 am to 8 pm or 9 pm but, on average, those under 21 years of age earned only 10s a week.[106] Daily workers worked shorter hours but, in the same age group, could expect to earn as little as 8 shillings a week.[107] Indeed, the rates paid to daily domestic workers on Merseyside were described as 'surprisingly low' by the authors of the Social Survey of Merseyside.

The over-supply of young women seeking domestic work in Liverpool was particularly detrimental to older and married women. Older women working as charwomen, office and shop cleaners and daily servants worked for pitifully low wages and those who had dependents were forced to supplement their income with parish relief. Indeed, hawkers and charwomen were the chief applicants for poor relief amongst working women in Liverpool.[108] Many lived out their lives on the edges of starvation, as the following statement testifies.

> The condition of those women who have lost their husbands and are left with a large family of children, is particularly difficult in Liverpool, owing to the absence of any employments suitable for them. These women are generally quite unskilled and their only means of livelihood lies in doing rough washing or charing, a profession so overcrowded that its wages are reduced to a minimum. If there are more than one or two children parish relief is obtained, to the amount of 2s for each child below the age of fourteen years, and this, with the addition

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105. D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol III, p. 300.
106. Ibid., p. 319.
107. Ibid., p. 321.
108. Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix Vol XVI, op.,cit., p. 70.

> of 3s to 5s a week from work enables the family to exist in some sort till the children, on leaving school, are able to improve its financial condition. 109

The economic depression of the inter-war years exacerbated these underlying problems faced by older domestic workers. Long term unemployment amongst older charwomen and cleaners became widespread. Thus in 1936 it was found that whilst 47% of unemployed women in Liverpool aged under 35 years had done some work in the previous year, three-quarters of those aged 45 years and over had had no work in the previous two years.[110] Many older women seeking work as domestics were found to be suffering from the illnesses and debilities consequent upon a life of poverty and, according to the Pilgrim Trust, represented 'sad cases' of women who had 'sunk into unemployability'. For example, a chambermaid, aged 53 years, who was suffering from bronchitis and 'should not be out of doors', lived in a cellar for which she paid 5 shillings a week and was so poorly clad it was considered she 'would not get a post in these clothes.'[111] Such cases were remarkably common in the city throughout the period under review.

As was the case for the majority of women workers in the city, most of the women who worked in the personal service industry were not unionised.[112] One important exception was female laundry workers, many of whom were recruited into the Warehouse Workers Union in 1914, when a strike occurred in the laundry industry in the city. The conditions of work in laundries were notoriously wretched. In the late 19th and early 20th century the hours of work were

109. Royal Commission on the Poor Law, Appendix Vol VII, 'Evidence of Eleanor Rathbone', op.cit., p. 266.
110. Pilgrim Trust, Men Without Work (Cambridge University Press 1938) p. 246.
111. Ibid., p. 250.
112. See Linda Grant, 'Women's work and trade unionism in Liverpool 1890-1914', Bulletin of the North West Labour History Society, 7, 1980-1, pp. 65-84.

extremely irregular. Short time in the early days of the week was often followed by excessive overtime towards the end of the week. Sunday working was not uncommon. Working days of 6.30 am to 2 am and 6.30 am to 10 pm were recorded in a Liverpool laundry in 1894. On average the working day was 8 am to 8 pm at this time.[113] Laundries were also renowned as insanitary workplaces. Lack of ventilation, a humid and steamy atmosphere and excessive heat created widespread ill-health amongst the industry's women workers. Many spent their working day drenched in water, conditions which encouraged the development of consumptive illnesses. And the work was often laborious and unpleasant. Soiled clothing and linen had to be sorted by the women workers and in 'hand' laundries which lacked the mechanical aides employed in 'power' laundries, still common in the early 20th century, much of the work, such as washing, wringing and ironing was heavy and demanding. Women laundry workers earned a certain notoriety as rough, strong women, a reputation encouraged by the custom of paying them beer money, or allowing beer to be brought in for them during working hours.[114]

It was the very poor conditions and abysmally low wages in Liverpool laundries which became the focus of the laundresses strike in the city in 1914. Mary Bamber, the women's organiser of the WWU, found that women were paid wages as low as 3s 6d a week for a 60 hour week and, in May 1914, she attempted to open negotiations over these conditions with the local employers. There were approximately 364 laundry firms in the city at this time, employing 3,139 women and girls and 306 men and boys.[115] The aim of the WWU was to secure a 50 hour week and a minimum wage of 6s a week. When negotiations

113. Report of H M Inspectors of Factories on the Hours of Work, Dangerous Machinery and Sanitary Conditions in Laundries, C. 7418 (HMSO, 1894)
114. 'Report of an Enquiry into the conditions of work in Laundries,' Women's Industrial News, June 1907.
115. F. Marquis, op.cit., p. 97.

broke down in July 1914, a strike was called of all laundry workers in the Merseyside area. 6,000 laundresses were reported to have responded to the strike call, 3,000 of them from Liverpool.[116]

The local press reports of the strike evoke an atmosphere of high spirits and solidarity amongst the strikers. On July 23rd, when Mary Bamber and the other strike leaders met the employers, the laundresses, gathered in Coopers Hall,

> .... made merry. The piano was unlocked and one of the girls, with an extensive ragtime repertoire and an exceptional ability for playing by ear, was soon at the keyboard, leading a rollicking chorus of popular songs. 117

The outcome of the negotiations was, however, a compromise on the full demands of the strikers. A 55 hour week was agreed, with a half day on Saturdays. The new wage rates for women workers were to range on a scale from 4 shillings a week to 13 shillings at age 21 years. For male workers the new agreed pay scale ranged from 6 shillings at 14 years to 25 shillings at age 21. The strike leaders, nevertheless, claimed a 'glorious victory'. Certainly, the solidarity and determination shown by the strikers was a rare demonstration of militancy amongst the Liverpool female workforce.

The Liverpool laundry industry continued to employ significant numbers of female workers into the 1930s. In 1921 there were 2,089 laundresses employed in the city and in 1931 there were 2,737.[118] Conditions in laundries began to improve as hand laundries were superseded by power laundries, in which machines were used for washing, drying and finishing. Nevertheless, laundry work continued

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116. Liverpool Echo, July 16th 1914.
117. Liverpool Echo, 23rd July 1914.
118. Census, Occupation Tables.

to be physically demanding. 'A good standard of general health and physique' was essential to all applicants to the work. 'Young people with flat feet, weak hearts and rheumatic tendencies' were not acceptable.[119] Wage rates remained relatively poor, with many companies operating piecework payment schemes and irregular working continued to depress women's weekly wages. In 1930, young girls starting in the industry were paid only around 3d per hour, advancing to 8d per hour at 20 years and over. At this time the wage paid to casual dock labourers was, on average, 12 shillings a day.

The poor wages paid to women workers in the personal service industry was its defining characteristic. Indeed, it is poverty which emerges as the thread which linked women's experience of waged work in Liverpool throughout the period. In both manufacturing and service industries women's work was low paid, not only in relation to men's work, but often so low as to make an independent existence virtually impossible. Many widowed and divorced women, forced into the periphery of an extremely limited labour market, could only survive by supplementing their earned income with parish relief.

But the poverty and degradation suffered by wage earning women was not only a scar on their own lives. In many households in Liverpool women were the chief breadwinners on whom others were dependent. Casualism and the irregular earnings of men meant that siblings, fathers, husbands and children were periodically forced to depend on a woman's weekly wage. Thus, the popular conception of women's wages as secondary within the household budget is wholly

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119. Liverpool Education Committee, Merseyside Employments for boys and girls (1930) p. 72.

inappropriate in the context of Liverpool. Indeed, the importance of women's work to the economy of working class families in the city makes its neglect in historical research particularly detrimental. The history of the nature and conditions of women's work in this period is as illustrative of the limitations of the local economy as the surplus of dock labourers. And the practices and ideologies which defined women's work as of less value than men's work, and generated women's very low pay, are social processes which assume their real significance when it is recognised that they shaped the lives of both men and women in the city.

Whatever the objective skill and experience required of women workers, their work was invariably characterised as unskilled and paid on that basis. But the impact of this on women's lives was not simply material. It is only necessary to consider the confidence and dignity which some male workers have been able to enjoy by virtue of the social and monetary value placed on their work to appreciate that the lack of status, dignity and value attached to much women's work had a bearing on their consciousness and identity as workers. The negative impact on women's self-identity of the consistent degradation of their skills inevitably undermined women's ability to assert their value as wage labourers. That is, women's working experiences tended to reproduce a consciousness which confirmed the appropriateness of the adverse consequences of the sexual division of labour.

The extreme limitations of the female labour market in Liverpool intensified this social process. Thus, for example, the huge numbers of working women confined to the personal service sector was a

constant reaffirmation of the apparent validity of the equation women's work/unskilled work; it was work which involved the demonstration of skills assumed to be the 'natural' possession of women and was ranked low on that basis. And the experience of being a servant, shared by thousands of working class girls and women, incorporated them into a working relationship which labelled them as inherently inferior to those for whom they worked, a relationship which constantly denied them their dignity and value as workers.

The period witnessed the assimilation of women workers into areas of work which had traditionally been the preserve of men. But this very process tended to emphasise women's low status as workers, rather than elevate them to the level of the male workers they now worked alongside. For example, the dilution of skills and the dismantling of career structures which took place in offices was, for male clerks, personified by the new female clerks and typists of the early 20th century. The hostility of male workers which greeted the new female recruits reflected the tension created by the destruction of skills. But in this process the low value of women's labour was effectively confirmed; women appeared to be the representatives of de-skilling. Such circumstances created almost insurmountable barriers to an assertion by women of their genuine value as workers. The views of male clerks meshed perfectly with the pervasive and dominant ideology of gender division which continuously degraded women's skills. The social assessment of women's work was only marginally informed by objective criteria and heavily reliant on an ideology which almost automatically defined it as unskilled.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence concerning the extent to which, day-to-day, women challenged the assumptions and practices which constituted the sexual division of labour. Although, of course, some women embraced trade unionism in an effort to ameliorate their conditions of work and their low pay. But women's ability to achieve social recognition of their skills and to insist on a standard of living commensurate with them was constantly undermined by changes taking place in the local economy. Thus, for example, the effect of the restructuring of the labour process which occurred in a number of manufacturing industries in the city over the period was to tie women more securely to the lowest paid levels of the skill hierarchy. The history of women's work in the clothing industry in Liverpool, outlined in the following chapter, is illustrative of this process, as are the changes which took place in the tobacco industry. Areas of skilled work, formerly occupied by women, were transformed into semi-skilled and unskilled processes, a development over which women were able to exercise little control. And a crucial effect of rising unemployment in the inter-war years was to facilitate an increasing concentration of women workers in low paid jobs in the service industries. Indeed, in the inter-war years the pre-existing boundaries of the sexual division of labour were socially confirmed and effectively consolidated.

CHAPTER FIVE

WOMEN'S WORK AND WOMEN WORKERS (2): EMPLOYMENT, UNEMPLOYMENT AND DIVISIONS WITHIN THE WORKING CLASS

In the first two decades of the 20th Century the horizons of the female labour market in Liverpool appeared to be shifting in women's favour. New jobs were created in shops and offices and some of the existing manufacturing industries, such as food and electrical engineering, increased their demand for female labour. But the hopes and aspirations which these developments brought to women were soon to evaporate as the economic recession of the 1920s and 1930s began to bite into the local economy. The new areas of employment for women seemed to disappear almost as quickly as they had been created.

By the mid-1920s the majority of women were faced, once again, with a choice of work which offered them low pay and little dignity. The numbers of women employed in the personal service sector began to rise again and thousands joined the dole queues. By the early 1930s the employment prospects for most women were almost as limited as they had been at the turn of the century. Indeed, in certain respects the market for women's labour was even more restricted than in the period prior to the First World War. In particular, women lost control over areas of skilled work in the manufacturing sector which had once been their preserve. And the relative advantages to women of work in the retail and clerical sectors over other jobs available to them were undermined in the competitive economic atmosphere created by the inter-war depression. For women workers the severe limitations of the local industrial structure were vividly

revealed by the economic crisis and industrial restructuring left women trapped in the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy. During the inter-war years a specific sexual division of labour was consolidated in Liverpool whereby women became more firmly entrenched in the service sector and, in the manufacturing sector, in low paid work characterised as unskilled.

This chapter explores aspects of the history of these developments in the Liverpool labour market and looks at the consequences of the inter-war depression for the women workers of the city. First, it examines the changing structure of the clothing industry in the period between 1890 and 1939 in Liverpool. The history of women's employment in this industry reveals many of the themes which structured women's experience in the Liverpool labour market as a whole: the consistent downgrading of their skills and abilities, their gradual transfer out of work formally recognised as skilled, the divisions and antagonisms between male and female workers at work, and the consolidation, in the inter-war years, of women's location in low paid, low status work. Secondly, the chapter looks at the implications for women workers of their concentration in certain areas of the labour market in the period of mass unemployment between the wars. The economic depression intensified pre-existing divisions within the working class and revealed more starkly the social structures and ideologies which disadvantaged women. Many women in work experienced a more intense exploitation of their labour, whilst others faced redundancy and unemployment.

The Clothing Industry and Women Workers

In the period between 1890 and the 1930s the clothing industry remained the single most important area of work for women workers within the manufacturing sector of the city. Conditions of work, wages and levels of skill varied widely across the industry. Women worked in all branches of the industry - as tailoresses, dressmakers, milliners and as the makers of shirts and underclothing. The work was carried out in both large factories and small workrooms, whilst some women worked in their own homes as outworkers to tailors and other clothiers. Clothing workers were to experience significant changes over time in the nature of their work and the structure of the industry. In particular, the increasing division of labour in the manufacture of clothing was continuously transforming branches of the trade from skilled to semi-skilled and unskilled processes.

Dressmaking and millinery were traditionally trades dominated by women but the tailoring trade witnessed a gradual increase in the proportion of women employed as the 19th century progressed. Thus the Liverpool Operative Tailors' Society estimated that in 1874 there were 1,400 men employed in tailors' workshops in Liverpool, and only 300 women. By 1889 the Society recorded 1,100 male tailors and at least 606 women although, they argued, the number of women was probably far higher if all those women working as outworkers and homeworkers could be counted.[1] This seems likely, for in 1904 a study of women workers in the city recorded 3,121 women and girl tailoresses. A further 1,452 worked as shirtmakers and seamstresses,

1. Fourth Report of the Select Committee for the House of Lords on the Sweating System, 1889, Evidence of Mr John Belmer Goodman, pp. 171-2.

and 8,260 were employed as milliners and dressmakers. In total, 12,833 women and girls were reported to be working in the city's clothing industry at this time.[2]

In the latter part of the 19th century the conditions of work in the clothing industry became a focus of investigation by women's organisations and others concerned with working class life and labour. It was in this industry, dominated by female labour at this time, that the conditions of work had horrified and appalled social reformers and to which the label 'sweated labour' became attached. According to the Select Committee of the House of Lords, which carried out an investigation into 'sweating' in the late 1880s in London and in a number of provincial centres, including Liverpool, sweating involved three key factors: 'a rate of wages inadequate to the necessities of the worker or disproportionate to the work done; excessive hours of labour; (and) the insanitary state of the houses in which the work is carried on.' In the view of the Select Committee, the 'evils' of sweating could 'hardly be exaggerated.'

> The earnings of the lowest class of workers are barely sufficient to sustain existence. The hours of labour are such as to make the lives of the workers periods of ceaseless toil, hard and often unhealthy. The sanitary conditions under which the work is conducted are not only injurious to the health of the persons employed, but are dangerous to the public, especially in the case of the trades concerned in making clothes, as infectious diseases are spread by the sale of garments made in rooms inhabited by persons suffering from smallpox and other diseases. 3

The findings of the Select Committee, and of other investigations carried out later, were to reveal that sweating resided in the

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2. A. Harrison, Women's Industries inLiverpool: An Enquiry into the Economic Effects of Legislation Regulating the Labour of Women, (University Press of Liverpool, Liverpool 1904) p. 16.
3. Fifth Report, Select Committee on Sweating,pp. xlii - xliii.

workshops and homes of Liverpool's clothing workers. As R.F.E. Willis, a local supporter of women's trade unions, writing in the Liverpool Review in 1888, stated with regard to the clothing workers of the city,

> ....thousands are working for 8 shillings a week, more like slaves than freeborn women. They do not receive sufficient to keep themselves in a healthy condition; they cannot prepare for sickness or short work. No woman here can live decently and independently and lay up a store for times of sickness unless she receives 15 shillings a week. 4

Long hours of work and low rates of pay, often below subsistence levels, were characteristic of the employment conditions faced by women in the industry in Liverpool. However, the appallingly high incidence of insanitary workrooms revealed in London at this time was not found in Liverpool. This appears to have been the case partly because of the diligence of the local factory inspectorate. Thus, Mr Richmond, a factory inspector in Liverpool in the 1880s and 1890s, stated in 1889,

> Speaking generally of the sanitary conditions of the sweating shops in Liverpool, I fancy they will compare favourably with those in other towns, but this is more the result of frequent inspection than the outcome of any desire on the part of the occupiers. The tendency to overcrowd is constant and occupiers seem to have no idea of the numbers a room should contain. 5

Perhaps Mr Richmond would not, in any case, have admitted to incompetence in his own work. But his statement seems to be borne out by the findings of the local Women's Industrial Council (WIC). Their study of women home workers in the industry, carried out 1908, argued,

> Those who desire to restrict home work usually base their case largely on the alleged insanitary condition of the worker's home, which is said to constitute a danger to the consumers

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4. Liverpool Review, 2.7.1888.

5. Third Report, Select Committee on Sweating, Letter from Mr Richmond to Mr A Redgrave.

> of the goods. This may possibly be true in other towns. Thus Miss Irwin of Glasgow says: 'Many of the houses of home workers were found to be in an extremely filthy state and the work was carried out in them under highly insanitary conditions.' As we have already stated, no such description could possibly be applied to the Liverpool home workers, except in a very few instances. 6

Nevertheless, insanitary workshops of the most appalling kind certainly existed in Liverpool. Thus, for example, in 1888 the Factory Inspector found in one workshop, 'six or seven young girls working in a room in the midst of which was a rat pit. The occupier of the house was a dog dealer who, whenever desired by a customer, exhibited the prowess of his dogs in the same room where the young girls were at work.'[7] As the Factory Inspector admitted, it was impossible to comprehensively examine all the workshops and workrooms used by clothing workers. Small workshops were constantly moving from place to place, while new ones were always being established, 'the consequence being that they are lost sight of for a time. When found, no doubt, some of them require great reformation.'[8] Deliberate evasion of inspection was also common. Thus Lady Dilke, chairperson of the Women's Protective and Provident League (WPPL) speaking in Liverpool in 1890, stated that,

> There is a block of houses in Liverpool which to the ordinary eye would appear unoccupied. The windows are boarded up and the place has that dismal and dirty look which is so common in an empty house.

Behind the doors of these houses, she observed women clothing workers working by gaslight in filthy rooms.[9]

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6. Report of an enquiry by the Investigation Committee of the Liverpool Women's Industrial Council, Home Work in Liverpool (Northern Publishing Co.Ltd., Liverpool 1908) p. 15.
7. Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops, Year Ending 31 October 1888, C. 5697 (HMSO 1888) pp. 106-7; See also Royal Commission on Labour, Reports from the Lady Assistant Commissioners, 1893-4 (C. 6894 - XX111) Vol XXXV11, Part 1, 'Report of Miss Clara E Collett on the Conditions of Work in Liverpool and Manchester.' Evidence of Witness 440, p. 70.
8. Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories 1888, op.cit., pp.106-7.
9. Liverpool Review, 13th September 1890.

The most fundamental problem facing Liverpool's female clothing workers and, indeed, the major problem highlighted by the Select Committee on the Sweating System, was that of low wages, wages often falling below subsistence levels. Women working in the dressmaking trade were particularly poorly paid. As Clara Collett, Lady Assistant Factory Commissioner, stated in 1894 with regard to Liverpool's dressmakers: 'No class of workers that I have come across are paid so little in proportion to skill and cost of living as the dressmakers and mantelmakers.'[10] Unfortunately, there is little documentary evidence available concerning the dressmaking trade in Liverpool at this time; investigations tended to focus on the tailoring trade. But the rates of pay and other working conditions were extremely poor in the tailoring trade of the city also.

