

# **Gender differences in absence from work: Lessons from two world wars**

Tobias Karlsson

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# Gender differences in absence from work: Lessons from two world wars<sup>a</sup>

by

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## Abstract

This paper traces the origins and early history of perceived gender differences in absenteeism in Great Britain and the USA. Among politicians and scholars, the problem was first articulated during World War I and reappeared as an issue of prime concern during World War II. The war efforts required mobilization and allocation of large numbers of women to jobs that had previously been done by men while maintaining high and continuous flows of production in an economy that was increasingly characterized by high capital intensity. The most common explanation of women's higher levels of absenteeism was their double burden of wage work and unpaid household duties. Although researchers in the field were cautious to give policy recommendations, the studies on absenteeism revealed that 'industrial fatigue' could have negative effects on productivity and helped to motivate regulations on working hours. Studies on absenteeism also encouraged firms to professionalize personnel management and to reinforce apprehensions of differences between men and women as workers and employees. Some employers and other policy makers referred to gender differences in absenteeism to motivate wage discrimination.

Keywords: Absenteeism, gender, Great Britain, United States, World War I, World War II

JEL-codes: H56, J16, M54, N32, N34, N42, N44

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## 1 Introduction

The expanding opportunities of women as political and economic actors belong to the major societal changes of the twentieth century. Yet, this is not a story of steady progress. Many objections were raised against women's participation in the labour market. Interestingly, these objections have not been constant. In an inquiry on the replacement of men for women during World War I in Britain, four "disabilities of women" were mentioned: physical weakness, lack of training, opposition by trade unions and social conventions (Kirkaldy, 1916).<sup>1</sup> As time passed, some of these disabilities lost their importance, whereas others remained. With the rise of white-collar work, lack of physical strength became decreasingly important whereas lack of training became more frequently referred to. Women's lower levels of human capital is an aspect that was recognized by feminists Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein in their classic monograph *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work* (1956) and that still is a major theme in the modern literature on women and work (cf. Goldin, 1990). A disability that seems to have been more explicitly articulated during the first half of the twentieth century is women's higher levels of absenteeism from work. This was actually the aspect that Myrdal and Klein focused on the most when discussing employers' resistance towards hiring, retaining and remunerating women on equal terms.<sup>2</sup> After going through studies from the United States, Great Britain and Sweden, Myrdal and Klein reached the conclusion that:

one of the major objections against the employment of women is based not merely on prejudice but on actual experience. The statistical data are undeniable evidence that, with all due variations as from one type of employment to another, the rate of absenteeism is higher among women than men in each occupational group. (Myrdal & Klein, 1956, p. 104)

In a content analysis of articles in the *New York Times* for the period 1851-2004, Eric Patton and Gary Johns find that for the United States, an intense debate concerning women and absenteeism began during World War II. They argue that this debate reflects the establishment of gender-specific cultures of absenteeism, according to

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<sup>1</sup> The two latter could rather be seen as institutional barriers than handicaps. Another such barrier was gender-specific legislation, for example restrictions on working hours or nights shifts for women.

<sup>2</sup> See also Baetjer (1946) and Zweig (1952).

which women's absence from work is more socially acceptable and that these expectations have shown persistence over time and become self-fulfilling prophecies.

In this paper I trace and contextualize the origins and early history of perceived gender differences in absenteeism among British and American politicians and researchers. When and why did politicians and scholars start to regard gender differences in absenteeism as a problem? How did they explain the differences and what were the explicit and implicit policy implications? As will be seen, the paper presents a story that is closely linked to the two world wars of the twentieth century.

My approach is complementary to that of Patton and Johns in that I focus on government inquiries and scholarly literature on absenteeism rather than mass media, and in that I include the British context. I show that scholarly recognition of gender differences in absenteeism in the Anglo-Saxon world had been established well before World War II. The fact that perceptions of gender differences in absenteeism can be traced further back in time does in itself not speak to the issue of gender-specific cultures, but reinforces another suggestion made by Patton and John: that it is of equal importance to study the consequences of absenteeism as its determinants. If gender differences in absenteeism have been observed and concerned about for about a century, it is very likely that policy makers and firms have made adjustments to cope with such differences.

The paper is outlined as follows: section 2 addresses the issue of why absenteeism in general, and gender differences in particular, were considered important to study in the former half of the twentieth century; section 3 accounts for how researchers tried to explain the gender gap in absenteeism; section 4 discusses policy responses; section 5 concludes and raises questions for further research.

