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## Chapter 8

**‘Equal Pay for Equal Work’:  
Women’s Wages in Soviet Russia**

Melanie Ilic

This chapter evaluates the impact of Bolshevik policy on ‘equal pay for equal work’ in the interwar period with specific reference to women’s wages. Russian socialist thought identified concerns relating to the causes and consequences of women’s low pay in the pre-revolutionary period. The Bolsheviks introduced legislative initiatives after the October revolution that provided the foundation for Soviet wages policy and included the concept of ‘equal pay for equal work’. The idealistic vision of social levelling and wage equalisation contained in the original statutes, however, was soon abandoned. Thereafter, acceptable levels of pay differentials were set within a framework determined by an overall wages strategy. The officially acceptable levels of inequality in pay, therefore, varied over time.

The classic western studies of Soviet labour and wages policy in this period pay little attention to the inequalities of earnings between women and men.<sup>1</sup> Other commentaries,

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<sup>1</sup> A. Bergson, *The Structure of Soviet Wages: a Study in Socialist Economics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944; J.G. Chapman, *Real Wages in Soviet Russia Since 1928*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963; G.R. Barker, *Some Problems of Incentives and Labour Productivity in Soviet Industry*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1956; Birmingham Bureau of Research on Russian Economic Conditions, ‘Wages of Industrial Workers in the USSR’, *Memorandum no. 6*, Birmingham, 1932.

including those of contemporary observers, uncritically accept the policy of 'equal pay for equal work' as an accomplished fact in the Soviet Union in the interwar years. Margaret Dewar's study of post-revolutionary labour policy, for example, states in parentheses that 'there was, of course, equal pay for equal work', whilst Peter Francis, in his account of working in a Soviet factory in the 1930s, noted that 'rates of pay for the same work by men and women are identical'.<sup>2</sup> Women's relative wage rates did improve during the interwar period, but whether this was the direct result of the policy of 'equal pay for equal work' has yet to be determined.

In western countries under the impact of industrialisation only a small proportion of women were the household's sole wage earner or main breadwinner. Women's secondary status in contributing to household income was used, in part, to justify their lower wages, and has been identified by historians as evidence of discrimination against women. Whilst the minimum wage was introduced in an attempt to combat low pay and the worst excesses of industrial exploitation, 'family wage' debates presupposed an ideal of a non-working wife and the removal of married women from the labour force. The work which women performed within

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Dewar, *Labour Policy in the USSR, 1917-1928*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1956, p. 139, notes 'in March 1919, the average wage for a male worker was 83r. 19k., that for a female worker 56r. 28k'; Peter Francis, *I Worked in a Soviet Factory*, London: Jarrolds Publishers Ltd., 1939, p. 83. See also S.M. Kingsbury and M. Fairchild, *Factory, Family and Woman in the Soviet Union*, New York: Putnam, 1935; J. Freeman, *The Soviet Worker: an Account of the Economic, Social and Cultural Status of Labour in the USSR*, Westport, CN: Martin Lawrence, 1973 [orig. 1932]; E. Winter, *Red Virtue: Human Relations in the New Russia*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1933, p. 104.

the household and in child care, needless to say, was not assigned a monetary value in either the West or the Soviet Union.

In an article investigating female-male wage ratios during the industrial revolution in Britain, Joyce Burnette argued contrary to the view that women received a 'customary wage' (that is, one which reflected their secondary status in the industrial labour force) and that women were, in fact, paid a 'market wage', which reflected their true economic contribution in a competitive labour market.<sup>3</sup> Burnette suggests that women workers paid on time-rates received lower wages because they worked fewer hours, and female piece-rate workers earned lower wages because they produced less. Her findings suggest that women, on the whole, were paid a wage, albeit lower than men's, which related directly to their levels of productivity, output and hours of work. She concluded that, 'there was no obvious incongruence between wages and productivity. Women seem to have been paid market wages, and the assertion that women were paid customary wages needs to be revised'.<sup>4</sup>

#### Women's Wages in Pre-Revolutionary Russia:

In her study of women's industrial employment in pre-revolutionary Russia, Rose Glickman notes that, despite a closer parity of wages in female dominated industries, generally, 'women were paid less because they would accept less', and in examining structural factors, 'women

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<sup>3</sup> J. Burnette, 'An Investigation of the Female-Male Wage Gap during the Industrial Revolution in Britain', *Economic History Review*, no. 2, vol. L, 1997, pp. 257-81.