By the late 19th century the Liverpool tailoring trade could be roughly divided into five branches. First, were the high class, bespoke tailors who were organised into the Master Tailors Association. In 1888 there were around 25 of these *firms in Liverpool, making* top quality suits for the 'gentlemen of the city'. They had their own workshops, in which most of the work was carried out and most of their employees were skilled male tailors and apprentices. Some workshops employed one or two women as machinists but this sector of the trade was dominated by male workers. The only aspect of this high class work which involved any number of women was the making up of waistcoats. It was the custom for most of these tailors to send out their waistcoats, ready cut, to be made up by female homeworkers and outworkers. The rest of the suit was

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10. Report of Miss Clara Collett, op.cit. p. 89.

made on the premises and the workers employed were paid at log rates, i.e. the rate mutually agreed between masters and men. Master tailors running businesses of this kind, therefore, paid good wages to skilled craftsmen. But it was this sector of the industry, characteristic of the whole trade in the early 19th century, which was in severe decline by the second half of the 19th century. The second branch of the trade was that of the master tailors owning their own shops in the main shopping areas but who did not have their own workrooms. They sold bespoke clothing but sent all their work out to middlemen who, in turn, employed men and women to make up the garments. The third sector of the industry consisted of wholesale clothiers who employed men and women in their own workshops and factories, but who also sent out work to middlemen and to home workers. These clothiers made cheap, ready-made men's and ladies suits and other articles of clothing, such as shirts and underwear. The fourth sector of the trade were the middlemen, referred to above, who worked for the tailor/shopkeepers. Most of these middlemen specialised in a particular branch of the trade. For example, some made only coats, others made trousers and women tended to run workshops making waistcoats. They had their own small workrooms, sometimes in their own homes, and employed, on average, 10 workers. Most of the workroom employees were women. They also sent some of their work out to women working in their own homes. The fifth sector of the trade were the middlemen who worked for the wholesale, ready-made trade already mentioned. Again, these middlemen ran small workshops, employing around 20 hands, the majority of whom were also women. The women employed by these middlemen and those employed as homeworkers directly by the wholesale clothiers represented

the most poorly paid sector of the industry. But sweating was not confined to this branch of the trade; all but the most high class tailors of the city depended on low paid home workers, sweat shops and, in the case of the wholesale clothiers, low paid female factory workers to manufacture their goods. Sweating was thus endemic throughout most of the industry.

Two factors had combined to encourage sweating. First was the gradual breaking down of the manufacture of clothing into its constituent parts. Thus as the 19th century progressed, semi-skilled and unskilled labour, usually female, was introduced to work on specific parts of a garment. The increasing division of labour undermined the skills of the craftsman tailor and opened up the trade to non-apprenticed workers. The greater use of machinery, in particular the sewing machine, but also machines for cutting cloth and buttonholing, facilitated the development of a division of labour and of skill dilution. The second and related development, which was initiated by the breakdown of skills, was the changing organisational structure of the industry, outlined above. As can be seen, this involved the increasing subdivision of the production units of the industry and the contracting out of a growing amount of work to middlemen. In turn, as the industry expanded, the proliferation of middlemen running small workshops created intense competition. Small workshops could be set up with little financial outlay and the growing number of such workshops encouraged the undercutting of prices. Across the industry prices and wages were constantly forced downwards. The introduction of female labour into the trade corresponded to these developments of subdivision and de-skilling with it. Women were defined as semi-skilled workers,

rather than craftswomen and were always paid at lower rates than men. The expansion of the industry followed the broadening of the market for tailored clothing. Thus, in 1888, according to Mr Lloyd Williams, a member of the firm of Peter Williams & Co. of Paradise Street, Liverpool, one of the large wholesale clothiers of the city,

> Our trade is certainly increasing.... I think working men are dressing better than they used to dress. They used to confine themselves principally to moleskin trousers. Now they go in for low priced cloth trousers. Cloth is remarkably low at the present time and has been for some years now. A working man now can get very respectable looking trousers for very little money. 11

The Liverpool economy provided ideal conditions for the development of sweating within the clothing industry. Crucially, there was a supply of female labour which constantly outstripped the demands of local industry as a whole. The practice of paying low wages to women was certainly not confined to Liverpool; it was customary throughout British industry to pay women wages a great deal lower than those paid to men. But, as I have argued in Chapter 4, the severe limitations of the female labour market in Liverpool intensified the depression of women's wages. The lack of openings in factories for married women in particular, but also for young single women, encouraged women to seek work as home workers. But the existence of female home workers as a source of cheap labour to the trade sustained a competitive relationship between home workers and those employed in factories and workshops. As a result, factory and workshop piece-work prices also tended to be pulled down. One wholesale factory in Liverpool in fact paid lower prices to its

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11. Fourth Report, Select Committee on Sweating, op.cit., Evidence of Lloyd Williams, p. 212.

indoor workers than to its home workers, arguing that this was necessary because of the overheads involved in factory production.

> We have to provide machinery and we have to provide driving power, and men to look after the hands; there is a great amount of expense connected with the inside labour. 12

Such examples highlight the fact that low wages were not confined to the home worker but existed also in the most advanced sectors of the trade.

There were other pressures on the Liverpool clothing industry, also tending to low wages. Liverpool wholesale clothing businesses were in competition with those in the larger and more developed factory industry in Leeds and Manchester, which could produce some garments even more cheaply than Liverpool.[13] Factories in Leeds, for example, equipped with modern power-driven machines were 'frequently accused of sweating' their workers and tailoresses there reported a lowering of prices in the late 1880s, consequent upon the introduction of new machinery.[14]

Precisely how poor were Liverpool's female clothing workers in the late 19th century? Wages tended to vary according to the nature of the garment made, the place of employment - home, workshop or factory - the age and experience of the worker and the regularity of the work. Indeed, the seasonal irregularity of the industry was highly significant in generating low wages. For six months of the year many workshops operated on a three-day week and in the busy season a full six-day week might last only a month, the rest of the time workers averaged five days.[15] Moreover, many

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12. Ibid., p. 212.
13. Ibid., pp. 210-211.
14. Jenny Morris, 'The Characteristics of Sweating: The Late 19th century London and Leeds Tailoring Trade' in Angela John, ed., Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1880-1918, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, pp.113-118.
15. Report of Miss Clara Collett, op.cit.,

sweat shops ran on the basis of casual recruitment. A contract was secured and sufficient hands were employed to complete the order. They were then discharged until the next batch of work came in. In 1888, in a typical small workshop supplying a bespoke tailor a young woman starting in the trade would earn around 1s 6d to 2 shillings a day. More experienced machinists earned between 3 shillings and 4 shillings a day. A male worker in the same workshop could expect to earn between 6 shillings and 8 shillings a day. For those women working for middlemen supplying the wholesale trade wages per day varied between 1 shilling and 3 shillings a day. Young women workers employed in the waistcoat making workshops, run by women, earned as little as 2s 6d a week.[16] Women machinists employed in the larger factories of the wholesale trade were equally poorly paid. In 1893, for example, nearly 85% of 200 women working in two factories in Liverpool were paid less than 15 shillings a week, and 53% earned less than 10 shillings.[17] At this time a working day was normally from 8 am to 8 pm Monday to Friday with an hour break for dinner, and 8 am to 4 pm on Saturdays: a 62 hour working week. Hourly rates, then, ranged from as little as 1d an hour to just 4½d an hour. In comparison, at this time the hourly rate paid to male dockers ranged between 1/1d and 1/6d an hour. The low wages paid to women in the clothing trade secured generous profits for middlemen. For example, a middleman contracted to make trousers at 3s 6d a pair could have them made for as little as 1s 3d.[18]

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16. See Third Report, Select Committee on Sweating, op.cit., Appendix A.

17. Report of Miss Clara Collett, op.cit., p. 71.

18. Fourth Report, Select Committee on Sweating, op.cit., p. 171.

The long hours and poor conditions of work in the sweatshops and the very low wages were a source of bitter complaint among female tailoresses and in June 1890 a handful of women formed the Tailoresses and Coatmakers Union in an attempt to ameliorate the conditions. Within a few weeks 300 Liverpool tailoresses had been recruited to the union and a strike was organised to pursue the demand of a shorter working day with no loss of pay. With the support of the Liverpool Trades Council, pickets were organised of the workshops where women continued to work. Many of these workshops were situated in the centre of the city and the spectacle of the women pickets, 'waving umbrellas and handkerchiefs' at those still working drew wide coverage in the local press.[19] Some middlemen conceded to the demands of the Tailoresses Union: the hours of work in a number of workshops were reduced and a working day of 9 am to 7 pm established.[20]

Evidence of the formation of this union is the earliest record of active female trade unionism in Liverpool. Contemporaneously, all-female unions were formed in other trades in the city and in other towns across Britain. This early female trade unionism followed in the wake of the successes of 'new unionism' which sought to organise 'unskilled' workers, such as the dock workers of Liverpool. Indeed, the great dock strike in Liverpool, which had brought tens of thousands of workers onto the streets in the struggle for recognition of the dock labourers' union, had ended only three months previously.[21]

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19. See, for example, Liverpool Echo, June 11th-23rd 1890; Liverpool and Vicinity Trades Council, Annual Report, 1890-91.
20. Report of Miss Clara Collette, op.cit., p. 70.
21. For details of this see R. Bean, 'Aspects of New Unionism in Liverpool 189-91', Building The Union (Toulouse Press, Liverpool, 1973); E Taplin, Liverpool Dockers and Seamen 1870-1890 (University of Hull, Occasional Papers in Economic and Social History, No. 6); R. Bean, 'Liverpool Dock Strike 1890', International Review of Social History, 1973; E.Taplin, The Dockers' Union: A Study of the N.U.D.L. 1889-1922, (Leicester University Press, 1985).

The movement throughout the country to organise non-craft workers had largely focussed on male workers but organisations such as the Women's Protective and Provident League (WPPL) which later became known as the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), sought to extend these gains of new unionism by organising meetings and conferences up and down the country urging women to organise.[22] There were tremendous obstacles to overcome in the struggle to unionise women workers at this time. Not least, the necessitous lives led by many working class women left them with little energy or time to devote to the demanding tasks of union organisation. But other factors, specific to the general conditions of female employment, became barriers to strong trade union organisation amongst women workers. The manner in which Liverpool's tailoresses were incorporated into the clothing trade are illustrative in this regard. Moreover, in consideration of this, the social processes which tended to sustain and reproduce the sexual division of labour are revealed.

As has been stated, women workers were gradually introduced into tailoring in the context of de-skilling within the trade. Once it became conceivable and possible to break down the manufacture of a garment into a number of separate processes, the craftsman tailor, capable of carrying out every operation involved in the making of a garment, was replaceable by a number of less skilled workers, proficient in a specific branch of the trade. This was particularly true at the cheaper end of the market. Employers grasped this opportunity with enthusiasm. The new non-craft workers were largely women paid at lower rates of pay than men and, in

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22. See S. Boston, Women Workers and the Trade Unions, (David Poynter, London 1980) Ch. 2; S. Lewenhak, Women and Trade Unions (Ernest Benn, London 1979) Ch. 5; Linda Grant, Women's work and trade unionism in Liverpool, 1890-1914 Bulletin of the North West Labour History Society, 7, 1980-1, pp. 65-84.

general, their conditions of work were poorer than men's. Master tailors were not only eager to cheapen their labour costs, in an industry which was very labour intensive, but also keen to undermine the control over the pace of work which skilled craftsmen had achieved. It was this latter factor which appears to have been an important determinant of the strategies adopted by employers in the context of the restructuring of the industry in Liverpool. Thus, John Allen of the Master Tailors' Association in Liverpool, argued,

> We find that a great number of working men are perfectly indifferent as to what promises you make to your customers about the time you will finish certain garments for them, and although you may allow plenty of time to the man to make it he will go off and get drunk in the middle of it, and think nothing of it .... in the busy seasons they are worst .... as soon as the sun shines and the trade pours in, they are off. 23

The universal cheapness of female labour, not least in Liverpool, and employers' perceptions of a female workforce as one over which they could exert greater control, enhanced women's value to employers. Simultaneously, the circumstances were created for an intense exploitation of women workers.

This proved to be a poor basis on which to build trade unionism. Moreover, the very process whereby women had become assimilated into the industry effected the institutionalisation of their inferior position as workers, confirming and sustaining the adverse consequences for women workers of the sexual division of labour. It was reflected in women's lack of confidence and weak bargaining position. That is to say, it was extremely difficult for women to assert that the value of their labour should be enhanced when their introduction

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23. Fourth Report, Select Committee on Sweating, op.cit., p. 218.

into the industry was representative of the means by which skill dilution had been achieved. Masters and male workers alike characterised women as a replaceable source of cheap labour, whatever their skills. In the face of the cheapness of women's labour throughout the economy such claims were almost impossible to counter. Indeed, in Liverpool, the overabundant supply of female labour had a consistently negative impact on women's strength as trade unionists and it inhibited women's potential to escape the rigid boundaries of the sexual division of labour which established such distinct life chances for male and female workers.

The breakdown of skills in the industry and the introduction of cheap female labour was widely resented by skilled craftsmen. Unsurprisingly, male workers directed their hostility over the changing conditions in the industry towards the new female recruits. The new labour not only heralded the demise of the craftsman tailor but threatened wage rates across the industry. In those few tailoring businesses dominated by apprenticed male workers in the late 19th century there was a forceful resistance to the introduction of female labour. For example, speaking of the female waistcoat makers who supplied the high class tailors, John Allen of the Liverpool Master Tailors' Association stated,

> There has been a suggestion in Liverpool that we should take these women in on sanitary grounds, that we should find the workshops for them; but when that was hinted to the men we have had it hinted back to us that there would be a strike if we did so. There is no doubt that the men's society in Liverpool is very much opposed to the introduction of female workers on the premises. 24

But this hostility of the organised male workers towards women workers also became an effective determinant of the sexual division of labour. Thus, whilst outside the select tailoring workshops

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24. Third Report, Select Committee on Sweating, op.cit., p. 217.

female labour dominated the industry by the late 19th century, contact between organised male tailors and female workers was minimal. In effect, women remained detached from the traditions of trade unionism in the industry. Additionally, female workers were isolated, one from another, working within small workshops spread across the city. They had no immediate evidence of the significance of organisation and many, no doubt, lacked the knowledge of the means by which to achieve it. The Liverpool Operative Tailors Society did not recruit female workers. Sweat shops mushroomed, yet no attempt was made by the male union to open its doors to women or to attempt to impose log rates of pay in those workshops in which women worked. In such circumstances the poor working conditions offered to women were continuously reproduced.

From the perspective of the present it is perhaps easy to criticise the male union for burying its head in the sand and failing to act to maintain good conditions across the industry, whatever the sex of the worker. But their stance towards the new female recruits was illustrative of that taken by organised male labour in many industries faced with transformation on this scale. Women workers could not easily shake off their inferior status in society generally; it was transferred into the workplace where the very structure of the industry institutionalised it. And they were not welcomed by men as equal workers in their struggles. On the contrary, cheap female labour appeared to be taking the bread out of men's mouths and standing in direct competition with them.

It is important to stress also that the hostility of men to the growth of female labour in the industry was complicated by a rampant anti-semitism. In the view of the Liverpool Operative Tailors Society, Jewish immigrant tailors were largely to blame for the introduction of female labour and for other transformations taking place in the industry. In line with this analysis, they advocated legal measures to stem immigration.[25] On this issue Liverpool-born masters and men were united. Such racist views served to increase the isolation of women workers employed in many sweat shops and blinded the men to the genuine underlying causes of changes in the industry. It fell upon Hyman Balsam, a Polish tailor who, in 1888, had been resident in England for 27 years, to counter the racism contained in much of the evidence given to the Select Committee on Sweating from Liverpool's masters and workers. In his view the employment of women could not be regarded as a wholly negative development. On the contrary, he argued,

> In many cases we have married women working for us whose husband has no work for months and months and the women support their children.... and if it were not for the women working, the children would be almost in the workhouse. 26

The pertinence of his comments to this analysis is clear. Women workers were often desperate for employment in a city which offered them so few opportunities. But it was precisely this situation which made women an easy target for an intense exploitation at work. Without the support of the well-organised male workers women's ability to resist exploitation was severely weakened.

In fact, by the late 1880s sections of the men's union were beginning to recognise the consequences for their own conditions of work of women's lack of organisation. Whilst this did not encourage

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25. Fourth Report, Select Committee on Sweating, Evidence of J Goodman, J Allen, H Richmond; Liverpool Trades Council, Minute Book, 19th June 1891.
26. Ibid., p. 196.

the men to recruit women into their own union, there was at least an understanding by some that the organisation of women was urgent and necessary. Thus, for example, John Goodman, a representative of the Liverpool Tailors Operatives Society argued,

> We think that by getting the women together they could be properly organised and that then the rate of wages could be increased by organisation. At the present time they are distributed all over the town, and no-one knows where to find them, except here and there. At present they have no means of communicating one with the other and there is no means of knowing what they are paid; whereas if they were working in proper workshops they could be organised and then be in a position to do something for themselves. 27

In the light of the obstacles to women's trade unionism the organisational achievements of the Liverpool Tailoresses Union and the success of its strike in 1890 are remarkable. Sadly, however, its success was short-lived. As soon as the reduction in hours was granted the number of women in the union began to diminish. By 1894 it represented only 100 members - a mere handful amongst the thousands of women employed in the trade by this time.[28]

Investigations into sweated labour in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century tended to highlight the particularly poor conditions of work amongst home workers to the clothing trade. Reports of women and children working day and night in miserable hovels for a pittance were widespread and appalled and horrified social reformers in the period. Typical is the following case, reported in the Liverpool Review in 1901, of a woman who,

> ....makes moleskin trousers for a well-known firm of wholesale tailors. At 12 o'clock every Saturday night this poor woman goes to bed. She sleeps til 12 o'clock on Sunday night and

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27. Ibid., p. 182.

28. Report of Miss Clara Collett, op. cit., p. 70.

> then works with little intermission for rest til the following Saturday night at 12 o'clock. She earns 12 shillings a week and out of this 12 shillings she pays another woman, and finds her own cotton. This woman is bent from continually bending over her work and cannot straighten herself. 29

It is impossible to assess how common such cases were in Liverpool. Many homeworkers failed to register as such with the local authority and thus no records exist concerning their conditions of work. However, a survey carried out by the Liverpool Women's Industrial Council in 1908 suggests that some of Liverpool's home workers escaped the worst excesses of sweating. Wage rates tended to correspond with those paid to outworkers in small workshops. Their wages were, nevertheless, miserably low.

TABLE I: WAGE RATES OF HOME WORKERS: LIVERPOOL 1908

	Estimated rate per hour			Usual weekly earnings		
	Highest	Lowest	Most Frequent	Highest	Lowest	Most Frequent
Men's Upperclothing	5d	½d	2d - 3d	15/-	2/6	10/-
Men's Underclothing	8d	1¼d	2½d - 3½d	15/-	3/-	6/- - 7/-
Women's and Children's Clothing	8d	1½d	3d - 4d	18/-	4/-	7/- - 8/6
Vest making i e Waistcoats	10d	2¼d	-	25/-	2/6	15/- - 20/-

Source: Home Work in Liverpool, Report by Liverpool Women's Industrial Council, 1908, p. 17.