## **2 The articulation of a problem**

Ever since the industrial revolution wage work has been the main type of employment for the working-age population in Western societies. Moreover, most contracts for wage work have included specifications on the number and distribution of working hours over weekdays. The existence of such contracts is a precondition for the phenomenon discussed in this paper – absence from work. Employers' incentives and capacities to monitor work attendance have varied over time and across industries (Clark, 1994;

Landes, 1983; Thompson, 1967). In many early industries, production and work was influenced by seasons and often irregular. In such contexts, it was difficult, and maybe not rational, for employers to demand strict time discipline by workers (Treble & Barmby, 2011). There may also have been a cultural acceptance of Saint Monday and other expressions of irregular habits of work.

The Second Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with its higher capital intensity of production, meant profound changes in labour markets. Demand for semi-skilled workers whose skills to some extent was firm specific increased (Owen, 1995). Thus, firms got incentives to strengthen the bonds to workers and reduce turnover, which was accomplished with various changes in employment policies, including seniority-based systems for remuneration, promotion and layoffs (Edwards, 1979; Jacoby, 2004). Higher capital intensity also meant higher costs for production interruptions (Chandler, 1977). In the time clock, originally patented in 1890, employers got a more efficient technology for monitoring work attendance of large workforces. Another, and later, technological change, which further strengthened employers' incentives to demand regular work attendance, was the introduction of the assembly line. It is hardly a coincidence that Ford Auto Company established a sociological department which was in charge of keeping track of work attendance in 1913, the same year as the assembly line was put in operation (Meyer, 1981).

Although individual employers may have perceived problems with bad timekeeping and irregular work attendance far back in history, a more widespread recognition of absence from work – or absenteeism – among politicians and scholars came during World War I.

In Britain, a massive mobilization and reallocation of labour was required to replace enlisted men, maintain production of necessary goods and increase production of arms and munition. At the outbreak of the war, the British armed forces relied on volunteers, of which many were men in urban, industrial centers. Almost one fifth of men employed in the iron and steel industry were enlisted and the share was even higher (23.8 percent) in the strategically vital production of explosives (Adams, 1975, p. 238). In the beginning of the war, the government relaxed existing regulations on working hours (Jones, 1994, pp. 44–45). In munitions factories, this meant that 8-hour shifts

were replaced by 12-hour shifts, six days a week and the introduction of night shifts. Yet, munition factories could not meet the rapidly increasing demand. Lack of artillery shells caused a political crisis in the spring of 1915. In response to this, a new coalition government established a Ministry of Munitions, with the purpose of overseeing, coordinating and regulating production (Jones, 2000, pp. 46–47). Recruitment, training and management of munition workers came to be central parts of the Ministry's work. A key task was to find ways to replace skilled male workers, represented by strong craft-based unions, with untrained women, so called 'dilution' (Braybon & Summerfield, 1987). The solution was often to simplify machines or increase division of labour.

The replacement of men by women in industry received scholarly attention from an early stage. The Section of Economic Science and Statistics of the British Association of Science made an inquiry into the matter in 1915 with local studies in London, Birmingham, Glasgow and Newcastle, whose results were published the following year (Kirkaldy, 1916).<sup>3</sup> The report summarized employers' opinions about women's performance.<sup>4</sup> According to the responding employers, women were inferior to men with regard to characteristics such as "organising power", "interest in business", "ambition", "self-reliance", "resourcefulness" and "physical strength", but superior or at least equal to men with regard to "manual dexterity and deftness", "in routine work" and "in 'cul-de-sac' positions" (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 81). There were also some qualities where the employers disagreed, namely "conscientiousness", "staying power" and "regularity" (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 80).<sup>5</sup> Whereas some firms thought that women were more regular in work, other firms had the opposite opinion.

In clerical work, particularly in banks, women were sometimes found to have higher sickness absence.<sup>6</sup> In a retail firm, the employer complained about "Frequent short absences" of "inexperienced women" (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 209). These negative opinions were balanced by more positive opinions. In the shipbuilding industry in Clyde valley, employers "agreed that women are, on the whole, excellent time-keepers. Not only are they punctual in their attendance at starting-time, but they are seldom off work for any

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<sup>3</sup> The report on women in industry was written by James Cunnison and approved by W. R. Scott, Adam Smith Professor of Political Economy at the University of Glasgow.

