

Changes in British employment

Learning objectives

In this chapter you will learn about:

- changes in the British economy that affected British workers
- changes in employment law that affected women and industrial relations.

Economic change

Between the 1950s and 1990s, Britain gradually changed from an industrial to a 'post-industrial' economy: 'blue-collar' work (jobs in industry and manufacturing) declined while 'white-collar' work (jobs in offices or in the service sector) increased. The change was not an easy one and regions where most jobs were in older industries suffered in particular: Lancashire (textiles), Glasgow (ship-building) and Tyneside or South Wales (coal-mining) suffered far more than London (commerce). There were several reasons for the decline of blue-collar work:

- Britain was the first nation to industrialise. Other countries (such as Germany and Japan) caught up and overtook Britain. They used more modern technology that began to produce better products more cheaply.
- Britain had used its Empire as a large captive market for its manufactured products. The loss of the Empire (mostly between 1947 and 1963) meant more foreign competition for British manufacturers.
- Britain had large and powerful **trade unions** that worked hard to secure the best wages for their members; high wages increased the cost of British products and made them uncompetitive.
- British governments had made full employment their top priority in their economic policy (many could remember the terrible time of mass unemployment during the Great Depression in the 1930s). They preferred to preserve jobs rather than promote efficient production. This allowed older British industries to become uncompetitive by the 1970s, leading to redundancies amongst blue-collar workers.

Source A

A table showing Britain's share of the global manufacturing trade.

Year	1950	1960	1970
Share (%)	25	17	10

Source B

A table showing the percentages of people in England and Wales employed in different types of job.

Share (%)	1951	1961	1971	1981
Agriculture and Fishing	4.8	3.4	2.8	2.2
Energy and water	6.8	4.7	6.0	7.3
Construction	6.2	6.7	7.1	6.9
Manufacturing	36.3	36.3	31.7	23.1
Services	45.8	48.8	52.4	60.5

There were also several reasons for the growth of white-collar work:

- Higher disposable income fuelled an increased demand for goods and services, that had previously been seen as unaffordable luxuries; this created more jobs.
- Governments increased spending on services such as health and education; this created a lot more **public sector** jobs.
- It is far more difficult to mechanise white-collar jobs than manufacturing jobs; fewer white-collar than blue-collar jobs were lost through **automation**.

Many women benefitted from these changes: it was felt that white-collar jobs were far more suitable for women than those in industry. There was also far more part-time white-collar work available than there had been in blue-collar industries; this allowed women to balance a job with family life. Not all women were satisfied: they were still paid on average 59 per cent the hourly pay of a male worker.

Employment law – women in work

Successive governments passed some important Acts of Parliament in the 1970s that attempted to respond to the economic changes affecting the British economy. Three Acts aimed to outlaw discrimination in female employment:

- The Equal Pay Act (1970) called for 'equal pay for equal work'. It remained voluntary for businesses until 1975. Many employers (in 80 per cent of cases successfully) claimed that the work men and women did was different so the law did not apply. This loophole was removed in 1983 by replacing 'equal work' with 'work of comparable value'.
- The Sex Discrimination Act (1975) made it illegal to treat workers of one gender less favourably than those of the other gender. While this helped in theory, in practice it was difficult and expensive for women to bring their discrimination claims to court.
- The Employment Protection Act (1975) made it illegal to sack women because they were pregnant; it gave women the right to maternity pay and to return to their jobs if they wished.

Employment law – industrial relations

A further range of Acts aimed (but failed) to improve relations between employers and employees and reduce the number of strikes (see pages 32–37):

- The Industrial Relations Act (1971), the Trade Union and Industrial Relations Act (1974) and the Employment Protection Act (1975) all tried to achieve this.
- The Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) was the first of many similar acts that have successfully improved working conditions.

Exam-style question

Study Source C and use your own knowledge. What was the purpose of this photograph? Use details from the photograph and your own knowledge to explain your answer. (8 marks)

Activities

- 1 Discuss the following questions in pairs and then share your ideas with the class:
 - a How might the changes in employment outlined above impact on people's lives?
 - b How important are jobs to people's identities?
 - c Are certain jobs associated with a particular class?
- 2 a Study Sources A and B. How useful are the statistics to an historian who wants to learn about the British economy and employment in the 1960s and 1970s?
 - b What are the key advantages and disadvantages of statistical evidence?

Source C

Female bus company employees protesting over equal employment rights in 1965.