Table I gives details of the wage rates paid to 218 home workers in the city in 1908. The rates of ½d and 2¼d recorded generated wages below subsistence level and, moreover, did not take into account the hidden costs facing the homeworker. Most were required to supply their own thread and many women were making weekly repayments of around 1s 6d whilst buying their machines. In 1908 a machine

29. Liverpool Review, 10th August 1901.

cost between £8 and £10 to buy. As the report of the WIC survey stated, 'If, therefore, we take the average earnings of the workers at 10 shillings a week, and this is a high estimation, it follows that a woman pays for her machine the equivalent of four to five months work.'[30] Similar wage rates were revealed by an industrial exhibition, held in St George's Hall in April 1907, of the products of female home workers and other workers. For example, Mrs E Roberts of Luther Street, had been paid the following amounts on a number of garments.[31]

Article	Cost of Material	Worker Paid	Selling Price	Profit to Shopkeeper
Chemise	7½d	1½d	1/0½d	3½d
Chemise	6d	2d	9½d	1½d
Baby's Shirt	1¼d	½d	2½d	¾d
Apron	4¾d	½d	5½d	¼d

Those factors tending to depress the wages of workshop workers were also felt keenly by home workers. The scarcity and irregularity of work meant that very few women were able to secure as much work as they wanted. Moreover, many homeworkers complained that piece work rates were declining in the years up to 1908. According to the WIC this tendency resulted from the excessive competition among workers and the competition between small contractors which enabled employers to, 'beat down rates to the lowest subsistence standard.'[32] There were simply too many women seeking work for wage rates to be maintained. The WIC report also confirmed the fragility of

30. Women's Industrial Council, op.cit., pp. 6-7.
31. Archive of the League of Welldoers, Liverpool, 14 1/144.
32. Women's Industrial Council, op.cit., p. 12.

the Liverpool industry in the face of competition from the large factories in Leeds and Manchester. The use of power-driven machines in these factories facilitated the production of clothing at prices even cheaper than those produced by Liverpool's homeworkers. Again, this competition threatened the piece work rates paid in Liverpool.[33] Placed in the context of the household, the poverty of the homeworker becomes even more apparent. Many were married women with unemployed husbands. Their pitiful earnings thus became the major income of the family.[34] In the survey carried out by the WIC, 39% of the married women in the sample had dependent husbands and children and around 25% of the widows and single women working as homeworkers were financially responsible for children and other relatives.[35] It was with an appreciation of the importance of women's wages to survival within working class families in Liverpool that the WIC were able to comment that homeworkers suffered,

> ....severely from insufficient earnings, from long and irregular spells of work, alternating with periods of total idleness, and from hard and excessively monotonous conditions of life. 36

The difficulties of organising homeworkers into trade unions, in an attempt to improve their conditions of work, were immense. It has already been argued that the structural location of female clothing workers within the industry militated against their union-isation. For the woman working in the isolation of her home the obstacles to successful organisation were experienced even more intensely. The sheer lack of contact between homeworkers was in itself a powerful barrier to combination. And there was no escape for the homeworker from the demands and hardships of family life,

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33. Ibid., p. 12.
34. For case studies of married women home workers in Liverpool see S Newcome Fox, 'Liverpool', in Clementina Black, ed., Married Women's Work (Garland Publishing Inc., New York & London 1980, First published 1915) pp. 173-183.
35. Women's Industrial Council, op.cit., p. 17.
36. Ibid., p. 14.

which forced women to work in the home in the first place. Attempts were made in the late 1880s to organise clothing homeworkers, but in 1887 the idea was abandoned. Few joined and only three or four were willing or able to devote the time and energy necessary for its success. According to the secretary, 'It never succeeded in reaching the lowest class of workers, whose lives are too necessitous to sacrifice any present to future good.'[37] Similarly, in 1908, the investigators involved in the Women's Industrial Council survey attempted to organise a number of women to protest about an exploitative practice of their employer. The initial enthusiasm amongst three or four women soon evaporated, however, because as the report explains, 'these women had nothing at all to depend upon but their work and do not dare risk offending the firm.'[38] The importance of women's wages to the family budget amongst the poor working class of Liverpool was thus a factor which constantly held women back from pursuing their interests as workers. In 1908, 60 women were recruited into the Liverpool Association of Homeworkers and Outworkers, established by the WIC, but the organisers characterised this as a disappointing failure. There were at least 700 registered home workers in the city at that time and possibly many more unregistered workers.[39]

The failure of trade unionism to arrest the worsening conditions in the industry which had given rise to sweating was, to some extent, offset by legislation. The WIC had been influential in drawing government attention to sweated labour in the clothing trade. For example, an exhibition held in London in 1906, organised by the WIC and the Women's Trade Union League, which displayed the products of sweated labour, highlighted the degree of exploitation

37. Liverpool Review, 2nd June 1888.
38. Women's Industrial Council, op.cit., pp.11-12.
39. Ibid., p. 3.

in the industry. This and similar publicity prompted the formation of the Anti-Sweating League, a branch of which existed in Liverpool. Increasing attention was drawn to the poor wages paid to women in many industries and pressure on the government from the anti-sweating lobby led to the appointment of a Select Committee to investigate homeworking. Evidence given to this committee shaped some of the proposals contained in the Trade Board Act of 1909, which set minimum wage rates in a number of sweated trades. 250,000 workers nationally were covered by the Act, but for many women the passing of this legislation was not wholly auspicious. For example, the minimum hourly rate set for women tailoring workers were about half those set for men, thus institutionalising the apparent inferiority of women workers within the industry. The periodic adjustment in the hourly rates did not eliminate this discrepancy. Thus, by 1912 a minimum rate of 6d an hour was set for male tailoring workers whilst the rate for women was only 3d. Moreover, evasion of the Act by employers was common and there is evidence to suggest that minimum wage rates were not put into effect amongst the majority of home workers.[40] Neither did the Act cover all clothing workers. Dressmakers, for example, already recognised as the poorest section of the clothing industry workforce, were unaffected by it.

The continuing campaign of the Liverpool Anti-Sweating League to extend the trades covered by the Trade Board Act drew attention to the poverty of women clothing workers by organising an exhibition in Liverpool in 1912 of the products of dressmakers' labour. They cited the case of a woman dressmaker, working at home, who made

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40. See James A Schmiechen, Sweated Industries and Sweated Labour, (Croom Helm, London 1984) p. 177.

print dresses at a standard size and who could, by working long hours, earn 14s a week, the rate per dress being 10d. She was subsequently obliged by her employer to make a more complicated garment, with a lined bodice in a variety of sizes but at the same price: 10d per dress. With the new design and by working 10 hours a day she could only earn 10s a week. On this wage she supported a young child and her husband who was 'unfit for work'.[41] Similarly, dressmakers working in the workrooms of some of the large stores in city centre Liverpool earned, on average, 10s to 12s a week in 1913. Hours of work remained long; many women worked from 8.30am to 7pm and in busy periods were often required to work until 10pm.[42] Smaller dressmaking establishments were renowned for the exploitation of girl apprentices. Most workrooms did not pay wages to girls in their first six months of work and some demanded a premium of as much as £2 10s to take a girl on. In 1916, a woman who had spent eight years in the trade might earn as little as 10 shillings to 13 shillings a week.[43] And in slack times, in particular January and February, and August and September, many workplaces closed down completely.

The earliest record of organisation amongst dressmakers is in 1908 when three delegates from the Dressmakers' Union, Miss Barron, Miss Carswell and Miss Hilton, - were represented on the Liverpool Trades Council.[44] Soon after Mrs Billinge became the Dressmakers' representative to the Trades Council and she remained the delegate for at least 15 years.[45] It is unfortunate that there are no records concerning the strength of the Dressmakers' Union, although the trade was sufficiently well organised in the workrooms of the principal

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41. Liverpool Echo, 7th December 1912.
42. Liverpool Echo, 6th October 1913.
43. F.J. Marquis, Handbook of Employment, op.cit., p. 65.
44. Liverpool Trades Council, Annual Report 1908-9.
45. Minutes, Liverpool Trades Council.

city centre shops for a strike to be called in June 1916. 500 women were reported to have struck work in pursuit of an all-round increase of 2s a week. At a mass meeting of dressmakers held on St George's Plateau it was stated that young dressmakers earned as little as 3s a week and others with twenty years experience in the trade earned only 15 shillings or 17 shillings. None earned more than £1 a week, although it was claimed that some of the dresses they made could sell for as much as £30 or £40 at this time. The outcome of the strike is unclear, although an 'agreement' was reached with the employers and the women returned to work three days later.[46]

Evidence concerning the development of the clothing industry in Liverpool in the 1920s and 1930s is not as comprehensive as that available for the earlier period dealt with above. Nationally, the changes in the labour process apparent in the period up to 1910 became even more marked in the following decades. That is to say, there was an increasing subdivision of the work involved in the manufacture of clothing which continuously undermined the importance of skill within the industry and transformed many semi-skilled aspects of the work into a series of repetitive processes which could be learnt with the minimum of training. Bespoke tailoring and dressmaking declined in favour of ready made clothing and the increasing utilisation of electrically powered sewing and other machines converted the trade, even in small premises, into a factory industry.[47] By this time women machinists made up the majority of the workforce and women increasingly replaced skilled men in branches of the trade formerly dominated by men. For example,

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46. See Liverpool Echo, June 7th, June 9th, 1916.
47. A Study of the factors which have operated in the past and those which are operating now to determine the distribution of women in industry, CMD. 3508 (HMSO, 1930) p. 12.

with the growth of factory manufacture women were employed to operate steam presses, thus replacing male pressers. And in the wholesale trade, cutting, previously a male preserve, was increasingly carried out by women using electrically propelled knives. In the tailoring trade alone, apprenticed male workers were able to resist the introduction of female cutters, but in most other branches of the industry female labour predominated in all aspects of the production.

These developments taking place in the industry nationally were reflected in the Liverpool industry. Thus the growing importance of the ready-made, wholesale clothing sector increased the demand for female machinists and allowed women to maintain their share of a declining workforce. (See Tables 2 and 3)

TABLE 2

PROPORTION OF MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY: LIVERPOOL 1921-1951

YEAR	WOMEN	MEN	TOTAL	WOMEN AS PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL WORKFORCE
1921	9336	3872	13208	70.7
1931	8541	3806	12347	69.2
1951	8067	2137	10204	79.0

Source: Census, Calculated from Occupation Tables.

But the progressive division of labour and the greater use of machinery meant that the more skilled sectors of the trade, which had opened up to women from the mid-19th century onwards, were, by the early 1920s, contracting markedly. The breakdown of the manufacture of garments into a series of operations made many machining jobs extremely monotonous and tied the majority of women workers to

the lowest paid levels of the industry. Dressmaking and tailoring apprenticeships were phased out, instead girls were taken on as learners and taught a specific aspect of the work. The dressmaking workrooms of the large stores, which once employed hundreds of local girls had, by 1930, closed down. Instead the stores employed a small nucleus of women on alteration and adjustment work.[48] And in the tailoring sector girls taken on as learners were effectively used as messengers, taking garments between the shop, the workrooms, the homeworkers and the clients. After one or two years these 'learners' were dismissed and replaced by new school leavers.[49] For bespoke dressmakers and women working in the bespoke tailoring trade the consequences of these developments were particularly detrimental. Thus in Liverpool in 1921 there were 2,157 female dress and blouse makers recorded in the census, but by 1951 there were just 867 women working in this trade.[50] Indeed, in the period before the First World War there were some 417 dressmaking businesses in the city, but by 1951 only 41 remained.[51] Similarly, in 1921 there were 3,481 women working as tailoresses, but by 1951 only 1,032 women worked in this branch of the trade. The number of tailoring businesses in the city had declined by nearly one half, from 574 before World War One to 292 in 1953.[52] By the early 1920s female unemployment in these sectors of the Liverpool industry was described as 'severe'.[53] And in the ready-made and wholesale bespoke sectors underemployment continued to be a dominant feature of the work - seasonal changes in demand meant that steady employment was rare.[54]

48. Liverpool Education Committee, Merseyside Employments for Boys and Girls (1930) pp. 13-14.
49. Ibid., p. 20.
50. Census, Occupation Tables
51. Liverpool Youth Employment Bureau, Reports on the Recruitment and Training of Young People in Liverpool Industries,'Clothing', Liverpool 1953.
52. Ibid.,
53. M.L.M. Reid, 'Unemployment among insured women on Merseyside, 1923-

TABLE 3

FEMALE WORKERS IN THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY: LIVERPOOL 1891-1951

YEAR	NO. OF WOMEN WORKERS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL FEMALE WORKFORCE
1891	13016	19.6
1901	14101	16.6
1911	13196	13.8
1921	9336	8.6
1931	8541	7.0
1951	8067	6.4

SOURCE: Census: Occupation Tables

The development of the ready-to-wear, wholesale sector of the industry in Liverpool was most dramatic in the inter-war years, when factories employing between 300 and 600 people, mostly women, were established. But large-scale factory production also came to dominate the made-to-measure tailoring sector. Thus, for example, one large factory in Liverpool was capable of producing 1,800 made-to-measure suits in 1953. The Liverpool industry, however, remained in the shadow of that in Leeds and Manchester. To give some idea of the scale of the industry in these cities, in 1934 one highly mechanised tailoring firm in Leeds employed 10,000 workers and was capable of producing 30,000 suits a week.[55] The Liverpool industry never achieved this level of significance within the local economy.

(53.)1932', Unpublished dissertation, University of Liverpool, 1934, p. 69.
54. Liverpool Education Committee, op.cit., p. 24.
55. Liverpool Youth Employment Bureau, op.cit.,

The history of the changes in the clothing industry in Liverpool are illustrative of a process which occurred in a number of manufacturing industries in the city, i.e. an increasing division of labour was accompanied by a tendency for women workers to become more firmly entrenched in the least skilled, lowest paid levels of the industry. In the early period women dressmakers and tailoresses were required to demonstrate considerable skill at their work. Dressmaking apprenticeships gave women proficiency in all branches of the trade and although in the tailoring sector women tended to develop an expertise in the making of a specific garment, their skills were by no means modest. The low status attached to women's work in the industry rested on pre-existing notions of the inferior value of women's labour. Thus, machining, a skill acquired by women rather than men, was consistently downgraded. It was 'women's work' and was assessed, both subjectively within the community of clothing workers and objectively in terms of wages paid, as inferior on that basis.

Although the industry witnessed a genuine process of skill dilution, subjective assessments of the relative value of men's and women's work continuously intervened to construct the sexual division of labour in such a way as to devalue women's work. The changes brought by the restructuring of the industry meshed with the ideologies of gender division which confirmed the equation women's work/unskilled work. Thus, for example, the practice of paying women very low wages was institutionalised by the Trades Board Act.

As had occurred in the tobacco industry, skilled women clothing workers were unable to develop the degree of union organisation necessary to protect their long-term interests. In contrast, male craft unions had some success in this project, albeit partial. Certain aspects of the work carried out by men continued to be defined as skilled into the 1930s and were rewarded on that basis. The relationship which developed between male and female workers in the late 19th century and early 20th century had a significant bearing on this. The employment of women as cheap labour, perceived by men as a threat to their wage rates, encouraged the development of antagonism between male and female workers rather than co-operation and collective action to improve the conditions of work across the industry. Women's objective interests as workers were effectively marginalised in a period which proved to be decisive in terms of its impact on women's long-term status within the industry. Employers met with little opposition to their strategy of establishing, as the norm, the payment of very low wages to women. The crucial consequence of this in a city such as Liverpool, where women's wages were vital to the household budget, was to impoverish women and those who were dependent on them.

Despite the poor working conditions experienced by women clothing workers and the low wages paid to them, the clothing industry remained the single most important source of female employment within the manufacturing sector of the city into the 1930s. As a result, the crisis which hit the local industry from the early 1920s onwards, in the face of intense competition from the more developed industry in other parts of Britain and the increasing importation of clothing manufactured abroad, had a decisive impact on the local female

workforce. The number of jobs available to women declined, to the extent that there were almost 5,000 fewer women employed in the industry in the 1930s than there had been in 1911. Moreover, unemployment amongst women clothing workers rose steadily through the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, the inter-war depression and the crisis in the local economy created very specific problems for all local women workers. The sexual division of labour, which drew rigid lines of distinction between the areas of male and female employment, came into sharp focus. The circumstances created by a diminishing labour market encouraged retrenchment in its accepted ordering, starkly revealing the severe limitations of Liverpool's female labour market. And many women with jobs were to experience a more intense exploitation of their labour. It is the significance of these aspects of the inter-war depression for women workers to which I now turn.

Unemployment and the continuity of division

Most people have an image in their minds of life in the inter-war years. For some it springs from their own memories. For others it has been built on old newsreels, the stories of relatives or friends, or pictures in books. Most agree that, as a direct consequence of unemployment it was a period characterised, above all, by the despair and suffering of many millions of people.[56] But until recent years it was an image which required no clear definition. The passage of time had blurred the edges. Even by the 1950s the slogan, 'Ask your Father', the rallying cry of post-war British

56. A number of writers have recently argued that mass unemployment was only one of a number of features which defined the period. See, for example, John Stevenson and Chris Cook, The Slump: Society and Politics During the Depression (Jonathan Cape, London 1977). For a commentary on this see A. Howkins and J. Saville, 'The 1930s:A Revisionist History', Socialist Register, 1979, pp. 89-100.

politics, suggested that mass unemployment was to be remembered only in so far as it reminded people of how good their lives were now. But twenty years later, in the 1970s, comparisons between then and now were being redrawn. Posters appeared on the theme 'No return to the 30s', with a poster which for many of us encapsulated our vision of the inter-war years: the Wigan miner, standing on a street corner, a sad, gaunt and hungry man. It seemed to say it all.

But this image is too uncomplicated to be accurate. It evokes the human tragedy of the 1930s but tells only half the story. It suggests that unemployment then was essentially a problem affecting an undifferentiated mass of white, male workers from the coal fields and ship yards; that the division within the working class was between the employed workers of the South and the Midlands and the forgotten unemployed of the North, Scotland and Wales. But that within the areas of heaviest unemployment the working class were united in their fight for the right to work. The political issues of the day were clear and obvious, unobscured by division.[57]

In effect this image romanticises and simplifies the past. It supports a view which accepts the importance of sex, race, age, skill and locality in fragmenting the working class of today but fails to find an echo in the past. This blindness to division is even more marked in the consideration of the unemployed during

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57. Michael Foot makes this point in his biography of Aneurin Bevan. Bevan, he argues, recognised the complexity of the political conjuncture of the 1930s. Foot states: 'A curious historical illusion of the fifties and the present day is the belief that in some ways the issues of the thirties were black and white.' Michael Foot, Aneurin Bevan 1897-1945, (Granada, St Albans, 1975) p. 149.

the period of mass unemployment between the wars. 'The unemployed' are invariably placed under a single heading, as if the very fact of unemployment breaks down differences between people and creates a common, shared experience. Whilst it is true that there are shared experiences as a result of unemployment, particularly in terms of income and standard of living, the divisions between people based on sex, race, age etc., were as sociologically significant and politically crucial in the inter-war years as they are today. Different sections of the working class lived through and responded to unemployment in different ways. And as unemployment became increasingly widespread, and the number of long-term unemployed multiplied, so pre-existing divisions between groups of people were deepened. The effects of this intensification of division within the working class were to persist into the post-war period.

Of course, unemployment was nothing new to local workers. As has been seen, there are few permanent, regular jobs in Liverpool. Just as dockers were taken on by the half day and seafarers by the voyage, so women in the food factories and the tailoring workshops were employed for a week, a month or a season. But this long experience of insecurity was magnified by the depression. Work became more irregular and the pool of long-term unemployed grew daily.

In the summer of 1932, 140,000 men and women were unemployed on Merseyside. In addition, another 90,000 could find work for only a few days each week.[58] By 1936 the unemployment rate in Liverpool was 26%, more than twice the national average.[59] Massive unemployment

58. D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol II, pp. 366-369. This is an estimate of unemployment amongst both insured and uninsured workers. In the same year there were 108,000 registered insured workers unemployed.
59. Ministry of Labour, Employment Gazette, 1936.

went hand in hand with the irregularity of work in a large number of local industries, creating a vast group of people whose standard of living was little different from that of the permanently unemployed. The crisis attacked the very heart of the local economy centred on the port. Thousands of dockers and seafarers, shipbuilders and warehouse workers, clerks and porters were thrown out of work. Thousands more jostled on the stands along the dock road for a few days work here, a few days work there.

TABLE 4

UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG INSURED WORKERS ON MERSEYSIDE

Industries associated with:	No unemployed in each industrial group, 1932	Percent unemployed of total insured in each industrial group		
		1924	1929	1932
Shipping and Shipbuilding	39,190	28.3	32.7	46.6
Transport and Distribution	23,150	14.2	11.1	20.8
Building and Furnishing	15,390	18.7	18.8	35.1
Metals and Engineering	6,750	16.0	12.6	29.2
Food, Drink, Tobacco	6,120	11.6	9.2	17.9
Clothing, Textiles	3,430	12.7	11.3	20.0
Miscellaneous Manufacture	4,440	10.2	8.2	14.3
General Service	9,680	10.4	19.6	12.5
Fishing, Mining, Quarrying	250	-	-	-
TOTAL	108,400*	17.0	16.5	27.8

Source: D. Caradog Jones, The Social Survey of Merseyside, 1934, Vol II, p. 9.

* This figure of 108,400 refers to insured workers only. The figure of 140,000 previously mentioned is an estimate of both insured and uninsured unemployed, calculated on the basis of the 'occupied population' recorded in the 1931 Census.

Britain's falling share of world trade, combined with the introduction of new mechanical methods for handling cargo at the docks worsened the docker's chance of finding work.[60] All unemployed dockers had to attend the morning and midday stands every day in order to remain eligible for the dole. In the inter-war years it was a demoralising experience with no guarantees.

> You used to fight for work. Oh, you fought for your work, no doubt about it. Don't let anybody kid you otherwise. You fought for your job and especially a ship starting and there was going to be any value about - if there was going to be any money earned on it - the men fought to get it .... Once you were employed, you weren't necessarily employed for a full day. The boss would come to you at ten to twelve, or a quarter to twelve and say, 'That will do', or 'Clear out'. They weren't as polite as that. They'd just say, 'Clear out there!' and you had to go. 61

As well as the loading and unloading of ships, there were a hundred and one other jobs which relied on the activity of the port. With the decline in the trade through the port, ripples of unemployment spread across the city. The massive warehouses and store rooms on the dockside required fewer and fewer workers. Carters, storekeepers, porters and messengers joined the ranks of the unemployed. And, in turn, many of the pubs, cafes and shops along the dock road closed their doors for the last time. The shipping lines, too, with their grand offices around the Pier Head were to enter a phase of intense competition and rationalisation which led to company mergers and the transference of headquarters to London. In consequence, by 1932, there were 5,000 unemployed clerks on Merseyside - an unemployment rate of 10%.[62]

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60. F.G. Hanham, Report of an Enquiry into Casual Labour in the Merseyside Area, (Henry Young & Sons Ltd., Liverpool 1930) p. 46; See also Daily Worker 11th January 1931, 14th February 1931, 14th March 1931 for details of union responses to this new machinery.
61. Interview with Billy Regan, op.cit.,
62. D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol II, p. 327.