<sup>4</sup> The investigators noted that the employers' opinions mainly concerned women with little education (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 81).

<sup>5</sup> "Lack of staying power" referred to a perceived inability of women to work overtime (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 204).

<sup>6</sup> Due to "continuous work with figures and a sense of responsibility" (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 204).



lengthy period.” (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 113).<sup>7</sup> In the engineering and metals trades in Birmingham, “The majority of the employers were agreed about the good timekeeping of the women” (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 156). In the manufacture of artificial manure in Glasgow “Timekeeping by women was good as compared with men’s” (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 164). Among conductors and drivers at the Glasgow tramways, “the women employed do not lose much working time; they are more often off than were the class of men employed before the war, but not more so than the class employed since” (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 184).

Overall, the inquiry of the British Association gave a relatively positive image of the performance of women in industry. It certainly did not present overwhelming evidence of women as poor time-keepers, rather the opposite. The reviewer of the inquiry’s report established that “Women have indeed proved to be regular time-keepers” (Price, 1916, p. 504).

The British Association’s inquiry into women’s work was largely based on qualitative statements. Through the Health of Munition Workers Committee (HMWC), the Ministry of Munition sought to achieve a better understanding of the relationship between working conditions and output (Braybon & Summerfield, 1987, p. 87).<sup>8</sup> One of the reports that HMWC sponsored was Thomas Loveday’s *The Causes and Conditions of Lost Time*, published in 1917, which pioneered the study of quantitative data on absenteeism. His report is based on observations from “the records of lost time in a number of [munition] factories” (Loveday, 1917, p. 42). Most of the evidence Loveday presented was not directly comparing men and women, but for one large factory department, characterized as “light work”, with a gender-mixed workforce, he could compare weekly percentages of time lost for men and women from June to September 1916. On average men lost 5.5 percent of “gross normal time” and women 7.6 percent (Loveday, 1917, p. 53). Other early studies on absenteeism also applied similar ways to measure and absenteeism and typically found higher levels of lost time among women (cf. Brundage, 1920; Vernon, 1921).

As observed by historian Deborah Thom, the view on gender differences in absenteeism shifted over the course of the war (Thom, 1998, p. 166). When the British

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<sup>7</sup> For one factory, the inquiry could report the actual number of working hours lost by men and women on day shifts in a specific week. The tabulation shows that a higher percentage of the women worked all scheduled hours (66 percent, compared to 56 percent for men) (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 113).

<sup>8</sup> The HMWC has been called the “best-remembered effort” of the Ministry of Munitions (Jones, 1994, p. 47).

Association investigated women in industry, it did so without an explicit assumption about gender differences in work attendance. When the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry investigated gender differences in absenteeism some years later, it did so with the assumption that women were worse time-keepers.<sup>9</sup>

Although the United States entered World War I later, its labour market also became tight. Concriptions to the armed forces, in combination with the winding up of migration from Europe, reduced the supply of labour. Recruitment agents were travelling around the country trying to poach already employed workers. In this setting characterized by severe shortage of labour, managers saw their prerogatives being challenged and feared a general breakup of the work ethic. Strikes became frequent and levels of personnel turnover skyrocketed, which also caught considerable scholarly attention. Another, related problem was rising levels of absenteeism. A manager complained that “if you can tell me any way in which we can distribute the thousands of men that are hanging around our moving picture shows at 11 o’clock in the morning waiting to get in, you will help us to solve some of our labour shortage problem” (quote in (Jacoby, 2004, pp. 100–101). This quote is not only illustrating a common opinion but is also interesting as it suggests that absenteeism was mainly perceived as a problem among male workers. In fact, the American debate on absenteeism during World War I did not put much focus on women or gender differences. Things were different during World War II.

As mentioned above, the debate on women and absenteeism in the United States flushed up during the 1940s (Patton & Johns, 2007). It was not only that women were thought of as being more absent than men; there were also differences in how the press described and explained absenteeism. While male absenteeism was associated with “shirking, hangovers, horse racing and other questionable reasons”, female absenteeism was most often, and increasingly so towards the end of the war, related to domestic duties (Patton & Johns, 2007, s. 1595). More sympathy was expressed for women who did not show up at work and some debaters called for social reforms that would support working women. As in Britain during World War I the American authorities initiated

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<sup>9</sup> Thom argues that the committee, which published its final report in 1919, implicitly made an unfair comparison of women war-time workers with male workers in peace-time (Thom, 1998, p. 167). She reasons “in many ways the reasons for poor time-keeping lay in wartime, not the gender of the worker”. To back up this statement, Thom points at evidence from the textile industry, where women had a long tradition of employment and had made “adequate arrangements for childcare and household tasks”, and where women actually had lower rates of absenteeism than men.

systematic research into the relationship between work, health and output, for example under the auspices of the Army Industrial Hygiene Laboratory, established in 1942. Many of the empirical studies that were done in the United States in these years had a medical perspective and were consequently focused on sick leave (Baetjer, 1946).

If the problem of women being absent from work was widely articulated in the American debate for the first time during World War II, the discussion in Great Britain reoccurred against a background of massive mobilization of women in the labour force.<sup>10</sup> As during the former war, working hours were extended. In 1941, women in factories worked 66 hours per week and night shifts were common. Anaemia and nervous disorders, colds and gastritis struck particularly hard against women. The Industrial Health Research Board maintained that “the interaction of the low pre-war standards of health among women, with the excessive hours expected of them in war work, the strains imposed by domestic work and their relatively poor diet during the war” (Braybon & Summerfield, 1987, p. 223). Some government officials suspected that malingering further boosted rates of absenteeism among married women in particular. The literature suggests that the explicit focus on married women is something new. Marital status was not an aspect that was emphasized in discussions on British women in the labour market during World War I.<sup>11</sup> It may have been the case that World War II in some ways was even more difficult for married women than the former war. The German blockade was more effective this time. Buying food and other necessities required long hours of queuing. Many employers regarded the shopping as the main cause of why so many married women failed to show up at work. A number of reforms were suggested to improve the situation: including the establishment of factory shops, ordering and delivery service, priority for women workers and neighborhood shopping leagues (Braybon & Summerfield, 1987, p. 244). Neither of these suggestions was widely applied. In practice, it seems like most employers basically gave women permission to leave to shop during working hours.

A profound difference between the two world wars is that whereas women were temporary participants in the labour market during World War I, considerable numbers of British and American women remained gainfully employed after World War II

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<sup>10</sup> The share of women in the British labour force increased from 17 to 46 percent during World War II (Carruthers, 1990, p. 232).

<sup>11</sup> As Thom observes, women workers in World War I were often labelled ‘girls’, which concealed the fact that a substantial part of them were married and/or mothers (Thom, 1998, p. 165).

(Carruthers, 1990, p. 255; Goldin, 1990, pp. 152–154; Myrdal & Klein, 1956, pp. 58–59; Walby, 1986, p. 205). While the media discussion on absenteeism may have faded out in the transition to peace-time conditions, scholarly attention did not. In many countries, the situation in the labour market remained tight. How to achieve an efficient use of labour in a society characterized by ‘full employment’ became a prime concern (Beveridge, 1944). Towards this background, absenteeism was often discussed in relation to labour turnover, as clearly seen in the simultaneous publications of Hilde Behrend’s *Absence under Full Employment* and Joyce Long’s *Labour Turnover under Full Employment* in 1951. The mentioned studies share a focus on the relationship between macroeconomic conditions and absenteeism, but also include discussions of factors at the workplace level. Moreover, the development towards more integrated production processes that had begun in the former half of the twentieth century became even more widespread after World War II. One could say that gender differences in absenteeism were discovered as a result of the labour supply shocks during times of war, but there were more profound forces in motion that served to preserve the interest of scholars and policy makers for the issue in the latter half of the century.

### **3 Explanations**

When the British Association surveyed employers’ views on absenteeism in 1915 it found conflicting evidence; some employers thought that women were less absent, others that women were more absent. The investigators suggested that the seemingly contradictory statements could be caused by selection effects: “The favourable opinion is generally given in occupations which attract a superior type of girl; the unfavourable in those which, on the whole, are recruited from a rougher type” (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 81). Primarily, what the investigators had in mind was class background: “women from better class homes, in which regular habits are taught, are as amenable to the discipline of business and as conscientious in the performance of their work as are the men” (Kirkaldy, 1916, p. 81).<sup>12</sup> Implicit in the investigators understanding was an idea that absenteeism to a great extent was socially determined, rather than based on biological differences.

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<sup>12</sup> They also suggested that some employers had been selective in their design of work, to minimize women’s disadvantages.