Clerks, typists, bookkeepers and secretaries joined the scramble for jobs. Indeed, between 1918 and 1932, 6,000 clerical jobs had been lost in the shipping industry alone on Merseyside. It was male clerks who were more likely to lose their jobs, as the cheapness of female clerical labour had become increasingly attractive to employers. But many offices were subject to the casualism central to the local labour market and run entirely by low paid and temporary female workers, liable to be dismissed at a moment's notice.[63]

In the winter of 1932 to 1933, nearly half of the 34,400 workers in the local shipping industry were unemployed. Seafarers were the hardest hit. Already used to long periods of unemployment between voyages, for some the gap now stretched into years. Similarly, the ship building and repair industry on Merseyside was devastated by the slump. Even in the comparatively 'good' year of 1924, unemployment in the industry was 30%. By 1931, no less than 60% of local ship yard workers were out of work.[64] Once a thriving industry in Birkenhead, Liverpool and Boottle, in 1932 there was only 11% of pre-war tonnage under construction. Boilermakers, rivetters, turners, and fitters - apprenticed dockside workers - became casuals, waiting each day at one of the 50 or so stands for work to come in. Taken on by the job, work could last just a few hours or maybe as long as a month. Most jobs in the 1930s lasted less than a week. Thousands of these workers and their families were, by 1932, living in appalling poverty.[65] For many of the unemployed chance became more important than experience for getting a job. Whenever the possibility arose of earning a few shillings word quickly spread around a neighbour-

63. Ibid., p. 329.
64. Ibid., p. 105.
65. Ibid., pp. 109-120.

hood. The stand system, once the hallmark of the docks, now became the practice for all kinds of local work. People learned to be in the right place at the right time, as one man remembers,

> One thing that my father used to look forward to in the winter-time, was the snow to come down. Because you could go and get employed by the Corporation, snow shifting, and it was a big asset.... He'd be looking through the window and he'd say, 'Send it down JC'. And he used to go down to Vine Street, on the stand, and they'd pick so many hundred men on. 66

The scale of unemployment and its crushing impact on male workers in the traditional industries combine to give an impression of uniformity amongst the unemployed. But whilst a life dependent on unemployment benefit and poor relief created many shared experiences, particularly poverty and malnutrition, as the 1930s progressed there also developed distinct divisions within the unemployed.

In this respect, age played a crucial role. The issue of a generation of unemployed and 'unemployable' young people is familiar enough today but it is not entirely new. For example, a government committee, set up in the late 1920s, expressed the following view with regard to youth unemployment.

> The disintegrating effect, moral and physical, of juvenile unemployment is incalculable.... We doubt whether sufficient attention has been given to the fate of the boys and girls who live in areas where the atmosphere is charged with disillusionment and discouragement. In some districts where employment is a comparative luxury, to allow girls and boys from 14 to 18 to roam the streets would be unthinkable. 'The unemployed boy of today is the unemployed man of tomorrow', is a saying which we are satisfied is often only too true. 67

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66. Interview with Billy Regan, op.cit.,

67. From the Malcolm Committee proposals on youth training, quoted in House of Commons, Official Report (Hansard) 9th November 1927.

At all times there is a value placed on experience and skill which almost invariably disadvantages the young. On the other hand, the cheapness of young labour is an attraction few industrialists can ignore. In Liverpool, however, the casual nature of the majority of industries created a very specific method of recruitment which almost always operated against the young. On the docks, for example, even before the worst years of the depression, there existed a massive surplus of registered dockers. Having a docker's tally was never a guarantee of regular work, and what became increasingly important in order to secure a job was familiarity with the foreman. As a new face on the stand you were far less likely to be chosen than the person next to you who had been there twice a day for the last ten years or more. He was known, his skills were known and consequently he would be more likely to get the job. It is not surprising, then, that in 1932 only 56% of men in their 20s in Liverpool were in regular employment, compared with 75% in the age group 40 to 49 years.[68]

Whilst the situation was marginally better for those aged between 16 and 21, it was anything but good. Many girls and boys under 16 could find work but around the age of 16, the exact age varying from trade to trade, children became adults, eligible for an adult job and an adult wage. Many were sacked and their place taken by another school leaver. As Jim Mottram, a railway worker, remembers, 'In those days, on the railways, they were taking boys on at 14 or 15 and sacking them at 20. And they would replace them with younger staff. They were virtually running the railways on junior porters.[69] Similarly, Frank Baker recalls his first job at a butcher's

68. D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol II, p. 377.

69. Interview with Jim Mottram, op.cit.,

shop in Liverpool,

> I worked there for about three years, until I was 17½. The man who owned the shop was a very good butcher, but also extremely lazy. He wouldn't do anything that he could make a boy do. The consequence was that when I left that shop I could do anything in the way of butchering. Anyway, I got sacked. I was getting to the stamp age, to the age when they would have to pay extra on the insurance stamp. Shop keepers, in those days, didn't keep boys on. As soon as they got to the stamp age, well, that was it - out. 70

The same was true for girls in many local industries. Young girls employed in laundries, baking and biscuit making, departmental stores and dressmaking establishments were particularly prone to sacking after one or two years of employment. As Marjorie Reid stated, in her study of unemployment among women workers on Merseyside, 'it is .... not uncommon practice for girls of 14 to be employed and dismissed after a year or more of service, in favour of girls of 14, the object being, of course, to reduce wage costs.'[71]

By the age of 16 it was too late to register as an apprentice. The young joined the thousands of unemployed who were trained and experienced in an unequal contest for scarce work. In any case, apprenticeships were hard to come by in Liverpool. There were relatively few local industries which required large numbers of time-served workers and most working class families simply couldn't afford to support a child learning a trade.[72]

By 1934 youth unemployment had become recognised as a serious problem locally and a special Committee of Enquiry was set up in Liverpool to examine the nature and extent of unemployment amongst 14 - 20

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70. Interview with Frank Baker, op.cit.,
71. M. Reid, op.cit., p. 63.
72. See Liverpool Daily Post, 6th April 1929.

year old people.[73] By the end of October, 1934, there were 13,000 unemployed young people in Liverpool and, with the sharp increase in the number of births which had taken place in the early 1920s, the number was destined to rise until the Second World War was to find employment for all. The committee's report expressed its finding in terms which are very reminiscent of similar reports in the 1980s.

> Many of the young unemployed have been without work for several years. Some have never worked since leaving school. Others have had no more than casual or intermittent employment, while not a few, after two or three years in fairly regular but definitely unprogressive employment, have been thrown out of their employment to make room for younger workers and have found it impossible to be reabsorbed into industry. The best years of their lives have thus, in more cases than it is possible to enumerate, been wasted altogether, and they have reached, or are rapidly reaching, an age beyond which the opportunities of acquiring skills in industry do not exist for them. For several years past this state of affairs has been a marked feature in the industrial life of Liverpool, and it would be impossible to estimate the loss that the City has suffered by its inability to utilise the surplus labour. 74

Just as age divided the unemployed, so many women found their experience of the inter-war years and of unemployment quite different to that of men. Unemployment amongst men was a massive and conspicuous problem in Liverpool, a spectacle played out on the streets daily. No-one could ignore it. But it was different for women, as in many other aspects of their lives. For a number of reasons women's unemployment was less obvious than men's; it was hidden but just as real.

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73. Joint Enquiry Committee on Unemployment among Young Persons in Liverpool, Report upon the nature and extent of unemployment among young persons between 14 and 21 years of age, (City of Liverpool, 1935). The Committee comprised of members drawn from the local Employment Committee Ministry of Labour, the Juvenile Employment Committee of Liverpool Education Authority and the Liverpool Council of Social Services.
74. Report of Joint Enquiry Committe, op.cit., pp.6-7.

Underlying the difficulties faced by women at this time was that the local industrial structure was unfavourable to their employment in large numbers, except in waged domestic work. The pressures on the local economy created by the economic crisis revealed more clearly the narrow range of job opportunities open to women. Job losses occurred in a number of key areas of factory and warehouse employment open to women such as sack repair, clothing, food and tobacco, and paper and printing. The effect of this was to propel women, in increasing numbers, into low paid, domestic service jobs.

TABLE 5

Mean No.* of registered unemployed in principal occupations in Liverpool Women, 1932

Women 18yrs and over		Girls aged 14 - 18	
Occupation	No. unemployed	Occupation	No. unemployed
Professional	154	Clerical	280
Clerical	573	Shop Assistant	455
Shop Assistant	1,326	Domestic Service) Laundry Workers)	89
Domestic, Resident	136	Cafe Workers	65
Daily Domestic and Charwomen	1,225	Needle trades	87
Laundry workers	161	Factory workers	1,011
Cafe and Hotel Workers	1,209	Messengers, Attendants etc	89
Sewing	517		
Printing	274		
Factory workers	3,856		
Total	9,431	Total	2,076

* Obtained by taking the mean for four quarterly figures for each occupation. Figures obtained from Ministry of Labour returns.

Source: D CaradogJones, Social Survey of Merseyside, Vol II, p. 371.

Local manufacturing industries, always overshadowed by the port and few in number, were to enter a period of restructuring and rationalisation as companies attempted to maintain levels of profitability in the context of the intensely competitive conditions of the economic depression. For workers, rationalisation could involve a speed-up in the pace of work, more intensive supervision, the introduction of new technologies, cuts in existing wage rates and redundancy. The precise strategies adopted by particular companies varied according to the nature of the products produced, the prevailing conditions within the particular industry and the restraints that the collective organisation of workers could impose on employers. But certainly, many workers in this period were subjected to a more intense exploitation of their labour. Indeed, the rationalisation programmes pursued at this time were to have a critical and irreversible effect on the way in which those with jobs were to experience the crisis. These developments had a direct bearing on local women workers.

The following account, written by a Liverpool woman in 1930 is indicative of some of the typical changes in working practices which occurred at this time.

> I work in a wireless and electrical firm in Liverpool. We work a 47 hour week and there are two shifts. If we are working days we get £1 a week, and for the night shift it's £1 2s 6d. Most of us are under 23 years of age and on the day shift there are many young workers who get as little as 8 shillings a week. It is bitterly cold in the shop as the heating arrangements are bad and the ventilation is rotten. There are no canteens and we have to eat our meals on the benches in the workshops. The firm refuses to take anyone on in a union. We are getting well and truly rationalised in this job alright! Automatic presses have been put in which put three out of every four workers out of work. One worker now has to look after four presses instead of one. We are all finding it hard to keep up with the new pace - but what can we do? 75

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75. Daily Worker, 4th January 1930.

Thus even in the 'new' industries of the inter-war years, such as electrical engineering and the manufacture of artificial silk, expanding in terms of output and trade, there was a net decline in the number of jobs available locally. Jobs in the local electrical engineering industry had been steadily expanding since the First World War, and some of the new jobs created were occupied by women. But by 1932, one out of every four workers in the industry were unemployed and in the summer months at least 50% of those with jobs were laid off. As was the case with many local industries, work was seasonal. Similarly, 11% of women workers in the artificial silk industry were unemployed in 1932.[76]

Established manufacturing industries such as food, drink and tobacco, labour intensive at every stage of production, were also restructured in this period. For example, the Tate and Lyle sugar refinery in Love Lane in Liverpool underwent total re-equipping in the 1930s. In the whole history of the plant until its closure in 1980, the most dramatic strides made in boosting productivity were achieved in the 1930s. But in these industries, previously labour intensive at every stage of production, the major impact of the introduction of new technology was redundancy amongst women. Work such as packing and labelling began to be automated in this period and as a result many women, concentrated in these areas of production, lost their jobs. As I have shown in Chapter 4, the tobacco industry was affected by these developments and by 1931, 29% of female tobacco workers on Merseyside were unemployed. Workers in these established industries also experienced speed-up. For example, the Bedaux System was introduced into the BAT tobacco factory in the inter-war years.

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76. D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol II, p. 263.

TABLE 6

PERCENTAGE UNEMPLOYED OF TOTAL INSURED* IN EACH INDUSTRY: WOMEN, MERSEYSIDE, 1923-1932

	Percentage of women unemployed				
	1923	1924	1927	1931	1932
General Service	10.3	11.4	7.5	24.1	18.6
Distribution	4.7	7.0	5.4	13.9	12.2
Transport and Commerce	5.4	6.9	3.4	11.0	11.2
Government Service	4.7	4.8	3.1	3.2	8.1
Clothing and Furniture	5.7	6.5	3.8	14.7	14.5
Food and Drink	10.6	12.0	7.4	19.2	15.4
Tobacco	9.0	11.7	7.3	29.1	14.7
Textiles (mainly sack repair)	21.7	21.2	14.8	38.9	18.8
Printing and Paper	10.5	10.6	6.4	17.3	16.8
Engineering and Motors	9.6	7.5	14.0	33.8	26.0
Miscellaneous Metals	16.4	11.0	8.4	25.4	22.4
Sawmilling and Rubber	10.4	9.5	5.6	18.2	13.4
Building and Contracting	3.0	3.0	3.0	11.3	4.0
Shipping and Dock	4.4	7.8	5.4	18.9	16.0
Miscellaneous Industries	8.7	10.3	4.3	14.8	8.2
Gas, Water and Electricity	3.4	4.0	16.5	11.3	18.7
All Industries	8.2	9.7	6.8	18.6	14.6

Source: M.L.M. Reid, 'Unemployment among Insured Women on Merseyside,' op.cit., p. 35.

* The dramatic fall between 1931 and 1932 shown in the proportion of registered unemployed in such industries as textiles, tobacco and food and drink is a direct result of changes which took place in the conditions under which women were eligible for unemployment benefit. In 1931 the effect of the Anomalies Act was to disallow benefit to unemployed married women and to seasonal workers (also mainly women) in the periods when they were unemployed. Such women subsequently fail to appear in the count of unemployed women workers. This is discussed fully in the following chapter.

The Bedaux System, named after its founder Charles Bedaux, was a work study scheme, the crucial effect of which was to increase the intensity and speed at which people worked.[77] A woman worker at BAT wrote to the Daily Worker in 1932 indicating the effect of the system on the pace of work at the factory.

> The Bedaux speed-up system is now in operation here. Previously six girls worker on each table, now the work is being turned out by two. Whenever a girl leaves the room to go to the toilet or to go to get a drink - because of the heat and exhaustion - the Bedaux expert times them and if the next day it is found that they have not performed the right amount of work, they are reprimanded or sacked. So much more can be produced under this system that the firm are using short-time working, giving us one week off in four. 78

In a number of industries a significant aspect of rationalisation and the introduction of new machinery which occurred in this period was the elimination of areas of skilled work previously open to women. This was a phenomenon occurring nationally in the inter-war years. Thus in Britain as a whole between 1911 and 1951, whilst the number of skilled male workers in the workforce increased by 11%, the number of skilled women workers declined by 34%.[79] The experience of women workers in the tobacco and clothing industries provide local examples of this development. Skilled dressmakers, for example, fell victim to the rise of factory produced, ready-made clothing.[80] And in the tobacco trade, skilled female cigar and cigarette makers were increasingly replaced by machinery. The pre-existing disadvantages faced by women workers in the local labour market, whereby they were concentrated in low paid, unskilled work, were thus consolidated in the period. The losses in skilled

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78. Daily Worker, 29th July 1932.
79. J. Lewis, Women in England 1870-1950, (Wheatsheaf Books, Sussex, 1984) p. 182.
80. See Evidence of Miss E.S. Fraser, Unemployment Insurance Commission (Gregory) Minutes of Evidence, Vol. 1, 1931, p. 250; M. Reid, op.cit., p. 69.

*77. See Craig R. Littler, Development of the Labour Process in Capitalist Societies (Heinemann, London 1982) pp. 105-115.

work sustained by women in the inter-war years were not regained in the post-war period.

As I have already indicated in Chapter 4, there were two significant areas of expansion within the local female labour market during the inter-war years: clerical work and work in the retail trade. But for a number of reasons the increasing demand for female labour in these occupations did not offset the job losses sustained in the more traditional areas of female employment. First, women made redundant from factory and warehouse jobs were not welcomed as employees in either offices or shops. Rather recruitment tended to be from lower middle class families or from working class families in which the father was in regular employment. Secondly, offices overwhelmingly sought young, single women as employees. Those married and older women made redundant at this time from sack and bag warehouses, and from the clothing and tobacco industries had virtually no chance of being re-absorbed into this work. And although some shops employed married women, they tended to be the wives of men in regular employment.[81] Thirdly, a significant proportion of the new jobs created in both offices and shops were part-time. This was particularly the case in the retail trade. As Miss Janet McCrindell stated, giving evidence to the Select Committee on Shop Assistants in 1931,

> The attention of the Select Committee may have been drawn in other areas to a practice which has developed considerably on Merseyside in recent years, not only in large stores, but even in shops engaging only a few assistants. In order to keep down their costs employers are making use on quite a large scale of part-time labour on their busy days .... A responsible

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81. Evidence of Miss Janet McCrindell, Select Committee on Shop Assistants, (HMSO, 1931), Vol. 1, Minutes of Evidence, 6th March 1931, p. 328.

> witness informed us that already there are probably about 1,500 shop assistants available for employment on this part-time basis in drapery and outfitting stores in Liverpool alone.

She added,

> .... a great many shops, owing to the trade depression - I am speaking of large shops, retail stores - are working on an absolutely skeleton staff; the bones absolutely sticking through. 82

The massive increase in the number of workers engaged in the retail and wholesale sector in the inter-war years on Merseyside - from about 55,000 workers in 1923 to 78,000 in 1929[83] - must be placed in this context. Full-time work continued to be the exception rather than the rule for local female workers.

For large numbers of local women, in particular married and older women and young, single women with only an elementary education,the overall effect of the changes brought by the conditions created by the economic crisis was to narrow the range of job opportunities open to them. This forced increasing numbers of these women to seek work in the personal service sector. Between 1921 and 1931 the number of women officially recorded as working in this sector rose from 31,000 to 38,000.[84] As the Pilgrim Trust found, in their survey of the unemployed in the city,

> ....the factory hand who becomes unemployed for some time after she is 18 years old stands little chance of being re-employed in a factory. She may get employed as a cafe hand, a waitress or a seasonal worker in a jam factory, but for the vast majority of these girls there is no skilled or semi-skilled job open to them. Similarly, the shop assistant, typist, tailoress and other semi-professional woman has no industry to which she can turn for re-employment if she loses and cannot recover a job in her own trade. This is the

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82. Ibid., 328 and 335.
83. Ibid., p. 329.
84. Census, Occupation Tables

> explanation for the size of the pool entitled 'domestic work' in the occupational analysis. 85

The impact of this growing transference of women into waged domestic work was to worsen the working conditions in this sector also. Already extremely low paid, the surplus of workers created in the industry depressed wages further and prevented many older and less fit women, once unemployed, from ever finding work again in their lifetime. They were faced instead with a future defined by poverty, poor health and little hope.[86] And increasing numbers of women were forced to find work on the fringes of the domestic service industry, taking in washing and ironing in order to make ends meet and, in some households, to provide the only income in a family of unemployed workers. For example, one man remembers how his mother would walk from Edge Hill to Mossley Hill at the beginning of the week, collect some washing from a large house there, pawn it later in the day, take it out of pawn on Thursday, wash it on Friday and walk back to Mossley Hill on Saturday morning.[87] Such ingenuity had little reward in a precarious industry. Similarly, street selling became an increasingly common means by which married women sought to earn a few shillings. As Bob Edwards recalls,

> My mother had a hand cart and she used to sell toffee apples, potted herrings .... You see, we had quite a family, my father was out of work then - it was the thirties and things were pretty bad - so my mother took in washing as well as doing the handcart business.... My old girl's toffee apples were quite something. She'd sell 300 of a Saturday afternoon, halfpenny a'piece. The only problem was that she'd get awful sore hands getting the sticks ready. We used to make them out of margarine boxes. My mother would always insist on that. She'd say that margarine boxes were always nice and smooth and waxy and with them the kids didn't get splinters in their mouths. She'd pot her own herrings as well. She'd

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85. Pilgrim Trust, Men Without Work (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1938), p. 249.
86. Ibid., pp. 250-1.
87. Interview with John McDermott, April 1980; Seaman, later car worker, born Liverpool 1921.

> boil up the herrings and then put them in big jars with various pickling things. Our lobby was always full with toffee apples and jars of herrings. 88

There was also a growing tendency, after 1918, to employ female domestic workers on a seasonal basis. Thus the Liverpool Employment Exchanges noted that 26,401 such vacancies were filled by them in 1929, an increase of 2,900 on the previous year. Placing such workers in the 'off season' was virtually impossible.[89]

This tendency to an increasing casualisation of the female workforce in the inter-war years qualifies any consideration and comparison of the male and female unemployment rates. In 1932, the unemployment rate amongst insured men on Merseyside was 32%. In contrast, the official rate amongst women was 14.6%, that is around 15,000 women. (See Table 6) In fact, however, women had become the hidden unemployed of the inter-war decades. First, many more women may have sought work had not the labour market for female workers been so restricted. Secondly, waged domestic work and hawking were not covered by the Unemployment Insurance Scheme. This meant that if a woman lost her job or was only employed seasonally she had no claim to unemployment benefit.[90] Indeed, in 1932 only one half of working women on Merseyside were occupied in insurable employment. Almost invisible as workers, when unemployed they simply disappeared from public record or concern. Women had, in effect, become the hidden unemployed of the 1920s and 1930s.

It is impossible to assess precisely how many women, forced into casual domestic work or hawking in this period, subsequently became

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88. Interview with Bob Edwards, April 1978, Born Liverpool 1924.
89. Evidence of Miss Fraser, op.cit., pp. 248-250.
90. For a discussion on this issue see Chapter 6.

unemployed and lost their source of income. Equally, the exact dimensions of the shift of women workers into domestic work remains elusive. But even if measured by the official figures, clearly the circumstances created by mass unemployment and economic crisis intensified the concentration of women workers in the very poorest paid sectors of the local economy. The boundaries of the sexual division of labour were effectively upheld and consolidated.