Subsequent studies of absenteeism had a heavy empirical focus, with lengthy methodological discussions. A common idea was that some causes of absence were more or less constant and could not be affected, whereas other causes could be affected by management actions. Loveday is an example in point. He distinguishes between “uncontrollable” and “controllable” causes of absence.<sup>13</sup> The difference was not clear cut; rather it was a matter of more and less. Among the less uncontrollable factors Loveday mentioned “[d]omestic duties of married women” alongside with things such as “sickness and accident”, “lack of housing accommodation”, “bad weather and dark streets” (Loveday, 1917, s. 42-43). Loveday did not discuss in what way married women’s duties affected absenteeism directly (having to take care of sick children or queuing to shop food) or indirectly (the double burden of homework and gainful work leading to fatigue and higher morbidity). When summarizing the results in 1919, Douglas did not put great emphasis on gender differences but noted that:

“[...] women have an almost uniformly higher rate of absenteeism than men. This is caused not only by their greater susceptibility to illness but also by the pressure of home ties which often compel them to be absent from or tardy at their work. This is, of course, especially true of married women.” (Douglas 1919: 601)

While no attempts were made to estimate the direct influence of domestic duties on women’s absenteeism, researchers typically tried to disentangle total absenteeism and sickness-related absenteeism. Many focused exclusively on sick leave. As Douglas noted, these studies came to the conclusion that women had not only higher total rates of absenteeism but also higher rates of disability due to sickness.

A popular explanation for the high levels of absenteeism during both world wars was that long working hours and high work intensity led to ‘industrial fatigue’. From this perspective, the number and distribution of working hours was a central variable. Vernon used variation in working hours between men and women in three munition factories for 17-18 consecutive months in 1916 and 1917 to demonstrate the effects of fatigue (Vernon, 1921, pp. 144–145). He found higher percentages of lost time in the factory with the longest working hours and that the level of lost time decreased when

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<sup>13</sup> Some years later, Vernon makes a distinction between “unavoidable” and “avoidable” causes of lost time (Vernon, 1921, p. 142).

working hours were reduced. Vernon also found that where women worked shorter hours than men they also had less lost time. Summarizing the experiences of World War II, Baetjer (1946, p. 97) concluded that “many authorities believe that the excess sick-absenteeism among industrial women is in part due to the fact that women often have home responsibilities and duties to perform in addition to their jobs”. Baetjer also mentioned other, complementary, explanations. For example that women’s expectations and life plans could make them less committed to work: “Some [women] do not view their employment with the same sense of responsibility as do men and, therefore, remain away from work for less cause or report unjustified absences as due to sickness” (Baetjer, 1946, p. 98).<sup>14</sup>

An alternative view, although not specifically aimed towards explaining gender differences, was articulated by Elton Mayo and the human relations school (Fox & Scott, 1943; Mayo, 1945). Mayo regarded absenteeism as an expression of a fundamental societal change – the transition from an “established” society to an “adaptive” society. In the established society, before the industrial revolution, every individual had its assigned role whereas in the adaptive society individuals had to cope with constant changes. In the adaptive society the role of labour management was particularly important. Managers who were responsive to the needs of individual workers and the dynamics of groups could achieve high levels of attendance even in settings with high work intensity. Mayo’s ideas inspired a great deal of research into the sociology and psychology of work in general, including absenteeism. From a human relations perspective, women’s higher rates of absenteeism could be explained by their lower degree of preparation for and experience of wage work. E. L. Collis’ comment upon Lynch’s study on female employees at the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company in the middle of World War II, shows that the fatigue and human relations views could be combined: “Not easily can human nature [...] adjust itself to the call for a working week of six or seven days, with 60 hours or more of productive activity. Long hours and unusual shifts inevitable mean minor illnesses and nervous exhaustion” (Lynch, 1943).

Some explanations of women’s higher rates of absenteeism were not frequently mentioned in the studies reviewed for this paper. One non-frequent explanation is that

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<sup>14</sup> Baetjer (1946, pp. 98–99) also refers to discussions on women’s poor diet and clothing habits.

women were exposed to more stress and monotony on the job than men. This view was dismissed by Baetjer based on the observation that gender differences in morbidity were seen also among the non-working population (Baetjer, 1946, p. 98). Neither was the gender gap in pay discussed as the cause of higher absenteeism among women. The reverse causation was more common, as will be seen below.

#### **4 What to do about the problem?**

Having established that the issue of absence from work was articulated and debated as a political and managerial problem with particular intensity during the two world wars, that there were perceptions, backed by occasional studies and data on sickness claimants, that women had higher rates of absenteeism, the question is what conclusions contemporary observers made. What advices did early students of absenteeism give to policy makers? Most of them were fairly modest in their claims. A common explicit policy suggestion was to encourage companies and authorities to keep better records of absenteeism in general and sickness in particular. In fact, most early researchers in the field complained over poor and inconsistent record keeping. Better records would not only allow better research, but would, as phrased by John Keir (Keir, 1917, p. 148), “serve as an indirect fining system, since a man’s record is a factor in determining whether he shall receive a raise for which he has applied”.

In spite of modest claims of researchers, there are clear pieces of evidence that policy and decision makers – in political congregations and in companies – took action to against absenteeism. When receiving Loveday’s report, and related studies, the British Ministry of Munitions made the conclusion that factories should reduce working hours and work on unpleasant hours. This lesson seems to have had a lasting effect.<sup>15</sup> Before the war, normal working hours ranged between 48 and 55.5, after the war between 44 to 48 (Vernon, 1921, p. 141). Similar lessons were made from the early experiences of World War II (Hooks, 1944, pp. 3–4). In her review for the US Army Industrial Hygiene Laboratory, Baetjer (1946: 22) concludes that: “Excessively long hours of work have been shown to lead to a decrease in output, an increase in time lost through sickness and absence without permission [...]”. In 1942, the official recommendation in

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<sup>15</sup> In a recent study, John Pencavel argues that the findings based on the work performance of British munition workers actually has shaped economists’ ideas of the (non-linear) relationship between working hours and output (Pencavel, 2015).

the United States was that working weeks should not exceed 48 hours. Based on apprehensions that women were more sensitive to fatigue, there were also suggestions that women should have shorter working hours than men and that women with household duties should work even fewer hours, “probably not more than 36 hours per week” (Baetjer, 1946, p. 25). In the light of high rates of absenteeism and turnover among married women, some observers advocated the use of part-time jobs (Baetjer, 1946, p. 25; Hooks, 1944, pp. 4–5; Myrdal & Klein, 1956, p. 100). Myrdal and Klein saw part time jobs as “a good temporary solution” but also warned for the long-term consequences of such a policy as “women may be side-tracked into a blind alley” (Myrdal & Klein, 1956, p. 163). Other suggestions on how to reduce rates of absenteeism, with relations to working hours, included rest periods, lunch breaks and holidays (Vernon, 1921).<sup>16</sup>

During World War I, and partly based on the reports from the HMWC, the British Ministry of Munitions concluded that companies should pay greater consideration into the social needs of women workers.<sup>17</sup> Canteens, child crèches, cloak rooms, lavatories, lighting, seating are examples of things that were recommended and to some extent subsidized.<sup>18</sup> Among the most important recommendations was also that firms should hire so called welfare supervisors, with a special responsibility for monitoring time keeping and make home visits.<sup>19</sup> The controlling functions of the welfare supervisor – typically a woman, often with middle- or upper-class background – are clearly seen in the following job description from a factory:

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<sup>16</sup> In addition, there was an inconclusive discussion on the relationship between night work, sickness and output (Baetjer, 1946, p. 26).

<sup>17</sup> As Thom points out, there was also an influence from the North American National Civic Federation (Thom, 1998, p. 165). The British War Office had contacted this organization already in 1915 and received a whole list of action points to facilitate the employment of women in industry. The War Office passed on these guidelines to the Ministry of Munitions. Some of the actors who were advocating ‘industrial welfare’, such as Seebohm Rowntree, had also been doing so before the war.

<sup>18</sup> Jones (1994, p. 47) claims that these measures were only implemented erratically and that the interest for improving workplace environments decreased after the war (Jones, 1994, p. 47). Similar measures were suggested by American President Roosevelt during World War II (Patton & Johns, 2007, p. 1596).

<sup>19</sup> The welfare supervisor was not a British invention. Inspiration came from the United States. During World War I and after, welfare and personnel departments became increasingly common in American firms and took over responsibility for decisions regarding hiring and firing, which previously had been in the domains of individual foremen (Jacoby, 2004, pp. 110–111). It seems like the original impetus for the professionalization of personnel management in America lacked the focus on women that was so prominent in the British case. Such a focus may instead have appeared around the time of World War II. When reviewing the American debate on absenteeism in the 1940s, Patton and Johns mention calls for “counsellors and social workers” (Patton & Johns, 2007, p. 1595).