The tendency for increasing numbers of local women to seek work as domestic workers was forced upon them by the under-development of the local economy. But it was a tendency further encouraged by the state's response to female unemployment in the inter-war years. In the following chapter I discuss the way in which unemployment legislation became part of the very process through which women were confined to low paid, unskilled work, especially in the personal service sector.

CHAPTER SIX

THE INTER-WAR YEARS: THE STATE AND WOMEN WORKERS

On 12th August, 1927, 25 year old Alexander Phillips of Slater Street appeared in court charged with throwing a brick through the window of Woolworths in Church Street. Alexander Phillips was married with a small child. He and his family lived on 22 shillings a week, the relief payment from the Board of Guardians. The money, he claimed, 'would only buy a cigar for Lord Birkenhead'. The magistrate fined him £20, commenting, 'God helps those who help themselves. Men who want to work and not to spout can often get work.'[1]

A year later 27 year old Sarah Fleet was charged with abandoning her 11-month old twins in a busy park. 'I did it in desperation', she said, 'because every door was closed against me and the Guardians would not take the babies. All they could offer was the workhouse. I have had three opportunities of getting work but lost them all on account of the babies. I am sorry I left them there.'[2]

In that same twelve months six Liverpool men were reported to have killed themselves while out of work and depressed. Men like Andrew Forrest, a 61 year old marine fireman from Patterson Street. One evening he returned home from another day-long search for work. In the kitchen he placed an overcoat over his head, threaded a tube from the gas pendant into the overcoat sleeves and sat in the chair with the gas turned on. The tragedy was repeated over and over as the 1930s progressed. Dusty files in the coroner's

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1. Liverpool Daily Post, 12th August 1927.
2. Liverpool Daily Post, 20th August 1928.

office remain the only testimony to the ultimate victims of mass unemployment.

The sense of hopelessness felt by some people in this period, which drove them to desperate individual solutions to their plight was, in part, a consequence of the state's response to them. The unemployed were rarely treated sympathetically by the administrators of unemployment benefit and poor law relief. And the amount of benefit and relief paid to the unemployed condemned thousands of people to a miserable existence lived out on the margins of poverty. Indeed, in large part, the social policy instigated in this period represented a minimal response to the massive social problems created by mass unemployment. One important aspect of these policies was the unequal treatment which they offered to men and women claiments. Indeed, in their implementation these social policies tended to systematically intensify pre-existing divisions within the working class.

In this chapter my principal concern is with the effects of these policies on women's lives and on the structure of the sexual division of labour in the inter-war years. Specifically, I aim to demonstrate that the rules and regulations contained within the many Unemployment Acts passed in the 1920s and 1930s were infused with ideologies of gender division in a way which was to have material effects on the lives of women workers. And these laws, harsh enough in themselves, and tending to disadvantage women, were made far worse in their administration by local Employment Exchanges, Boards of Guardians and Public Assistance Committees.

The presentation of this legislation in Parliament opened up public

debates which both fed on and reinforced reactionary ideas concerning the appropriate setting for men and women within the economy. The genuineness of women's unemployment was scrutinised and doubted by many adjudicators of unemployment within the national and local state. And as unemployed women were put 'under the microscope' and became a central focus of government campaigns to rid the unemployment registers of 'non-genuine workers', so the debate widened, calling into question the aptness of the employment of women in a number of industries. Similarly, poor law relief was administered locally in a way which was particularly disadvantageous to women's interests as workers and as mothers.

It is remarkable that, in large part, the literature dealing with the inter-war years and the social policy passed at the time has paid scant regard to the discriminatory content of unemployment legislation. Alan Deacon's work on inter-war social policy stands virtually alone in highlighting the differential impact of this legislation on men and women.[3] But there are no studies which place women at the centre of their analysis. Pat Thane's research concerning women and the Poor Law deals largely with the period before World War One.[4]

This gap in the literature is a crucial omission in our understanding of the inter-war years, since discrimination against unemployed women is a central thread running through much of the legislation

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3. Alan Deacon, In Search of the Scrounger; Occasional Papers in Social Administration, No. 60, 1976; Alan Deacon, 'Concession and Coercion: The Politics of Unemployment Insurance in the Twenties' in Asa Briggs and J Saville eds., Essays in Labour History 1918-1939 (Croom Helm, London 1977)

4. Pat Thane, 'Women and the Poor Law in Victorian and Edwardian England', History Workshop, 6, Autumn 1978.

and discussion on unemployment at the time. The omission is even more startling when it becomes clear that the strategies of successive governments in the period with regard to unemployed women involved a crude presentation of the view that the proper place for women workers was in domestic work, whether waged or unwaged. Governments were able to exploit the widespread support for this ideology, passing discriminatory Unemployment Acts with little opposition. In the long term the ability to achieve consensus on the justice of this legislation lent further support to the argument that a division of labour which denied women an equal place with men in the labour force was just and proper. Inter-war unemployment legislation became part of the very process through which women were confined to low paid, unskilled work. In particular, it encouraged the expansion of female employment in the personal service sector and weakened women's links with other areas of the economy.

Compulsory unemployment insurance administered by the state was introduced in 1911. At first it covered only male workers in the building and engineering industries. Gradually its scope was extended. The passing of the 1920 Unemployment Insurance Act brought 12 million workers into the scheme and by that time the only major exclusions were agricultural labourers and domestic servants. (It was argued that insurance was unnecessary for these groups of workers since unemployment within their industries was normally low.) Unemployment insurance was conceived of as exactly that - a financial security against unemployment. Workers paid money into an insurance fund whilst at work and should they then become unemployed they were entitled to an income based on their contributions to the fund. For each insured worker his or her employer and the government

also made a financial contribution to the fund. Once a person's entitlement to benefit was exhausted under the terms of the scheme, as laid down by law, the unemployed could then apply for poor relief. In the 1920s this was administered by local Boards of Guardians. After 1930 the powers and duties of Boards of Guardians were transferred to the County and County Boroughs, each of which formed a Public Assistance Committee.

During the 1920s and 1930s almost every year that passed saw some change to the unemployment and poor law legislation; changes which appear to be frantic and haphazard responses to rising unemployment. In fact, however, a number of themes and ideas were embedded within this legislation, giving shape to it and its implementation, and revealing a consistent ideology with regard to the unemployed. First, was the idea that the cost borne by the state for maintaining the unemployed should be kept to a minimum. Ideas of cost cutting, economies and balanced budgets fitted with the orthodox financial policies pursued by most governments over this period. And, as unemployment increased, the pressure to limit public expenditure on the unemployed intensified. Secondly, and allied with this, was the view that the individual should have freedom from state control; that the individual was 'responsible' for his or her own life. People who were unable to maintain themselves and their dependents had failed in their responsibilities and should be penalised for that failure.

In this respect the unemployment laws passed at this time were informed by some of the principles on which the poor law was based. In particular, unemployment legislation upheld the principle that

the poor fell into two categories - the deserving and the undeserving. Yes, people could be unemployed through no fault of their own, but for some unemployment was avoidable. These people were the 'undeserving' and they must be taught the norms of hard work and family responsibility. Any money given or administered by the state to maintain the unemployed was, therefore, not a right but a privilege granted on proof of a genuine desire to work. For the destitute, dependent on poor relief, the workhouse had been the ultimate 'test' of the genuine worker, but as the workhouse was gradually phased out and increasing numbers of workers were covered by the provisions of the state-run unemployment insurance scheme, so other 'tests' were introduced, based on the idea that a distinction could and should be drawn between the 'genuine worker' and the malingerer. Further, as the scale of unemployment increased and the cost to the state of maintaining the unemployed rose, so such ideas gathered momentum. More and more people found themselves in the 'undeserving' category. For them benefit was paid only after the most rigorous and detailed investigation of their personal circumstances and intentions. The means test and the other restrictive regulations attached to the payment of unemployment benefit were, in this sense, the workhouse test by another name.

The third theme informing the development of this legislation, based on the view that a distinction must be drawn between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' cases, was that poor relief should be of less monetary value than unemployment benefit. By the same token, it was considered essential to ensure a gap between the lowest wage levels and poor relief. This argument was clearly put by the West Derby Union, the Poor Law authority for Liverpool in the 1920s,

in a report in 1923 which followed a suggestion that the relief scales be reduced. The Central Relief Committee statedthat,

> ... they realise that the rate of wages of certain workers approximates very nearly to the scale of relief and that to prevent inducement to transfer from wages to relief the greatest discrimination is essential.... That the most careful revision of all cases be persisted in, with a view to the elimination of individuals who clearly come within the category of the undeserving for out-relief, and their transfer to institutional or other appropriate treatment. 5

Thus an assumption was invariably made that the payment of higher benefits might encourage malingering. Of secondary importance was the consideration of providing an income sufficient to buy the diet and housing necessary to maintain good health. This principle was upheld despite a growing body of evidence that ill-health and malnutrition amongst the unemployed were a direct result of low income.[6] It was within the context of these general guiding formulae, which shaped the official stance towards the unemployed, that unemployed women were increasingly relegated to the category of the undeserving and ultimately came to be regarded as 'a special case' within the insurance scheme.

Under the 1920 Unemployment Insurance Act the benefit received while unemployed was directly related to a person's contributions whilst at work, in a ratio of one week's benefit to six week's contributions - 'the one in six rule'. Also, claimants could not draw benefit for more than 26 weeks in any one year. However, rising unemployment from the end of the First World War onwards placed increasing strains on the funds and administration of the scheme. By 1921, nationally, the unemployment rate had reached 15% and was nearer 30% in some occupational groups, such as ship

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5. West Derby Union, Minutes, 22nd August 1923.
6. C. Webster, 'Healthy or Hungry Thirties?' History Workshop Journal, Spring 1982.

building and repair.[7] Unemployment and underemployment were becoming concentrated in particular industries and geographical areas. As the number of long-term unemployed rose so more and more people were exhausting their right to benefit under the conditions of the scheme. Once this benefit was exhausted the unemployed then became the responsibility of the locally appointed Boards of Guardians (BOG) from whom they could receive poor relief. At this time relief payments for the unemployed and their families normally involved a combination of a small amount of cash and some food tokens, which could then be exchanged at specified shops. The nature and amount of relief which was given varied according to the political complexion of the Board and the personal circumstances of the claimant. But as relief was paid out of the local rates most BOGs aimed to keep payments to an absolute minimum. The Guardian's means test was notoriously rigorous and degrading. Moreover, to be forced to go to 'the parish' carried with it a terrible stigma in all communities.[8] And despite such humiliation, the relief given to many families was insufficient to prevent many families falling into poverty.[9]

The rapid increase in the number of long-term unemployed from 1920 onwards had not been predicted by the Government. Alarm was expressed at the increasing number of demonstrations involving the unemployed at BOG offices and the Government was concerned to prevent such demonstrations escalating into more organised and violent action. They were particularly keen to contain the anger of ex-soldiers, many of whom had been unemployed since returning from the war and

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7. B.B. Gilbert, British Social Policy 1914-39,(B.T. Batsford, London, 1970) p. 86.
8. See Alan Deacon & Jonathan Bradshaw, Reserved for the Poor: The Means Test in British Social Policy (Basil Blackwell & Martin Robertson, Oxford 1983) pp. 5-6.
9. See D. Caradog Jones, eds., Social Survey of Merseyside (University Press of Liverpool, Liverpool 1934) Chapter 8, Volume 1.)

were now dependent on the meagre rations of the Guardians. Special Branch officers had been stationed in certain parts of the country in order to monitor the mood of the unemployed. Their reports increased anxiety at the Home Office. The following was the despatch from Liverpool in 1920.

> The feeling of the unemployed is becoming very bitter. On January 21st a queue of men at Liverpool was a quarter of a mile long and at the women's exchanges thousands of women waited in a side street for their insurance money. Indignities at what are termed 'inhuman treatment' is intense. 10

It was this set of circumstances which prompted a major change in the insurance scheme; a change which, in many ways, set the pattern for the system of unemployment benefit and social security today. First, a new payment was introduced into the scheme called 'uncovenanted benefit' (later called extended benefit). This benefit was payable over and above a person's entitlement under the one in six rule. Second, a payment for dependents was introduced into the scheme. These concessions, particularly that allowing for benefit to be paid over a longer period were, however, costly and in the view of many increased the possibility of malingering. Aiming to avoid this, uncovenanted benefit was made discretionary in much the same way as parish relief. The long-term unemployed now had to appear before a local Employment Committee and face rigorous interviews concerning their personal circumstances. Those that failed this test then became the responsibility of the Guardians. This was the infamous means test introduced into the Insurance Scheme for the first time. Items of saleable personal property and the income of relatives would be taken into account in determining the level of benefit paid. The income and expenditure of the long-term unemployed were to be scrupulously examined in a way which was demeaning and dispiriting. Walter Brierley, writing from his

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10. B.B. Gilbert, op. cit., p. 77.

own experience, captured this in his novel Means Test Man.

> Never looked you once in the face, the snob. Too superior. When he can come and demand to look at your bank account and ask you when you were married, how much you pay out and how much you have coming in, he thinks he can lord it. The ill-mannered pig. Still, we're nothing. Who would waste manners and glances on us? And yet we're flesh and blood like everybody else. We should work if they'd let us.... All the desperate striving, all the hopeless endeavour to manage on the dole money and keep respectable seemed to sweep up from the years gone by to this moment.... all this insulting of her soul, this prying, this callous prying. 11

But the means test, pernicious enough in itself and widely resented, was backed up by another new regulation. This laid down that those people claiming uncovenanted benefit were required to prove that they were 'genuinely seeking work'. [12] It was in its administration that this regulation was to have an extremely disadvantageous effect on the unemployed. Behind it lay the idea that many of the unemployed were 'scroungers' or non-genuine workers, illegally claiming benefit and slipping through the net of other tests. Under this regulation the claimant was interviewed about his or her efforts to find work. People were then questioned as to where the factory was located, which bus or tram they had travelled by and the results of their enquiries. Neighbours, friends and relatives of the claimant were interviewed about how the claimant spent his or her day and Investigating Officers of the Local Employment Committee would monitor people's daily movements.

The crucial change brought about by the 'genuinely seeking work' clause was that whereas previously responsibility lay with the

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11. Walter Brierley, Means Test Man, (Spokesman, Nottingham, 1983/ first published 1935) pp. 264-265.

12. Clause 3B, Unemployment Insurance Act, 1921.

Employment Exchange to prove that suitable work was available in a particular area but that the claimant had refused this work or failed to attempt to get it, now responsibility lay entirely with the claimant. In other words, local Employment Committees could recommend a refusal of benefit without having to show a person could have found a job had he or she genuinely sought one.[13] Many people now found their search for work a pointless and exhausting experience as they pursued, what one writer described as, the 'baffling phantom of work'. [14]

The short-lived 1924 Labour Government introduced yet another Unemployment Insurance Act. The main provisions of this Act were, on the one hand, the repeal of the means test attached to extended benefit, but, on the other hand, a more comprehensive application of the 'genuinely seeking work' clause. Under this Act all claimants were required to satisfy the terms of this regulation. In effect, it was to demonstrate a similarity of thinking of both Conservative and Labour governments in respect of the unemployed; a shared belief that sections of the unemployed were illegally claiming benefit. As the Labour MP, Margaret Bonfield commented: 'the person in receipt of benefit after 26 weeks has to come under the microscope.'[15] When the Conservatives returned to power in November 1924 this strategy was further consolidated. Every effort would be made to ensure that only those considered 'deserving' cases were covered by the provisions of the Unemployment Insurance Scheme.

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13. For a full account of the genuinely seeking work clause and its implications see Alan Deacon, 'Concession and Coercion' op. cit., and In Search of the Scrounger, op. cit.
14. Max Cohen, I was one of the Unemployed, (Gollancz, London 1945)
15. House of Commons, Official Report (Hansard) Vol 173, Col 2151, 20th May 1924.

The effect of the application of these punitive regulations was to transfer responsibility for the long-term unemployed away from the Insurance Scheme and onto the Guardians. In Liverpool, in the first two months of 1927 alone, nearly 5,500 people were disallowed benefit. Of these two-thirds were struck off either under the 'genuinely seeking work' clause or because it was considered that they had done insufficient work in the previous two years.[16] And despite the fact that Employment Committees were local bodies, theoretically able to exercise leniency in their interpretation of the law, this discretion was increasingly undermined. The Ministry of Labour began to monitor these committees, both with regard to their decisions and their personnel. The Ministry could, and sometimes did, step in to ensure that local committees complied with the spirit of the law as conceived in Parliament.[17]

The next major change to the Unemployment Insurance Scheme came with the introduction of the 1927 Unemployment Insurance Act. This new Act followed closely the recommendations of a Departmental Committee appointed in 1925 and chaired by Lord Blanesburgh. The crucial problem facing the Government was that the scheme, originally conceived of as self-financing, had become a permanent drain on the Exchequer as a result of rising unemployment. But the aim of reducing the shortfall of money in the Insurance Fund had to be balanced against the dissatisfaction amongst the unemployed over the conditions for claiming extended benefit. There was also

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16. Answer to J Gibbins, MP in House of Commons,(reported in the Liverpool Daily Post, 5th April 1927)

17. A. Deacon, 'Concession and Coercion', op. cit., pp. 18-19.

pressure on the Government from the locally-run Boards of Guardians. Many Boards were urging the Government to take centralised responsibility for the long-term unemployed and thus end the crippling effect on the local rates of mounting unemployment. The Blanesburgh Committee report recommended an end to the distinction between standard and extended benefit. They were to be merged into a single benefit of unlimited duration, payable on condition that at least thirty contributions had been paid in the previous two years, or fifteen in any one year. The new Act, then, abolished the one in six rule, but the thirty contributions regulation meant that a claimant had to have had at least 7½ months employment in the previous two years to qualify - a condition which many of the unemployed could not satisfy. For many even the fifteen contributions regulation was difficult to satisfy. In recognition of this the Government was forced to introduce a new benefit called 'transitional benefit', payable to those who could show either that they had made eight contributions into the insurance scheme in the previous two years or thirty contributions at any time. Although the introduction of transitional benefit did not square with the principle of balancing incomings and outgoings in the Insurance Fund, the Committee had calculated, wrongly it turned out, that the unemployment rate would settle down to around 6%. On this basis they argued that the new benefit would only be necessary for a year. In fact, each year the Government were forced to continue to pay transitional benefit to thousands of people, and by 1930 about 10% of the unemployed were receiving it.[18]

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18. B.B. Gilbert, op. cit., p. 95.

But perhaps the most significant aspect of the 1927 Act was the way in which it penalised both young and women claimants. Before 1927, 19 to 21 year old men and women were paid the adult rate of benefit. Under the new Act the rate of benefit for men over 21 years old was reduced from 18 shillings to 17 shillings a week and the rate for adult women remained at 15 shillings. However, the Blanesburgh report recommended that the benefit for 18 to 21 year old men be cut to 10 shillings and that for 18 to 21 year old women to a mere 8 shillings a week. In fact, when the Act became law, this proposal was diluted to some extent and a sliding scale put into operation whereby, for example, 19 year old men and women received 12 shillings and 10 shillings respectively. Nevertheless, this was a sudden and drastic reduction in the income of the young unemployed. It marks the beginning of a strategy, pursued by successive governments over the period, of differentiation in the treatment of specific sections of the unemployed.

An extreme view, but one not without support in Parliament, regarded state maintenance of young unemployed workers as morally wrong. As the Honourable E.C. Harmsworth argued,

> I think it is now a matter of comment throughout the country that this juvenile unemployment is one of the most disgraceful things.... the less the younger element can be brought up to believe that they may be able to live either on unemployment pay or charity of some kind the better it will be for the moral feeling of this country. 19

But whilst such an argument may have represented a minority view, the crucial effect of a cut in the income of the young unemployed was to deny them the opportunity to live independently of parental financial support. They were to be classed as children and offered

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19. House of Commons, Official Report (Hansard) Vol 210, 415, 10th November 1927.

an income too low to support themselves in terms of housing, clothing and food. Some MPs argued that the new rates would have a particularly detrimental impact on young women, arguing that many might be forced into prostitution in order to survive. There is no evidence available to assess whether or not this occurred. But there was another view, clearly stated by the Minister of Labour, and a theme which informed all the previous and subsequent debates which took place around unemployment, which distinguished the response to female unemployment from that to male unemployment. This was that there existed an unmet demand for domestic servants and a supply of female labour theoretically available for this work.