The general work of the Supervisor will be directed to making regular inspection of the factories with a view to reducing the difficulties caused to the Factory staff through irregularity of attendance, bad time-keeping, slackness, want of good discipline, etc. among the workers. It will be the duty of the Supervisor to inquire into and endeavour to remedy the causes, from which the above difficulties have arisen. (Braybon & Summerfield, 1987, p. 93)

Originally, the British welfare inspectors were controversial in the eyes of workers and trade union officials, but it seems like they gained increased acceptance over time (Thom, 1998, p. 166). Perhaps this was because the role of welfare supervisors also changed over time as they became responsible of a wide range of welfare activities and courses.

Membership figures from one of the professional organizations, the British Institute of Personnel Management, suggests that there were around 1,000 welfare inspectors during World War I, that their numbers decreased somewhat in the 1920s, expanded again in the 1930s and even more so in the 1940s, from 812 in 1940 to over 3,000 in 1948 (Woollacott, 1994, p. 48). Basically, there was a professionalization of industrial welfare work. Over time, there was also a certain influx of men in the occupation which accelerated in the 1940s so that by 1950, the majority of the members of the Institute were men. Along with the masculinization of the profession, the emphasis on social work decreased and the occupation was accepted as a part of other managerial functions.

The growth and professionalization of personnel work was not delimited to Great Britain, it was also seen in countries such as the United States, Germany, France and Sweden (Frevert, 1988; Jacoby, 2004; Lee Downs, 1992; Robertsson, 1967). It is unclear what role welfare supervisors and personnel departments played in a wider context and in the longer run. Woollacott mentions in passing that “[s]ome welfare supervisor introduced new systems to make it possible for a pregnant woman, married or otherwise, to stay at work, such as schemes for gradually lighter work” (Woollacott, 1994, p. 34). This suggests that welfare supervisors acted against discrimination.

Based on American and British experiences from World War II, Baetjer writes that “[w]here large numbers of women are employed it may be advisable to have woman on the personnel staff to present the viewpoint of the women and to assist in interpreting to

the women the personnel policies” (Baetjer, 1946, p. 30). Among other things, the female involvement in personnel management included the question of selection. Baetjer writes:

In selecting women employees it is desirable to obtain information concerning the responsibilities which women have in connection with their homes, children, dependent relatives, and the like. Women who have heavy household duties or who have not made adequate provision for the care of their children or aged relatives should not be employed, since experience has indicated that the high labor turnover and absenteeism among women is largely due to home responsibilities. (Baetjer, 1946, p. 30)

It is difficult to imagine a more explicit argument for employment discrimination on the basis of sex and family situation. To a certain extent, Baetjer advocates gender specific personnel policies. Yet, not all of her suggested measures were intended to restrict the opportunities for female labour force participation. Medical screening should be used to achieve a better placing of workers within the firm, not to exclude workers from employment (Baetjer, 1946, pp. 99–100). Firms should also offer medical services to women workers in particular, and encourage them to seek help at an early stage. Visiting nurses or medical social workers should not mainly be involved in “checking false claims of sickness” but should “encourage the prompt return of workers to their jobs upon recovery” (Baetjer, 1946, p. 102).

Claudia Goldin associates that spread of personnel departments with increasing occupational segregation on the basis of statistical discrimination, based on the idea that women on average had shorter tenures (Goldin, 1990, p. 116). Personnel departments helped firms to create separate pathways for male and female workers, where the latter typically were referred to dead-end jobs. Many big firms with modern practices of labour management also introduced so called marriage bars, that is restrictions in hiring married women (hiring bars) or in retaining women who marry or become pregnant (firing bars). In the private sector, marriage bars were most frequently used among banks and insurance companies, where pay was related to tenure. Goldin argues that women’s jobs had early productivity crests and soon reach a situation where pay exceeded their contribution to the firm. Marriage bars helped firms to get rid of unprofitable workers. Married women’s higher rates of absenteeism would have created

similar incentives for firms, particularly if production had high fixed costs, involved a lot of teamwork, or the employer was responsible for sick pay. For other firms, the costs associated with absenteeism may be smaller, with weaker incentives to introduce welfare work and marriage bars.