Typically, this view was expressed in the terms used by Colonel Newman in the House of Commons in 1921. He argued,

> There is not a single member on these benches who has not had letters from constituents as to the scandal of women wanting domestic servants who cannot get them. All these unemployed women are drawing unemployment pay and the householders, already overburdened, have been made to pay their share. 20

Thus, the question was frequently put, 'Why should the Insurance Scheme support young women when they could take up work as domestic servants?' The aim of successive governments, then, was to solve this apparently simple equation of supply and demand by increasing the availability of domestic service training and simultaneously limiting the ability of young women to maintain an independent existence on state benefit. The latter was achieved in two ways. First, by disallowing benefit to women considered suitable for domestic work but unwilling to take up such work and secondly, by setting women's benefit levels so low as to tempt them into domestic

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20. House of Commons, Official Report (Hansard) Vol 131, 2099, 3rd March 1921.

work. In fact, there was no clear cut evidence of a straightforward excess of demand for domestic servants over supply; circumstances varied from area to area. In the long term the policy did result in the transfer of young women into domestic service from other trades. But the effect of this was to push out older women, creating unemployment amongst 40 to 50 year old domestic servants.[21]

The strategy of coercing women into domestic service was consistently resisted by many women who believed their skills lay elsewhere. As Ellen Wilkinson MP argued, on behalf of such women, in the House of Commons debate concerning the proposals within the 1927 Act,

> I know there were many supporters of the Right Honourable Gentleman (the Minister of Labour) who imagine the whole problem of the employment of women is solved by saying, 'Let them go into domestic service' ... Say the girl is a milliner and is out of work a couple of months.... With these girls it is not a question of taking up an entirely new career in domestic service.... They wish to remain in their trade and their trade needs them.... I say, quite frankly, that we have no right to tell girls in that position, any more than to tell men, that they must change occupation.... Take the case of a girl living in lodgings.... Who is going to keep a young woman of 18 to 21 years of age for eight shillings a week? .... I cannot too strongly stress the tragedy this is going to mean to girls in our great cities.22

What could not be ignored, however, was the fact that three Labour MPs had signed the Blanesburgh report and conceded to its recommendations. Margaret Bondfield, later to become a Minister of Labour herself, was one of them. Subsequently she became known as 'Eight Bob a Week Maggie'. In attempting to justify her support for the cuts in the benefit paid to young people she argued they were appropriate when combined with the provision of facilities for training.

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21. Evidence of Dr Marion Phillips and Miss Dorothy Elliott to Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance, Minutes of Evidence, 30th April 1931, p. 931)
22. Hansard, op. cit., Vol 210, 279, 9th November 1927.

I will return in more detail later in this chapter to the question of youth training. However, it is important to underline here the severe limitations in the conception of training at this time as a response to youth unemployment. Training centres were not conceived of as genuine places of learning or skill development. Rather they were to be centres in which young men were kept physically occupied and young women were taught basic domestic routines and practices. The deficiency in the proposals for youth training were ingenuously revealed by Margaret Bondfield, who said,

> You cannot get these people into industry unless you set up a comprehensive nation-wide system of training. You may call it advanced education. You may call it what you like. I do not care for a moment what you teach inside the 'training centres'. You can teach them algebra, geography, dancing or singing. What you have to do is bring them into a position where they will have occupation for the mind and proper physical exercise and care for the body. I know of no training scheme that I have approved that does not make part of the scheme a properly cooked mid-day meal. In connection with the women, it is part of their training. When they cook a dinner they eat it. 23

The essence of the response to women's unemployment was starkly revealed. Women were to be 'trained' in efficient housekeeping and domestic service.

The 1927 Act was also clearly designed to encourage a more strident use of the 'genuinely seeking work' regulation. Concern had been expressed that the terms of the clause were too vague. How could the genuine claimant, and thereby the genuine worker, be distinguished from the scrounger under the terms of this regulation? According to the Blanesburgh Committee, 'In considering whether a person is genuinely seeking work the most important fact to be ascertained is the state of the applicant's mind.' Such a project was stated

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23. Hansard, op.cit., Vol 210, 424, 10th November 1927.

to be a straightforward matter! The Committee argued that the ruling of the Umpire in a recent appeal could be used to clarify the terms of the regulation and set down its statutory principles. This stated,

> An applicant who is genuinely seeking work should generally be able to show that besides registering for work at an employment exchange, she is making personal efforts on her own behalf to find work and is not content to merely wait until it is thrust on her. Moreover, she should be able to satisfy a Court of Referees that she is not merely looking for a particular kind of work which is congenial to her or to which she has been accustomed, but that she is also trying to get other kinds of suitable employment if there are any for which she is qualified. 24

A footnote added: 'To apply equally to both sexes.' But this obscured the reality of the way in which the regulation was interpreted. Women, and particularly married women, were being singled out for investigation.[25]

As early as 1923 Mr Tatham of the Printing and Paper Workers Union in Liverpool had moved the following resolution at the Liverpool Trades Council and Labour Party meeting:

> That the Liverpool Trades Council and Labour Party enters a strong protest against the system prevailing at the Employment Exchange whereby women workers, who have served an apprenticeship

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24. Report of the Unemployment Committee (Blanesburgh) 1927, Vol 1, Appendix 3.

25. It is interesting to note that whilst official documents invariably used the pronoun 'he' in texts referring to men and women, in this case 'she' was used. It is significant that a female case was used to define the law in this instance. It suggests that officers in local employment exchanges were being presented with the terms of the regulation using the pronoun 'she' in order to urge a more rigorous investigation of women claimants.

> to a trade, are suspended from unemployment benefit owing to refusing to work as a domestic servant. 26

Not only was domestic service an uninsured occupation, thus eliminating the possibility of future claims, it was also a job despised by many women. But from the early 1920s onwards it was considered that unemployed women should be directed to such work whatever their previous trade. In effect women were being systematically harassed into domestic service under threat of disallowance of benefit. Many women who refused this work were not considered to be genuinely seeking work and their benefit was disallowed on this basis. Moreover, under the terms of the genuinely seeking work clause mothers were to be treated in a particularly callous way. They faced tremendous difficulties in persuading employment exchanges that their desire for work was genuine. Typical is the case of a woman, living in the North West, who appealed to the Umpire against the decision to disallow her benefit. The Umpire ruled in the following way:

> The applicant fails to show that on 24th April and on the 15th May she was unable to find suitable employment. On each of these dates she was offered employment, in one case four miles and in the other two miles from her home. She refused the offers because she has a child 10 or 11 months old. The child, I am advised, was old enough to be bottle fed, and the applicant should have made arrangements for its care whilst she was at work. 27

Regarded as the sole guardians of their children's welfare, it was made clear that unless mothers could furnish conclusive proof that their childcare arrangements were without difficulty they were to be excluded from the registers of the unemployed. In Liverpool,

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26. Liverpool Trades Council and Labour Party, Minutes, 15th August 1923.

27. Evidence of Miss E.S. Fraser, Deputy Divisional Controller, North West Division Ministry of Labour in evidence to the Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance (Gregory), 1931, Minutes of Evidence, 16th January 1931, p. 253, para. 64.

where many families lived in deep poverty, the extra cost of bottle feeding were beyond reach. Only employment close to home could be undertaken giving women the opportunity to return home to breast feed during breaks. There is no doubt that many women did precisely this, despite the difficulties it caused them. Others unable to overcome these problems were considered beyond the scope of insurance scheme whatever their previous contributions to the fund.

Opposition to the 'genuinely seeking work' test had been initiated by Clydeside workers in 1925. But on the whole the labour movement was sluggish on the issue. It was not until 1929, when the National Unemployed Workers Movement made the repeal of the test the central slogan of a national hunger march, that publicity concerning the test was made more widespread. That women were particularly affected by its operation must partly explain this quiescence. After all, many male trade unionists viewed women as unnecessary competitors in a diminishing labour market. [28] And because there was no automatic recognition of women as genuine wage earners, state harassment of women into domestic service was often not seen as an infringement of rights. On the contrary, it was gaining support within the labour movement. For many it appeared to solve the problem of women's unemployment whilst simultaneously leaving other available jobs open for the 'real' workers - men.

The 1927 Unemployment Insurance Act set the pattern for the treatment of the unemployed in the 1930s. All the regulations aimed at scrutinising the unemployed were to be tightened up and rigorously applied. The unemployed were indeed 'under the microscope'.

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28. See S. Lewenhak, Women and Trade Unions, Ernest Benn, London, 1977, Chapter 12.

Future legislation was to be a variation on a tried and tested theme. More and more of the unemployed were viewed by a powerful layer of bourgeois opinion and by MPs of both parties as undeserving scroungers. And certain identifiable sections of the unemployed were considered less deserving than others and more likely to abuse the state benefit scheme. Women and young people in particular were singled out as parasites, bringing the insurance scheme into disrepute; an affront to the moral fabric of hard-working Britain. In effect, the very groups of workers experiencing the greatest difficulty in finding new jobs were being made the scapegoats of the bankrupt insurance fund.

By the beginning of the 1930s mass unemployment had become a firmly entrenched feature of the British economy. But the Unemployment Insurance Scheme, originally welcomed by working class organisations as a just and dignified solution to the problem of unemployment, had become tainted with some of the more degrading aspects of poor law relief. The grievances of the unemployed ranged from the low level of benefit to the treatment of claimants at the Labour Exchanges. The following letter, written by a Liverpool woman in 1930, is an indication of the depth of feeling over what were seen as the indignities experienced by the unemployed.

> I want to give you some idea of the treatment of unemployed women in Liverpool. At the Labour Exchange women are not permitted to take their babies. Notices are posted on the walls to this effect:- 'Babies are not permitted upstairs', 'Babies are not allowed in here', 'Silence' and so on. Just lately a few chairs have been brought in to allow the women and girls to rest while they wait, but only twenty, a mere fleabite for the thousands that sign on.... The treatment at the Public Assistance Committee is even worse. The women are simply seething with anger over these conditions and some

TABLE B

INSURED PERSONS UNEMPLOYED IN GREAT BRITAIN

	21 October 1929				22 September 1930			
	Males		Females		Males		Females	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
A.								
Cotton	22,252	11.1	45,374	12.8	80,037	39.9	166,393	47.0
Woollen & Worsted	14,040	14.7	23,146	16.3	22,557	23.6	40,562	28.5
Other Textiles	26,075	14.1	24,571	9.6	52,583	28.5	68,898	27.0
Pottery	3,913	11.3	4,202	10.8	7,737	22.3	11,649	29.9
Clothing	19,675	10.3	25,727	7.1	29,832	15.6	46,945	12.9
Distributive	73,102	7.4	30,242	4.6	108,204	10.9	51,631	7.9
Hotels, etc.	12,798	10.7	24,530	10.2	15,884	13.3	29,297	13.9
Food, drink & tobacco	24,449	7.4	13,951	6.5	27,577	9.6	28,392	13.3
Metal trades	29,438	8.3	11,294	6.6	59,963	16.9	31,788	18.5
Engineering, Motor Vehicles etc.	84,360	9.4	4,279	4.6	172,413	19.2	10,443	11.3
Printing & paper	10,223	4.4	6,365	4.3	17,145	7.4	12,892	8.7
Laundries, dyeing & dry cleaning	1,416	5.2	4,321	4.1	2,144	7.8	8,437	8.0
B.								
Coal Mining	165,254	15.5	832	15.0	245,893	23.0	1,588	28.7
Iron & steel	37,818	19.3	274	6.1	74,955	38.2	573	12.8
Shipbuilding etc.	47,687	25.1	153	5.4	72,958	38.5	371	13.0
Building, Public Works Conts.	138,880	14.5	215	2.1	171,936	17.9	320	3.1
All Industries	978,836	11.4	237,513	7.3	1,565,638	18.2	551,208	17.0

Source: Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance (Gregory) Minutes of Evidence, 31st December, 1930, Appendix 1, 'Married Women Claimants', p. 81.

> say if the authorities do not do something soon they will start looting the shops to make them. 29

Organised opposition to the conditions under which unemployment benefit was claimed was gaining momentum by the late 1920s. In particular, the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM), a body established by the Communist Party but with wide support amongst the unemployed, was effectively articulating many of these grievances.[30] Demonstrations and marches organised by the NUWM were placing the issues of unemployment at the centre stage of British politics. This put increasing pressure on Boards of Guardians, Employment Committees and the Government to address the discontent and resentment amongst the unemployed. There was particular disquiet about the terms of the 'genuinely seeking work' clause which continued to force claimants to search for non-existent work. Indeed, the campaign to repeal the genuinely seeking work clause became a major focus of struggle amongst the unemployed and within sections of the labour movement. It was in an attempt to head off this growing anger that the Labour Government, with Margaret Bondfield now as Minister of Labour, set up yet another parliamentary committee, this time chaired by Sir Harold Morris, to review the unemployment legislation. The failure of the committee to reach overall agreement, with three separate reports being issued, heightened the level of debate in Parliament over the terms under which the 'genuinely seeking work' test would be replaced. When it was finally repealed in March 1930, it was replaced with a regulation which shifted responsibility for proving availability for work away from the claimant on to

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29. Daily Worker, 21st May, 1930.

30. See Wal Hannington, Unemployed Struggles 1919-36, (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1936)

the Labour Exchange. Now the Exchange had to notify a claimant of a job vacancy and if the job was refused 'without good cause' benefit was disallowed.[31]

It is important to stress, however, that the unemployed remained subject to rigorous and painstaking investigations with regard to their availability for work. It was a remote possibility that a non-genuine claimant would pass through the net. Nevertheless, the change in the law was coincident with a sharp increase in the number of people successfully claiming transitional benefit. Increased success was most marked among married women claimants and as evidence of this came to light, it fuelled the already popular notion that women were abusing the scheme. The genuineness of women's desire to return to work once unemployed became a matter of full public debate through the pages of the press and in Parliament. For the Labour government of the time there was a belief 'that unemployment benefit is being paid in many cases which are alleged to be outside the proper scope of the unemployment insurance scheme, though within the letter of the present scheme.'[32] As was the case in many previous discussions concerning benefits paid to the unemployed, a sense of what was morally 'right' was evoked to justify a cut. But this was a hollow morality, only thinly veiling the economic arguments which lay behind it. Transitional benefit had become a permanent drain on the Exchequer and unemployment rates were still rising.

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31. See Deacon, op. cit., p. 26

32. Sir Francis Floud KCB, Secretary of the Minister of Labour in evidence to the Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance (Gregory), Minutes of Evidence, 19th December 1930, p. 3.

If the Unemployment Insurance Fund was to be self-financing, cuts were essential. In order to achieve this without further antagonising the unemployed it was necessary for the Government to convince the public that the fund was overstretched because abuse of the scheme was widespread. A Royal Commission was set up to examine 'abuses' of the scheme. Its central concern was to establish that married women should properly be placed outside its scope.

TABLE A

PROPORTION OF MARRIED WOMEN CLAIMANTS BY REGION

	24.2.1930			13.10.1930		
REGION	Single women & widows	married women	married women as a %age of all women	Single women & widows	married women	married women as a %age of all women
London & South-Eastern	19596	12414	38.8	22912	22432	49.5
South Western	7229	2456	25.4	8253	5011	37.8
Midlands	22739	26315	53.6	32164	44990	58.3
North Eastern	31418	19180	37.9	40075	33405	45.5
North Western	61375	57399	48.3	96629	109956	53.2
Scotland	18823	10675	36.2	32305	22043	40.6
Wales	5338	579	9.8	6088	990	14.0
Total Great Britain	166518	129018	43.7	238426	238827	50.0
	11.11.1929			13.10.1930		
Liverpool	3275	2142	40.0	6267	3954	39.0

Source: Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance, Minutes of Evidence, 31st December, 1930, Appendix 1, 'Married women claimants', calculated from table on p. 76; Figures for Liverpool from Ibid., Evidence of Miss Fraser, 16th January, 1931, p. 251.

Giving evidence to the Royal Commission, Marion Phillips, Secretary of the Joint Standing Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations, argued

> I do not see any ground of justice at all for these proposals to cut a woman off from insurance when she marries and I can only assume that they come from a very general idea that when you are in any industrial difficulty if you can throw the burden of it on the woman, do so, and especially the married woman. It does not seem to me to have any sort of basis of justice at all. 33

But Marion Phillips' view proved to be an isolated one. The allegation that women were abusing the scheme was widely supported and upheld by the Gregory Commission. Certain sections of the female labour force were to be labelled as a 'special case' who could no longer be covered by the provisions of the scheme. Indeed, when the issue was debated in the House of Commons even Marion Phillips conceded that the claims to unemployment benefit by certain married women did constitute an abuse of the scheme and that action was necessary to curb this. She stated,

> ....if these cases exist we on this side of the House have no reason to say that we want them to continue and I believe that the working class.... have a straightforward and exact sense of what is right and what is wrong.... I think the working class are the last people to say that they want anybody to draw benefit who is not entitled to that benefit. 34

From Margaret Bondfield the message was clear and unequivocal. Men were to be upheld as the only genuine breadwinners after marriage; women were defined as men's legal and financial dependents. She argued,

> I have definitely come to the conclusion that there is a strong body of opinion which believes that there is an evil here that ought to be cured. I think it will have to be made

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33. Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance (Gregory) op. cit., 30th April 1931, p. 935.

34. Hansard, op. cit. Vol 254, 2158, 8th July 1931.

> clear that benefit is not a dowry on marriage on account of contributions paid; that it is not a source of income to enable a woman to be economically independent of her husband's earnings, or to supplement the poor earnings of her husband; that marriage does not create a special privilege to escape the normal obligations of a job; that benefit is only due to an unemployed married woman who is still in the insurance field and will remain so in the same sense in which a man or a single woman remains. 35

In fact the real reason for the rise in the number of women successfully claiming transitional benefit was the dramatic increase in genuine female unemployment (See Table B). Between September 1927 and September 1930 the official unemployment rate amongst men, nationally, had risen from 10.9% to 18.9%. But in that same period women's unemployment had gone up from 6.3% to 18.1%.[36] The reason was quite straightforward. The economic depression was now severely affecting those industries in which large numbers of women were employed. The cotton industry was particularly badly hit, an industry in which it had been the tradition for women to continue working after marriage. Other industries in which there were high rates of female unemployment were the woollen industry, pottery, metal industries and light engineering. (See Table B) Moreover, the depression had accentuated the practice of sacking women on marriage.

The Commission, presented with this evidence, turned it on its head. Their report argued, first, that because there was a growing practice of dismissing women on marriage and a reluctance by employers to take on married women, it was unlikely that they would be able to secure an insurable job once unemployed. Secondly, although

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35. Hansard, op. cit., Vol 254, 2108, 8th July 1931 (my emphasis)

36. Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance (Gregory) op. cit. 'Married Women Claimants' Appendix 1, p. 72.

some women might want to work and lived in regions where there was a likelihood they could get a job, many would be prevented from doing so because of their responsibility for child care. Thirdly, the majority of women had, in the past, chosen to leave work when they married. For these reasons, the Commission argued, 'it follows that in the case of married women as a class, industrial employment cannot be regarded as the normal condition'.[37] Since one of the conditions for receiving benefit was that a person was 'normally in insurable employment', the scheme should not be expected to cover for them.

It was on this basis that the Anomalies Act was made law in July 1931. Unemployed married women could no longer receive benefit on the same basis as other workers. Their contributions to the Unemployment Insurance Fund before marriage were no longer relevant. They would have to work after marriage and requalify on that basis. On Merseyside, and in many other parts of the country, this was a formidable task. Women, already marginalised in the labour market, were now to be penalised at the dole office. In effect, married women were to be defined as men's financial dependents. In Liverpool, where married women's contribution to the household budget was so crucial, the Act was to have a considerable impact on the standard of living within many working class households and increased the tendency for women to take up available domestic work.

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37. Report of the Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance (Gregory) Cmnd 3872, June 1931, p. 42, para. 117.

TABLE C

WOMEN CLAIMANTS FOR UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFIT, 1930, GREAT BRITAIN

	Number of women claimants (1)	Included in column (1)	
		Married women claimants (2)	Single women claimants (3)
24.3.1930	354,390	172,631	181,759
7.7.1930	433,927	199,750	240,177
13.10.1930	477,253	238,827	238,426
Percentage increase in no. of claimants 24.3.30 to 13.10.30	34.7%	38.3%	31.2%

Source: Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance, Minutes of Evidence, 31st December, 1930, Appendix 1, 'Married Women Claimants', calculated from Table on p. 75.

It will be seen from Table C that the percentage increase in the number of married women claimants from the time of the repeal of the 'genuinely seeking work clause' to October 30 was 38.3%, compared with an increase of 31.2% amongst single women in the same period. However, if the rate of increase amongst married women had been the same as that for single women this would have reduced the number of married women claimants by only 12,000 to 226,492. Despite this, by mid-November 1931, just four months after the Anomalies Act had been put into operation, nearly 11,000 women in just four places in Britain - Glasgow, Liverpool, Bootle and Birmingham - had been disallowed benefit under the terms of the Act. By the end of 1931, five months after the Act had come into operation,

134,000 married women had been disallowed benefit nationally.[38] Whilst it is impossible to refute, conclusively, the claim that married women were claiming unemployment benefit with little or no intention of resuming work, equally evidence of a widespread abuse of the Fund by married women did in no sense present an open and shut case. In this regard it is important to bear in mind that there had been a 132% increase in female unemployment between 1929 and 1930 (see Table B). Moreover, in some industries the rise had been even more dramatic. In this same period female unemployment in the cotton industry had increased by a staggering 266.7% and in the pottery industry by 177%. These industries alone accounted for 178,042 unemployed women in September 1930. Further there is no evidence to disprove the suggestion that a larger proportion of those women made redundant were married rather than single. On the contrary, the evidence before the Royal Commission argued this very point, stating: 'It is not improbable, however, that in the recent trade depression there may have been a tendency to discharge married women rather than single women.[39]

Apart from attacking the rights of married women to claim benefit, the Anomalies Act was also designed to deny benefit to workers employed casually and on a seasonal basis in certain industries. In effect, the Act was applied to women workers in specific trades. It did not affect the majority of casually employed male workers. (For example, dock labourers continued to have the right to claim unemployment benefit for the days on which they were unable to secure work.) According to Holman Gregory, chairperson of the

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38. Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann, Britain in the 1930s, Granada , St Albans, 1973, p. 32.