It is not obvious that all firms aim to eliminate absenteeism. Some firms may find the costs of reducing absenteeism higher than the benefits and accept a certain level of failure to keep scheduled working hours (Treble & Barmby, 2011). The level of acceptance may be higher if the group of workers are relatively low paid and fill positions that are easy to find replacement for, which often has been the case with women. If women demanded lower wages than men, firms could use some of the wage discount to hire extra workers to make up for irregular time-keeping and sick leave.

During and after World War II voices for equal pay for men and women grew stronger (Jones, 2000, pp. 190–191, 198–200). In Britain, the government tried to postpone the whole matter by appointing an inquiry (Smith, 1981). The National Council of Women tried to influence the members of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay by arguing that women's lower pay had negative consequences for women's sense of citizenship, among other things resulting in greater absenteeism (Jones, 2000, p. 200). The commission indeed investigated male-female differences in absence from work, but the majority of its members drew opposite conclusions from the observed patterns. They regarded women's greater absenteeism as a motivation for not introducing legislation on equal pay, even though they supported the idea of equal pay in principle. Three of four women in the committee were dissenting with the majority view. The minority maintained "that it was unfair to penalise all women for the bad time-keeping and absenteeism of a few" (Braybon & Summerfield, 1987, p. 278).<sup>20</sup>

Also in America, demands for equal pay were raised during World War II and the debate continued in the following decades. Those who advocated and rejected equal pay shared the belief in wages as a price that should reflect labour costs.<sup>21</sup> Advocates maintained that women were equally productive as men and therefore should receive the same pay. Opponents argued that women's lower wages could be motivated by higher costs of employer's to have women on the payroll. Absenteeism, due to domestic

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<sup>20</sup> As noted by Braybon and Summerfield, the minority did not demand political measures that would facilitate the combination of work and family life for married women (childcare, laundries, shopping facilities etc.).

<sup>21</sup> This view may be contrasted against earlier ideas of that wages should be determined by social needs (Mutari, Figart, & Power, 2001, pp. 39–40).

responsibilities, was one explicitly mentioned cause of costs. To this, advocates of equal pay argued that women's higher rates of absenteeism "were caused by the job and working environment, not the individual worker" (Mutari, Figart, & Power, 2001, p. 40). Eventually, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 established the principle of equal pay for equal work. The practical importance of the legislation was limited by the extensive segregation of men and women between occupations in the labour market (Goldin, 1990, p. 201).

## **5 Conclusions and questions for further research**

Absence from work emerged as an important political and economic problem in general, and in particular with regard to women, during the two world wars of the twentieth century. The war efforts required mobilization and allocation of large numbers of women to jobs that had previously been done by men. In this context, it was of uttermost importance to maximize output, given the available workforce.

Absenteeism, most often measured as time lost in early studies, was found to be considerably higher among women than men. Early studies on absenteeism had a clear empirical focus; there was a fairly sophisticated methodological discussion on how to best measure absenteeism, but no comprehensive theoretical framework for explaining differences between groups of workers. With regard to the gender difference, there was an awareness that of women's double burden of wage work and unpaid household duties could cause absenteeism. The possible explanation that women had higher rates of absenteeism because they typically were performing more monotonous and stressful jobs, which became common in the 1970s, was seldom articulated in the former part of the twentieth century.

Early studies on absenteeism often lacked explicit policy implications. Still, the studies induced policy responses. One important conclusion was to restrict working hours. Too long working hours would only lead to 'industrial fatigue' and lower levels of output. Another measure of lasting impact was the professionalization of industrial welfare work and personnel management. It is a question for future research to find out whether the new occupational groups – welfare supervisors, medical doctors and nurses – that were established at many big companies served to restrict or expand women's opportunities in the labour market. Another likely implication of the early studies on

absenteeism was to reinforce apprehensions of differences between men and women as workers and employees. Some employers and other policy makers used the findings to motivate existing differences in the terms of employment for men and women, for example formal wage discrimination. This is also a question that needs more attention in future research. As long as it was socially acceptable to pay women less, employers could hire reserve workers to make up for temporarily non-present women. How did these employers respond to the increasing pressure for wage equalization in the decades after World War II and what were the consequences of these responses for women in the labour market more generally? To conclude, the findings in this paper calls for more attention to the long-run effects of absenteeism on labour demand.

## 6 Literature

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