39. Royal Commission, op. cit. 31st December 1930, Appendix 1, p.73.

Royal Commission, these were women who said to themselves: 'I am going to supplement the income of my husband by working three or four months during the summer season and thereafter I am going to rest at home. The government will keep me therest of the time.'[40] In Liverpool there were a large number of women workers who were disallowed benefit under this aspect of the Bill. For example, in 1929, 26,401 vacancies for domestic workers were filled on a seasonal basis. Other women worked during the summer months in hotels on the Lancashire and North Wales coast. Similarly, female jam makers were employed for roughly 15 weeks in the summer months and occasionally for eight weeks in the winter. Shop assistants, too, were often only able to secure casual weekend work. The chances of placing these seasonal workers in the 'off season' were practically impossible according to Miss Fraser, Deputy Divisional Controller of the North West Division of the Ministry of Labour, in view of the fact that by October 1930 there were 10,221 unemployed women registered at the Liverpool Employment Exchanges.[41] Moreover, as has been stated in Chapter Five, a number of women's industries were undergoing changes at this time which increased the tendency for women's unemployment to rise. For example, new methods for transporting grain and the introduction of new machinery for manufacturing sacks was leading to redundancies amongst female sack makers and menders. Similarly, technical changes in the methods of manufacturing clothing created unemployment amongst female clothing workers. In the retail trade younger women were tending to displace more mature women, who then faced almost insurmountable problems in the labour market. The limitations of the Merseyside labour

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40. Ibid., p. 96.

41. Ibid., pp. 246-267.

market were experienced most intensely by married women. The tobacco, biscuit, silk, paper, toy, telephone manufacturer and sugar industries did not employ married women in the inter-war years in Liverpool. As a result, according to Miss Fraser, 'The placing in employment of married women claimants is, in fact, one of the most difficult tasks confronting women vacancy officers, and the difficulty is not confined to middle-aged and elderly claimants.[42]

Nationally, by April 1933, 299,908 claims for unemployment benefit had been refused under the terms of the Anomalies Act. 250,920 of these claimants were married women.[43] The Labour Government had initiated a major attack on women's rights yet they met with little opposition. The majority of women were unorganised and their interests as workers were left largely undefended by the labour movement. The publicity which had surrounded the debates concerning the Act upheld the notion that married women had been fraudulently claiming unemployment benefit and sustained the view that a woman's proper place was in the home. The 'genuinely seeking work' clause had, in its administration, tended to reproduce a sexual division of labour which confined women to waged and unwaged domestic work. The Anomalies Act, similarly, operated in such a way as to deny women's claims to be considered as workers equal to men and placed increasing pressure on unemployed women workers to seek work in the one area of the economy where jobs were relatively plentiful - the domestic service industry. Social policy and the laws enacted by the state in response to mass unemployment were infused with ideologies of gender division which reproduced and sustained pre-existing disadvantages faced by women workers.

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42. Ibid., p. 253.

43. A Deacon, op. cit., p. 27.

It was at this time that another government committee was appointed with a brief to produce proposals for reducing government expenditure. Presided over by Sir George May, in August 1931 it issued its report. The forecast was for a budget deficit of £120 million a year and the report placed its main emphasis on the charge to the Exchequer of the £30 million paid out in each year on transitional benefit and on the £40 to £50 million deficit of the Unemployment Insurance Fund. To meet the deficit the May Committee proposed to raise another £24 million intaxes and to cut public expenditure by £96 million. Two-thirds of this was to come from cuts in the rates of unemployment benefit.[44]

The proposals of the May Committee were ruthless. Benefit was already so low as to make life on the dole a miserable and hungry experience. Splits within the Labour Government over the recommendations of the May Committee were followed by its collapse and the formation of the National Government led by Ramsay MacDonald. By September 1931, the National Economy Act was introduced. Under the Act unemployment benefit was reduced by 10% which meant that a single man would now receive 15s 3d instead of 17 shillings a week; and a single woman received only 13s 6d instead of 15 shillings. Dependents allowances were also cut. Employers and employed workers were required to pay higher contributions into the insurance scheme and standard benefit would now only be paid for 26 weeks a year. But perhaps the most damaging aspect of the Bill for the unemployed was the re-introduction of the means test for claimants of transitional benefit. Renamed 'transitional payment', it would be paid through

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44. Sidney Pollard, The Development of the British Economy 1914-1967, Edward Arnold, London 1976, pp. 212-213.

the Employment Exchanges as before but it was to be administered by local Public Assistance Committees (PAC). This was not an administrative decision. The PACs were budget balancers par excellence. The long-term unemployed were to be classed and treated as paupers.

The formation of the PACs in March 1930, as a replacement for Boards of Guardians, had been one step in a strategy of reforming the administration of the Poor Law. From the early 1920s the official aim with regard to BOGs was 'improved efficiency'. In effect this meant greater control by central government and economy measures. The view of central government had been that local political control of BOGs had undermined this strategy. Boards sympathetic to the plight of the poor and the unemployed, who were few in number it must be added, were relatively free to administer relief payments in a generous manner. The first measure to neutralise this generosity had been the passing of the Board of Guardians Default Act of 1926. Certain BOGs had been characterised as 'extravagant' in their relief payments and the Act allowed the Minister of Health to dissolve an existing Board and replace it with personnel appointed by central government. Other legislation followed on similar lines. For example, the Local Authorities Act of 1928 allowed for Ministry of Health Inspectors and Auditors to examine the administration and books of the Poor Law authorities and recommend cuts in payments and other changes. In general, the aim was to reduce relief payments and standardise the level of payments nationally. As the unemployed gradually developed organisational strength, marches and other acts of civil disobedience frequently occurred in the vicinity of Board of Guardian premises which, unlike Whitehall, were accessible to local people. Moreover, Guardians were often known to the unemployed.

Thus, for example, local councillors who sat on Boards could be placed under pressure from their constituents. It was not uncommon, therefore, for demonstrations of the unemployed to gather outside the homes of Guardians. Such pressure could result in changes in the decisions over individual cases or even in the reappraisal of relief scales as a whole. Organisations of the unemployed were also able to highlight the differences in the relief scales paid in various parishes. Convincing arguments were presented that relief scales paid in one area should be raised in line with the higher payments made elsewhere. It was mounting pressure such as this which, in the view of successive governments, undermined the very basis of the Poor Law relief system. A sympathetic appraisal of the plight of the unemployed dependent on relief, reflected in increased monetary generosity, was to be avoided at all costs. This was because the central tenet on which poor relief was founded was that it, 'should be so unpleasant and so degrading that people would turn to their families for support or, if they were able-bodied, take the work which it was assumed was available... Everywhere the pauper was an object of contempt: someone who was maintained at the expense of others and thus forfeited all status, all respect and any rights of citizenship.'[45]

In 1928, when a Ministry of Health Inspector visited Birkenhead BOG he had expressed 'grave concern' at the administration of relief payments. Money, he claimed, was being handed out to people who weren't destitute and to people who 'didn't want to work'. He argued that it was 'difficult to avoid the conclusion that the methods of administration adopted by the Guardians tend to encourage applicants with the expectation that both the manner and the degree

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45. A. Deacon and J. Bradshaw, Reserved for the Poor, op.cit., p. 6.

of the relief afforded will be in accordance with their desires.'[46] He suggested a greater use of 'institutional relief', i.e. the workhouse, to weed out non-genuine claimants. But, as in many other areas, this suggestion was impractical. Workhouses were crumbling, ancient institutions unable to cope with a large influx of new inmates. Moreover, the move would be fiercely resisted by organisations representing the unemployed. His other suggestion was test work - compulsory labour on public work schemes. The difficulty was that jobs had to be found. In the previous year the Council had only been able to offer work to a handful of men digging the garden at the Tranmere Institute. The Birkenhead Guardians agreed to look into it. Nevertheless, as a direct result of the Health Ministry's report, cuts in relief payments were put into effect at Birkenhead. A single man or woman, living in lodgings, for example, would now receive 10 shillings instead of 12 shillings. And because of the operation of a means test many would not receive this maximum sum.[47]

Birkenhead was in some respects one of the more enlightened Boards. Labour members had won a few reforms over a number of years. West Derby Union, on the other hand, the authority for Liverpool, were rarely benevolent. Indeed, a certain smugness pervaded the proceedings of the Board. As one Guardian, Councillor Pugh, argued, 'All this talk about starving people was ridiculous nonsense.'[48] Nevertheless, when Mr C J Malin, Chief Inspector for the Ministry of Health in the North West region visited the West Derby Board in August 1927, he urged them to make a more careful scrutinisation of relief claimants. In his view, 'a considerable number were not anxious to find work.'

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46. See Liverpool Daily Post, 29th February 1928; 1st March 1928; 8th March 1928 and 28th March 1928.
47. Liverpool Daily Post, 20th June 1928.
48. Liverpool Daily Post, 23rd June 1927.

Moreover, he argued, 'the evil is especially great amongst single women.'[49] This pressure placed on the Board by central government resulted in a cut of between one shilling and two shillings in relief payments. On a further visit by the Inspector in 1929, extravagance was again alleged. The solution posed - that the unemployed be put to work - was wholly unrealistic in a city with such grave economic problems. As the chairperson of the West Derby BOG was forced to admit,

> We have been making every effort to provide useful work, but the response is disappointing. Three years ago the Liverpool Corporation did take on four hundred men for a short time, but since then there has been nothing. 50

The Guardians were simply overwhelmed by the number of unemployed people dependent on them. As their reply to the Inspector stated: 'In one street consisting of 80 houses there are 187 families in receipt of relief. 104 of these require assistance directly as a result of unemployment.' In Liverpool as a whole, 56,000 people were dependent on relief payments from the West Derby Union in March 1929. In two districts of the city one person in every five was dependent on the Guardians and in another three districts the ratio was 1 in 6. More than 11,000 of these claimants were receiving relief solely on the grounds of destitution due to unemployment.[51] Whilst relief was given to a whole series of groups of people such as invalids, the physically disabled, single mothers and widows as well as the unemployed, coincident with changes in unemployment legislation and its administration the number of people dependent on poor relief in Liverpool had declined to 37,305 by June 1930. However, the numbers again began to rise as the terms and conditions

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49. Liverpool Daily Post, 25th August 1927.
50. Liverpool Daily Post, 25th April 1929.
51. Ministry of Labour, Employment Gazette, 1929, p. 439.

under which unemployment benefit could be claimed were tightened up. In March 1931, 45,344 people were in receipt of relief in Liverpool and by March 1933 the figure was 76,276.[52] Growing unemployment and underemployment combined to make Liverpool a city with one of the highest rates of people dependent on relief per head of population in the country. Thus, whereas the ratio of people in receipt of relief in all the county boroughs in England and Wales in January 1933 was 476 per 10,000 of the population, in Liverpool the figure was 935.[53]

A large proportion of relief claimants in Liverpool were women. On January 1st 1931, of the 36,670 people dependent on relief, 11,637 or 32% were women, 16,642 or 45% were children, and 8,391 or 23% were men. 44% of these women were normally employed but were dependent on relief because of unemployment or because their earned income was insufficient for their needs.[54] But such women faced very specific forms of scrutiny by the poor law authorities, distinct from those applied to men. In particular, their skills as housewives and mothers were meticulously observed and, as was the case with claimants of unemployment benefit, the tests used to assess women's desire to work were invariably informed by an assertion of the unmet demand for domestic servants.

The relieving officers and official 'visitors' of the West Derby Union, like those employed in other parishes, based their assessment of deserving cases using such criteria as an ability to show cleanliness, temperance and 'good' morals. Thus in the assessment of a woman's claim for relief it was considered her duty to maintain the home

52. D. Caradog Jones, op.cit., Vol 3, p. 118.
53. Ibid., Vol 3, p. 120
54. Ibid., p. 120.

to a standard set by bourgeois notions of good housewifery. For example, a dirty home or unfed children indicated an undeserving case. Thus the West Derby Union authorised that,

> ....widows with dependent children, whose characters will bear strict investigation, whose children do not beg in the streets, who attend to their children's health and cleanliness and whose habits are in every way satisfactory, may be relieved....[55]

In the 1920s, women who were destitute but who failed to meet these standards would be admitted to the workhouse and separated from their children. Single mothers of illegitimate children were condemned as immoral and often deprived of their children, who were then kept in institutions or fostered. And deserted wives were carefully monitored to ensure that their husbands had indeed left them without support.

The Guardians consistently chose to ignore the genuine problems which women's poverty created for them as housewives and mothers, a factor highlighted by the Women's Industrial Council (WIC) in a report concerning poor widows in Liverpool:

> It is hard for a woman to be an efficient housewife and parent whilst she is living under conditions of extreme penury - obliged to live in an unsanitary house because it is cheap; waging a continual war with the vermin which infests such houses; unable to spend anything on repairs or replacements of household gear unless she takes it off the weekly food money; limited in the use of soap, soda, or even hot water, because of the cost of coal.

According to the WIC, 'the astonishing thing to us is not that so many women fail to grapple with the problem successfully, but that any succeed.'[56] And the difficulties faced by women as workers were similarly underestimated by the Guardians. Able-bodied women

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55. West Derby Union, Minutes, 27th September 1922.

56. E.F. Rathbone, Report of the Conditions of Widows under the Poor Law in Liverpool, Lee and Nightingale, Liverpool, 1931.

dependent on relief were under constant pressure to find work. But many women were simply unable to find jobs which would raise them out of their poverty. Those who secured employment invariably worked irregularly and for very low pay as charwomen, office cleaners and in other similar domestic jobs. In effect, women were penalised by the Guardians for the limitations of the local female labour market. Moreover, the pressure on women to find work fuelled the tendency for women's wage rates to remain low. The key solution posed by the Guardians to the problem of female unemployment and poverty was to channel women, and particularly young women, into domestic service. Thus Miss Taylor, an official visitor to the West Derby Union, stated in her report of 1924,

> In view of the overwhelming number of persons unemployed, and the dearth of domestic servants, applicants sent to this department by the Relieving Officers are usually given the option of entering service, with a promise of any deficiency in clothing being supplied by the Guardians, but in spite of this assurance they immediately furnish excuses in support of their refusal to accept domestic service. It is not unusual for applicants to admit that they have not worked for years, also to find two or three daughters in one household unemployed, and likely to remain so as they never give the matter serious consideration. The fact of their being unskilled renders it almost impossible to obtain employment other than domestic service at the present time, and this they refuse to entertain. 57

But despite the reluctance of women to enter domestic service many young women were obliged, and at times coerced, to embark on training for this work. It was the view of successive governments throughout the 1920s and 1930s that the unemployed should be found 'useful' work or given training of some kind. Test work on corporation schemes had become attached to the payment of poor relief from the early 1920s, although there were periods when, as we have seen, it had proved impossible for the local authority to find work for

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57. West Derby Union, Report of Out-Relief Department, 1924.

the unemployed. 'Training', on the other hand, had been directed at the young unemployed. For example, all 14-18 year old men and women claiming poor relief and transitional benefit were required to attend 'unemployment classes'. The classes taught basic woodwork to boys and aspects of domestic work, such as sewing and cookery, to girls. Unfortunately, any skills acquired had little value in a city without jobs. In a sense the training centres acknowledged this. A core aspect of the training for both boys and girls was physical exercise, or drill as it was called. The courses for girls were, in effect, an attempt to impose bourgeois concepts of 'good' and efficient housekeeping on working class women. But the conditions under which many unemployed women lived made the classes wholly inappropriate to their needs. As a survey of 1936 discovered,

> The cookery classes are....unpopular because of the lack of facilities at home, inadequate housing and the preference for a ready-cooked fish and chip meal, even when good food of another type is available. Further, the parents' method of shopping precludes their getting much variety, as they obtain goods at one shop on credit, and pay at the end of the week. Tinned and cooked meats are therefore largely used. 58

There is little evidence of the views of the girls who were obliged to attend these centres. But the following letter, written in 1931, gives some indication of the poor quality of the instruction and the cynicism with which the training was approached.

> For some time now, on and off, I have been on short-time and in order to draw benefit for the days I am unemployed (I have been paying insurance for nearly two years) I must attend the Training School in Walton Road. About three hundred girls attend in the morning and a fresh batch, about the same number, in the afternoon. The 'training' we receive is as follows: sums, English, singing, cookery and laundry. I think the

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58. The Pilgrim Trust, Men without Work, Cambridge University Press, 1938, p. 257.

> laundry teacher goes around all her family for the washing. Any latecomer is stopped a day's pay - 1s 3d. One girl was pretty sure of a job but was afraid to go after it for fear she should be late and have her day's dole stopped. Girls have been told to wash the powder from their faces and have actually been sent home, with consequent stoppage of benefit, because the principal thought that all the powder had not been removed. A notice is pinned up in every classroom drawing our attention to the fact that five girls have had their benefit stopped for six weeks as 'punishment for a breach of the rules.' The girls in question were smoking in the lavatory during the break. It is as good as a picnic in the laundry class, watching the girls ironing and folding the garments, every little crease is ironed out, they are folded oh so very correctly. Failing to do this could be a breach of the rules. 59

Some girls dependent on relief were trained at the Board of Guardians' 'Girls Training School' in Shaw Street. Here, each year, 24 girls undertook a twelve month training course in domestic service and at the end of the course were placed in jobs in private homes.[60] For older unemployed women in Liverpool the only available training was at the Domestic Training Centre. Here, according to the Pilgrim Trust,

> Endless trouble is taken to awaken an interest in each part of their duties, whether in the cookery class where they cook a whole dinner as it would be served to a family of six, or in the detailed care given to methods of washing, cleaning, learning to lay a table attractively etc. When these girls have been through a full thirteen week's training they have learned the rudiments of skilled housework. If they can pass on to a mistress who is herself skilled and will continue their training they can become efficient and reliable domestic servants. 61

Voluntary organisations also ran classes and clubs for the unemployed. The Salvation Army, for example, set up schools of domestic service for girls and taught boys farm work. These young men and women were then shipped out to Canada and Australia on liners commissioned by the Salvation Army. Indeed, by the late 1920s the idea of

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60. Daily Worker, 7th March 1931.

61. Pilgrim Trust, op. cit., p. 259.

emigration as a solution to youth unemployment was extremely popular. In 1928 the Liverpool Education Authority set up its first farm training centre for young boys, preparing them for jobs in Canada. Similarly, the Industrial Transference Board, a government body, encouraged and organised the migration of single men and women from the depressed areas to more prosperous parts of Britain and abroad.[62] The success of this scheme was limited in the case of young women. Girls were reluctant to leave the security and familiarity of their homes to live in towns where they would be totally without support. Moreover, for a number of reasons, parents were often opposed to their children leaving home. First, the income which girls brought into the home was often crucial to the family's ability to subsist. As a Liverpool mother explained in 1936,

> My girl is 22. She used to earn 22 shillings and give me 16 shillings. Now she is on the dole and gets 15 shillings and I get 13 shillings of that. I couldn't let her go and have nothing because if she goes I would have to give up my home here and where would I be? She does not eat 13 shillings worth of food. 63

Secondly, the transfer of girls to other areas was often poorly supervised and arranged. Girls were left in strange surroundings, without support and often without an income sufficient to maintain themselves. Furthermore mothers expressed concern over what were seen as the moral dangers of the project. For example, stories of girls getting pregnant whilst away from home were prevalent.[64]

It is in the consideration of the proposals for training unemployed women that the state's response to female unemployment is most clearly revealed as crude and unimaginative. All the schemes and

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62. See the Joint Enquiry Committee, Report upon the nature and extent of Unemployment Among Young Persons, Liverpool, 1935, pp.20-23.

63. Pilgrim Trust, op. cit., p. 262.

64. Ibid., p. 262.

classes offered to unemployed women and girls were aimed at re-training them as domestic workers and efficient housewives, whatever their previous skill or occupation. Indeed, successive governments, Boards of Guardians and Public Assistance Committees consistently recommended domestic service as a suitable, or even rewarding, occupation for unemployed women. In essence, the policy hinged on publicly proving an unmet demand for domestic servants and equating, in a straightforward manner, a supply of unemployed women. Women's preferences in terms of employment and their existing skills were largely overlooked in this equation. Moreover, the policy was relentlessly pursued despite the view held by many working class women that domestic service was degrading and unpleasant work. Women's resistance to undertake a career in domestic service was heightened by the new aspirations created with the expansion of the female labour market after the First World War. The growth of clerical work and shop work and the increased opportunities for work in factories manufacturing goods for the domestic market, such as food, cigarettes, textiles and electrical products, extended women's job opportunities. But within a short space of time this widened female labour market entered a period of stagnation and retraction, particularly in the manufacturing sector, as a result of the economic depression and the restructuring of the productive process in a number of industries. Women were again confronted with very limited opportunities for gainful employment from the 1920s onwards. Their rejection of domestic service as a suitable occupation heightened the coercive aspects of state policies with regard to female unemployment.

The aim of transferring unemployed women into domestic service was not without success. The number of female domestic servants and other domestic workers began to rise from the early 1920s and throughout the 1930s in Liverpool and elsewhere. In Liverpool, a city with a particularly limited labour market, the expansion in the number of female employees in this sector was very marked. The Government were able to utilise aspects of unemployment legislation to achieve this. First, the very low levels of benefit paid to unemployed women left many with no alternative but to work as domestic workers. Young unemployed women, in particular, were offered benefit at a rate too low to maintain an independent existence. Thus, for many women the only rational choice became domestic service. Secondly, a successful claim for unemployment benefit depended on the ability of a claimant to prove a genuine desire to work. This was the case whether or not a specific regulation setting down the conditions under which a person was genuinely seeking work was contained within the law; it remained a fundamental principle of unemployment legislation throughout the 1920s and 1930s. But this principle was interpreted in a very specific way with regard to unemployed women, since they could be defined as non-genuine claimants and their benefit disallowed if they refused work as a domestic servant. The adjudication of female applicants for poor relief operated on the basis of similar principles. Women were effectively coerced into the domestic service industry.

The emphasis placed on domestic service as a solution to female unemployment was to have far-reaching and long-term implications for women workers. First, those women unwilling to take up this

work risked the loss of benefit and thus the loss of their only source of independent income. Secondly, those women who took up domestic work relinquished the possibility of future claims to unemployment benefit, should they become unemployed, since domestic workers were placed outside the insurance scheme. Finally, the legislation tended to consolidate a division of labour which located women firmly in waged and unwaged domestic work. Women and young school leavers were channelled into domestic work, whatever their skills or aspirations.

Successive governments looked no further than a conception of women as housewives, mothers and domestic workers to solve the problem of female unemployment. And the weakness of any organised opposition to women's location within such work favoured this strategy. Indeed, it had wide public support. State policies thus drew on and reinforced ideologies of gender division which regarded women workers as having a far more tenuous relationship to the labour market than male workers. The refusal to accept women as genuine claimants of the Unemployment Insurance Fund effectively defined them as non-genuine workers, ideologically placing them outside mainstream productive activity and reaffirming the appropriateness of a sexual division of labour which confined women to domestic employment.

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to explore the social processes which tended to shape and structure women's lives in Liverpool in the period between 1890 and the Second World War. In particular, it has been concerned to examine and analyse the mechanisms by which a sexual division of labour within the occupational structure was continuously reproduced over time and to highlight the adverse consequences of this for women workers. Women's lives, then, have been placed at the centre of the study but, in a curious way, the focus of the questions posed has been on everything but women. Questions have been raised in relation to *men's work in the city, on the* quality of local living conditions, on industrial restructuring, about the state and social policy and the prevailing ideologies of the period. There are another series of questions, however, which have appeared here only in passing, but which might have structured a study such as this, which seeks to rescue the history of women's lives from an undeserved obscurity.

These questions are, no doubt, already in the reader's mind: what sense did women themselves make of their experiences in the city as workers and as mothers; how did women respond to their low pay and to the degradation of their skills and abilities as workers; what strategies were employed by women to insist on their value as workers? Conventional historical source material is unable to answer these questions with any certainty and clarity. The answers lie in the memories and interpretations placed on this history by the women and men of the city. Some of this detail is no longer attainable; a generation who remember the late 19th

century and early 20th century have died, taking their memories with them. But the interpretations which people can place on the later period could add a new and rich dimension to the history of women workers in Liverpool recorded in this study. This omission may suggest a portrayal of women as the 'passive victims' of extraneous social forces. There is an implication that the mechanisms which tended to locate women workers at the lower levels of the local occupational structure were incontrovertible; women lacked control over the social processes which structured their lives. This is not the view of the author but, rather, the expression of the limitations of any single study. The analyses women make of their own histories and the way in which their collective experiences and actions challenged the ideologies and practices which oppressed and exploited them, are aspects of Liverpool's history yet to be written. It is hoped that the foundations of this historical account underline the significance of an understanding of women's lives to a comprehensive appreciation of the city's history but that, simultaneously new areas of enquiry are immediately suggested. Oral testimony would, without doubt, illuminate those aspects of women's lives which supported and contradicted the general tendencies identified here.

Having said this, however, it is clearly apparent that for a large proportion of local women their experiences as workers were defined by an unrelenting, intense exploitation of their labour. The means by which a rigid sexual division of labour remained such a persistent feature of the local economy, consistently denying women their dignity and value as workers, is the issue I have addressed. The

aim has been to suggest ways in which the local economy and local conditions meshed with prevailing ideologies and the priorities of national governments to reproduce and consolidate a rigid division between male and female workers. Women's hopes, aspirations and potentialities were invariably expressed within the parameters drawn by these more general social forces.

The significance of local economic conditions *and traditions for* women's lives and the structure of the sexual division of labour has been a theme running through this study. Most of the literature concerned with women workers published *throughout the 20th century* has stressed the influence on women's lives of the expectations placed on them as mothers and wives and the way in which women have assumed certain responsibilities in the home. But the precise means by which these aspects of women's lived experiences have determined their relationship to the labour market has varied considerably from region to region. Aspects of local social life have intervened to create diverse patterns with regard to women's commitments to their potential dual role as mothers and wage labourers. Moreover, within specific families and households men and women have negotiated individual solutions to the problem of women's double burden. In Liverpool, one central aspect of local economic conditions which had a bearing on women's experience as workers and mothers was the casual recruitment of local male workers.

The consequences of casualism identified in this study as having a crucial bearing on women's relationship to waged work and their location within the occupational structure are poverty, the inability

of thousands of local working class families to escape the slum housing centred on the dockside areas and a workplace culture amongst the dock workforce that sharpened a masculine consciousness which drew clear distinctions between the spheres of men's and women's economic activity.

Poverty and a hand-to-mouth existence structured countless thousands of lives in Liverpool during the period of this study. And the extremely poor housing in the dockland areas left many families living in miserable, health-threatening conditions. This poor quality of life was experienced most acutely by women, since they shouldered burdens not encountered by men. Pregnancy, childbearing, childcare and the struggle to make ends meet placed a constant, debilitating strain on women's health. Lack of funds meant poor nourishment, poor household equipment and no medical care for women. High infant mortality rates and widespread maternal morbidity reflected this.

Despite the strains imposed on women in the home, however, few women were able to choose not to seek waged work. The irregular earnings of men created households in which women's wages were vital to family survival. But women entered a severely restricted labour market, unable to employ all those women who sought work. The consequence of this for the woman worker was that her conditions of employment were invariably wretched. Low pay, long hours of work, insanitary working conditions, oppressive supervision, insecurity of employment and irregular working were the characteristic features of women's daily experiences at their workplaces. Those factors

which typically defined women's working lives in Britain were exaggerated and intensified in the context of an inflated supply of female labour. All the oppressive and exploitative practices which confronted women workers generally came into sharp focus. Thus, even in those industries which relied on skilled, experienced women workers, such as the tobacco industry, employment conditions were characteristically poor. In many households, of course, there were no male workers. But the low level of female wages prevalent locally left many widows and single women, women on whom others were often dependent, barely surviving on the margins of poverty and periodically forced to depend on the Parish and the workhouse.

The circumstances created by the intermittent and fluctuating earnings of men, combined with a limited market for female labour, intensified the characteristic features of the sexual division of labour in Britain whereby women were heavily concentrated in the personal service industry. In Liverpool, thousands of women in each generation were paid at the very lowest wage levels as step cleaners, office cleaners, washerwomen, laundry workers, shop cleaners, chambermaids, domestic servants, charwomen, waitresses and cleaners on board ship. Liverpool was a city in which the sexual division of labour came into the sharpest relief.

The significance of the personal service industry within the Liverpool economy has been neglected in the literature concerned with the city's history. But this was a phenomenon of immense importance. For thousands of women, their horizons of employment did not extend beyond domestic work. Moreover, it could be argued, the size

of this industry made it as characteristic of the Liverpool economy as work in and around the port. Women's work, however, has little resonance within our images and understanding of a particular community primarily because much of this work is hidden. The office is cleaned in the early hours before the office worker arrives, the ship is cleaned whilst the seafarer is on shore leave, women wash and clean in their own homes and in other people's homes, isolated one from another and invisible as workers. It is only when we reflect on the size of this section of the workforce and the importance of women's earnings to households of underemployed workers, that its significance becomes apparent. The sheer number of female resident domestic servants in the city - 20,000 and more each year - underlines this, but this workforce has been consistently overlooked in the analysis of Liverpool's past. The neglect of women's history in the city amounts to an ignorance of the unique working relationships in which a significant section of the working class were involved. Furthermore, we overlook the important fact that the nature and conditions of women's work in this period of Liverpool's history were as illustrative of the limitations of the local economy as was the surplus of dockers. The impact of the city's economic dependence on trade defined women's lives as much as men's lives.

I have argued that the culture and consciousness generated amongst the male dock workforce stressed and applauded the demonstration of skills and abilities inextricably linked with masculinity in our society. Implicit within this culture was the delineation of femininity and a distinct female world. An entrenched relationship between gender and occupation was partly sustained by people's

very sense of themselves as male and female. The boundaries of the female labour market were supported by a consciousness which defined the essence of masculinity and femininity.

Further research could undoubtedly extend this analysis and examine the extent to which the culture generated by the conditions and nature of dock employment radiated into the life of the city more generally. For example, how did the sense men made of the distinctions between the spheres of male and female activity express itself within the family and in the personal relationships between men and women? This method of enquiry also raises questions in relation to political activity and citizenship. One major focus of political representation and trade unionism in Liverpool was the port and its workforce. Dockers were drawn into the political arena by virtue of the importance of the port to the local and national economy, and this continued to be the case into the post-war period. Thus, the campaigns and recruitment programmes of the trade union movement found a central focus amongst dock workers. One can speculate that on this basis dockers had the potential to command political attention and exercise the rights of citizenship to an extent denied to women. The involvement of men in the struggles, campaigns and committees of the trade unions was a basis for their incorporation into the political life of the city as a whole. Women, outside of this primary economic activity of the city, tended to be marginalised not only economically but also politically. The majority of women lacked trade union representation and, as a result, were less involved as citizens. Women were placed outside of those issues and interests which strongly influenced the local political agenda. Women's

concerns as citizens and workers were defined as of secondary importance to those of men by virtue of the prevailing ideologies which contrasted the status and economic contribution of men and women. But local conditions were inextricably interconnected with these ideologies of gender division, reinforcing the tendency to exclude women from the political arena. The impact of this on women's political confidence and involvement - on their ability to insist on their rights as citizens - is an important aspect of women's lives virtually neglected in historical research. Myths abound concerning women's political aspirations, allegiances and involvement, but detailed local studies of the social processes which structure the contrasting political activity of men and women have yet to be written.

This study has traced the fortunes of women workers in a number of local industries which employed large numbers of women in the period under review. A number of themes have emerged in this analysis. The first, already mentioned, was the poverty and abysmal working conditions which typically confronted female workers in Liverpool. A second theme is the way in which industrial restructuring and increasing capital investment in a number of manufacturing industries tended to encourage the transfer of women out of work formally recognised as skilled into semi-skilled and unskilled processes. Gradually, but consistently, changes in the labour process annihilated the 'skilled woman worker'. The effects of this were significant for local women workers. Materially, women were denied the prospect of relatively well-paid work. In this sense, the pre-existing characteristics of the sexual division of labour were progressively more sharply drawn. There were also more general ideological

consequences of the increasing obsolescence of certain skills held by women. The equation skill/women became gradually more tenuous, less real. The loss in skill status experienced by specific groups of women workers reinforced the tendency to categorise all women's work as unskilled. The genuine process of skill dilution which occurred was superimposed on subjective assessments of the relative value of male and female labour, confirming the ideological characterisation of the sexual division of labour as a hierarchy in which women workers were located at the lower levels. Thus, although changes in the labour process undoubtedly undermined the opportunity for certain women to exercise skill at their work, there was a tendency for the objective skills retained by women to be degraded. The adverse consequences of the sexual division of labour for local women workers were thus consistently confirmed, materially and ideologically.

Closely related with this was the way in which, in certain industries, the introduction of women workers into areas of work formerly dominated by men encouraged the conceptualisation of women as unskilled workers - women appeared to be the representatives of the means by which skill dilution was achieved. In reality, changes in the labour process extended the opportunities for the employment of non-apprenticed workers and in such circumstances employers seized the opportunity to employ cheap female labour. But the antagonisms and hostilities which arose between male and female workers compounded the difficulties faced by women seeking to insist on their skills and value as workers.

Underlying these divisions between male and female workers was the prevailing view, held by many men, that women's proper place was in the home or, at least, that certain work was, and should remain, 'men's work'. Moreover, because it was the practice to pay very low wages to women, understandably men saw in women workers a threat to their own wage rates. These divisions and hostilities which often characterised the working relationships between men and women similarly tended to reinforce the rigid nature of the sexual division of labour. Men were willing to use their collective power to insist on the maintenance of a distinction between the areas of women's work and men's work.

Because of these factors women's trade unionism tended to develop in isolation from the male trade union movement. In a number of industries and workplaces all-female unions were established in Liverpool in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Generally, however, these unions lacked strength and consistency in their confrontations with capital. Whilst some successes were evident, there was a weakness in the resistance of women to the exploitation of their labour. Nevertheless, there were positive aspects to women's trade union organisation. Women-only unions were in a position to raise some of the specific issues faced by women as workers. The records of the Liverpool Trades Council indicate the way in which the representatives of these unions pushed for the expansion of unionisation amongst women, organised speakers on the question of votes for women, raised issues in relation to women's dual role as mothers and workers, and campaigned for hostels for single working women. It is unlikely that such issues would

have appeared on the Trades Council agendas in the absence of organised women workers. This raises the importance of an episode in the history of women's trade unionism which remains unresearched in the local context. In the 1920s and 1930s all-women unions began the process of amalgamation with male and mixed unions. Little is known about the way in which this was achieved locally. Moreover, what impact did this process of merger have on women's ability to raise the issues which specifically confronted them as women workers? Contemporary research suggests that within mixed unions women's interests have been consistently overlooked and that women have remained on the periphery of these organisations. A study of the impact of this transition from isolation to incorporation within the mainstream trade union movement would, perhaps, clarify the relative strengths and weaknesses of local women's trade unionism throughout the period.

The social processes which structured women's location and experiences within the local labour market and the limitations of Liverpool's industrial structure were vividly revealed by the economic crisis of the inter-war years. In this study I have argued that the consequences of this period for women's status as workers and for the value placed on their labour were particularly detrimental. Indeed, this was a decisive historical period for women workers and for the future shape of the sexual division of labour. A number of tendencies with regard to the changing outline of the sexual division of labour and its effects on women were consolidated in this period.

The history of the weakness in women's trade union organisation in the period before the 1930s ill-equipped women to counter capital's attempts to increase the exploitation of labour at this time. Indeed, women workers were undoubtedly a prime target in this project. Equally, the attempt of employers to rearrange working practices and restructure the labour process were clearly successful in a number of industries, despite the consequences of this for women formerly occupied in skilled work. Some of the most significant struggles in British trade union history have involved the efforts of skilled male workers to retain control over the pace of work and resist the introduction of new technologies which threatened to remove the skill content of particular jobs. But there is no evidence that skilled women workers engaged in similar struggles in Liverpool. The transformations which took place in a number of workplaces in the city were pushed through, it appears, with little resistance. The concentration of women workers at the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy was effectively crystallised.

The other major tendency with regard to the sexual division of labour brought to fruition in the circumstances of the inter-war depression was the consolidation of a relationship between women workers and the personal service industry. Waged domestic work was widely upheld as the solution to female unemployment. In this study I have highlighted the way in which unemployment legislation became one agency through which this was achieved. Trends in the previous decades indicated a shift of women workers away from domestic work. Moreover, the widespread dissatisfaction amongst women over the conditions of employment in resident domestic service had become

a major public issue. But in the circumstances created by mass unemployment, domestic work was again regarded as the most appropriate career for women workers. Social policy both reflected and reinforced this view concerning the proper location for women within the occupational structure. Both directly and indirectly state intervention upheld a conventional ordering of the sexual division of labour. For the women workers of Liverpool the imperatives of this policy, combined with a limited labour market, even further diminished, tended to intensify these national tendencies. For many thousands of local women who lost their jobs at this time there was simply no alternative to employment in domestic work or a retreat into the home.

The experience of mass unemployment was to raise another factor which distinguished men's and women's relationship to the labour market. As is the case today, male unemployment was widely regarded in the 1930s as an issue of major importance, not least for the unemployed men themselves. Male unemployment was at the centre of the political debates of the period and the tragic consequences of unemployment for men was given prominence at the time. Female unemployment did not, however, arouse the emotions, anger, moral condemnation and political urgency attached to male unemployment. The refusal to accept women's unemployment as genuine and important, underpinned government responses to it. This was reflected in unemployment legislation. The corollary of the prevailing ideology which placed women firmly in the home was the expression of a refusal to accept women's right to work and a denial of the genuineness of women's unemployment. Just as women's experiences and rights

at work were constrained within gender ideologies, so unemployed women were regarded as a special case, distinct from unemployed men. The financial needs of women and the importance of their income to others dependent on them, were issues consistently ignored in the period. The needs of the male breadwinner were asserted at women's expense. Women became the hidden unemployed of the inter-war years. Forced back into the home and into jobs which lacked a public presence, their interests and aspirations were conveniently buried.

Recent literature concerned with the impact on the working class of the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s has stressed the increasing fragmentation and division. Implicit or explicit in much of this analysis is a view that this fragmentation was not a feature of the 1930s. Today, it is argued, there are new divisions between black and white workers, the skilled and the unskilled, the south of the country and the north, the inner city and the suburbs, men and women and younger and older workers. In this study the assumptions behind the contrasts drawn between 'then and now' are rejected. Here I have argued that the inter-war years similarly saw the intensification of divisions within the working class and I have examined the way in which divisions based on age and sex became more pronounced in the period. But these were not the only divisions which had a political and economic importance at the time. The circumstances created by a retracted labour market aroused intense debates and incidents over who should occupy the available jobs. For example, the local newspapers of the 1930s are littered with claims and counter-claims from Liverpool-born

and Irish workers in relation to the alleged ease each group experienced in securing work at the docks. Local Orangemen periodically claimed that Irish workers were given preference for work by certain foremen, but organisations representing Irish catholics insisted that migrant workers were unable to secure work and were forced, through destitution, to return to Ireland. Pressure to restrict the employment of Irish workers in the city encouraged the Liverpool corporation to introduce bye-laws which linked recruitment to corporation jobs with a person's period of residence in the city. Newly-arrived Irish migrant workers were denied council jobs and effectively repatriated. Similar divisions existed between black and white workers in the city. Indeed, attempts to prevent the engagement at the port of black seafarers living in Liverpool was supported within the local trade union movement and by local MPs. In this regard it is instructive to consider that the only contribution of David Logan, Labour MP for the Scotland constituency of Liverpool, to the many debates which took place on unemployment in the House of Commons in the 1930s was consistently on the question of the employment of 'black, Lascar and Arab labour' on British ships sailing out of Liverpool. Logan's attachment to this campaign was, in his own words, a crusade 'for the protection of the British race' (sic).[1] Racist ideas and practices were as relevant in the 1930s as they are today, structuring deep divisions within the working class.

One central thrust of this study has been to indicate that the experience of the 1930s for both employed and unemployed women was distinct to that of men. But for some groups of women the consequences of the 1930s were particularly tragic. Many women, past

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1. Hansard, 8th November 1932 Vol 270, 243; See also Vol 259, 357; Vol 260, 398-9; Vol 260, 1957; Vol 269, 281-2; Vol 270, 242-3.

the years of middle age, found it increasingly difficult to secure employment in the context of economic crisis. A history of poor nourishment, hard work, the struggle to make ends meet and frequent pregnancies condemned older and less fit women to spend the remaining years of their lives existing in the misery of extreme poverty. Such examples suggest that contrasting life experiences also divided women. There is an almost inevitable tendency when writing about women's lives to overlook such distinctions; to place all women under a single heading. Our understanding of men's history, and the material available to recreate it, allows these finer differentiations to be drawn in relation to men. As our knowledge of women's history becomes more extensive it is hoped that the resources will become available to build into our analysis these shades of difference.

This study has sought to indicate that for the women workers of Liverpool the experience of the period between 1890 and 1939 was one of continuity, only briefly interrupted in the decade between 1910 and 1920, when the female labour market briefly opened out beyond its traditional boundaries. For many women in the city the entire period was continuously defined by the experience of limited opportunity for dignified, well-remunerated work. The tendency for a rigid sexual division of labour to be continuously reproduced was sustained by a series of complex and interlocking social processes evident within diverse areas of social life, from the policies and practices of trade unions, employers and governments to people's very sense of themselves as men and women, masculine and feminine.

In broad terms, the location of women in the local occupational structure established in the inter-war years set the pattern for women's employment horizons in the post-war period. There were a number of industries which expanded in the 1920s and 1930s which established themselves as important employers of local women workers after the war. Electrical engineering and other light engineering factories and food manufacture took on a new significance in the post-war years. The experience of women workers employed in manufacturing industries such as these in the 1950s and 1960s has received little attention in the written history of the city. Indeed, the examination of the contrasts and continuities in women's employment conditions and status as workers apparent throughout the 20th century would counter the continuing tendency of historians and sociologists to focus exclusively on areas of male employment in the city. It is hoped that the analysis presented here indicates the value and urgency of such a project. New dimensions can be added to our existing knowledge which will transform and enrich it. Women's lives can be given a deserved prominence in our collective memory of the past.

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