<sup>4</sup> Burnette, 'Female-Male Wage Gap', p. 278.

earned less because they were women'.<sup>5</sup> The consequences of women's low pay were evident to contemporary observers, and particularly to the socialist critics of the capitalist economy. Many women were forced to supplement meagre wages by resorting to prostitution, seeking charitable relief or by entering into unsatisfactory marriages as a source of economic security. On a more basic level, as Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, observed, women who earned lower wages were under nourished in comparison with their male colleagues. Krupskaya identified women's wage earning capacity as a possible means of securing their economic independence.<sup>6</sup> Low wages also meant that most working women had insufficient money or time to join trade unions or to participate in their activities. It was virtually impossible, therefore, for women to campaign collectively for improvements in their own conditions of employment, and they often had to rely on sympathetic male colleagues for this.

The plentiful supply of cheap female labour, however, also served to depress wages for male workers and gave rise to tensions in the workers' movement. Many male workers, faced with competition from cheaper female labour, were hostile to the very idea of women working for wages. If women had to work for wages, men resented the challenge to their patriarchal status

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<sup>5</sup> R. Glickman, *Russian Factory Women: Workplace and Society, 1880-1914*, London: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 113, 114.

<sup>6</sup> Sablina (N.K. Krupskaya), *Zhenshchina-Rabotnitsa* (orig., 1901) p. 8. See also E. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997, pp. 29-30, and Glickman, *Russian Factory Women*, pp. 239-40.

posed by the idea that women could possibly earn as much as men were paid.<sup>7</sup> There was also some concern amongst more conservative thinkers that women's independent wage earning capacity may encourage wives to leave their husbands.

Although it did not directly address the issue of women's low pay, the Labour Programme of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party, adopted at their 1903 congress, looked to ways of protecting the working class from 'physical and moral degeneration' by calling for restrictions on the hours and conditions of work, the introduction of statutory maternity leave, provisions for child care and the regulation of procedures for the payment of wages.<sup>8</sup> Despite such concerns and the vociferous championing of the minimum wage, the concept of 'equal pay for equal work' was conspicuously absent from the demands of the 1905 'revolutionaries' and, with one or two exceptions, from the programmes of the Russian trade unions which emerged in the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> It was absent too from the 'bourgeois feminist' programme of the All-Russian Union of Equal Rights for Women and the agenda of the 1908 First All-Russian Women's Congress.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Glickman, *Russian Factory Women*, pp. 159-60. See also J. McDermid and A. Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution: Female Bolsheviks and Women Workers in 1917*, London: UCL Press, 1999, p. 106.

<sup>8</sup> 'Programma Rossiiskoi Sotsial-Demokraticheskoi Rabochei Partii' (1903) in *VKP(b) v rezolyutsyakh i resheniyakh s"ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK*, Moscow, 1940, vol. 1, pp. 21-3, and in English translation in Dewar, *Labour Policy*, pp. 158-9.

<sup>9</sup> Glickman, *Russian Factory Women*, pp. 198-9.

<sup>10</sup> L.H. Edmondson, *Feminism in Russia, 1900-1917*, London: Heinemann, 1984.

The concept of 'equal pay for equal work' had emerged as part of the socialist reform agenda by 1917, though it was far from a universal demand amongst workers.<sup>11</sup> Initially, the political debates were framed rather cautiously and were formulated within the remit of a general concern to combat poverty and improve overall living standards. The mass expansion of female employment during the First World War had depressed the overall level of wages and had given rise to calls for the introduction of a minimum wage as a means of securing higher rates of pay for both women and men.<sup>12</sup> The concentration of the female workers in specific areas of production and in particular industries (primarily in unskilled jobs paying the lowest wages) allowed only limited scope for comparisons with men of wage payments by identified tasks.<sup>13</sup> The Bolshevik-sponsored women's magazine, *Rabotnitsa* (*Woman Worker*), however, was quick to realise that the minimum wage would only be of real benefit to women if it was combined with 'equal pay for equal work', a policy which was recognised as problematic because of the reception it would receive from male workers and factory committees. Where it was in evidence, the support of male workers for 'equal pay for equal work' can be viewed in two different ways, as Diane Koenker has highlighted:

When we read that striking workers demanded equal pay for men and women, this could mean several things: the strikers were idealists and thought women deserved

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, J. McDermid and A. Hillyar, *Women and Work in Russia, 1880-1930: a Study in Continuity through Change*, London: Longman, 1998, p. 166.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, L. S., 'Vserossiiskaya konferentsiya professional'nykh soyuzov', *Rabotnitsa*, no. 5, 1917, pp. 2-3, and K. Samoilova, 'Primer, dostoinyi podrazhaniya', *Rabotnitsa*, no. 5, 1917, pp. 6-8.

<sup>13</sup> McDermid and Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution*, p. 161.

equal pay for equal work, or else strikers hoped that by raising the cost to an employer of hiring women, these workers would no longer be a bargain, and their jobs would return to men.<sup>14</sup>

Campaigners for improvements in conditions of employment for women workers continued to include the principle of 'equal pay for equal work', alongside pressure for the introduction of a minimum wage, and they called on the male-dominated trade unions to support them.<sup>15</sup> Despite these efforts, women remained concentrated in jobs rewarded with the lowest pay.

#### Early Bolshevik Policy on Wages:

The principle of 'equal pay for equal work' (as distinct from the minimum wage) was included in a number of legislative initiatives introduced by the Bolsheviks after the October revolution. On 19 January 1918 a decree that set out the norms of wages for Petrograd metal workers included the provision that, 'women workers employed in the same tasks as men in quality and quantity shall receive the same wage'.<sup>16</sup> On 22 September 1918 minimum pay

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<sup>14</sup> D. Koenker, 'Moscow in 1917: the View from Below', in D.H. Kaiser, ed., *The Workers' Revolution in Russia, 1917: the View from Below*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 87-8.

<sup>15</sup> N. Sibiryakova, 'Zhenskii trud i zadachi professional'nykh soyuzov', *Rabotnitsa*, no. 7, 1917, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> *O normakh zarabotnoi platy rabochim metallicheskoi promyshlennosti Petrograda i ego okrestnostei*, *Sobranie uzakonenii i rasporyazhenii RSFSR*, 1918, 16 / 242; see also Dewar, *Labour Policy*, p. 165.



rates were introduced for adult workers ‘without distinction by sex’.<sup>17</sup> The 1918 Labour Code stipulated the payment of a minimum wage and set out restrictions on the employment of female labour, but did not specifically require ‘equal pay for equal work’.<sup>18</sup> The principle found further legislative enactment in a June 1920 decree on wage tariffs that stipulated, ‘women undertaking the same quantity and quality of work as male workers shall be paid the same as men’.<sup>19</sup>

In its early formulations, Soviet wages policy was not only concerned with the principles and procedures for the correct payment of wages, but it also embodied concerns for social justice by raising overall living standards and reducing levels of social inequality. There were attempts to set down a ‘maximum’ as well as a minimum wage and to determine wage differentials within predetermined parameters. A grading system setting out the various tariffs for wage payments, supplemented by a complex system of grade coefficients, was introduced for all waged workers and salaried employees. The grade coefficients were designed to reduce the discrepancy in payments between the most lowly and highly paid workers.

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<sup>17</sup> Decree of VTsIK, *O zarabotnoi plate rabochikh i sluzhashchikh v sovetskikh uchrezhdeniyakh*, *Sobranie zakonov i rasporyazhenii RSFSR*, 1918, 69 / 747; see also Dewar, *Labour Policy*, p. 169.

<sup>18</sup> Decree of VTsIK, *Kodeks zakonov o trude*, *Sobranie zakonov i rasporyazhenii RSFSR*, 1918, 87-88 / 918; see also Dewar, *Labour Policy*, pp. 174-6. On the 1918 Labour Code restrictions, see Melanie Ilic, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy: From ‘Protection’ to ‘Equality’*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> *Obshchee polozhenie o tarife*, *Sobranie zakonov i rasporyazhenii RSFSR*, 1920, 61-2 / 276; see also Dewar, *Labour Policy*, p. 195.

The social justice and welfare foundations of levelling and equalisation embodied in early Soviet wages policy soon came under attack. The minimisation of pay differentials was seen to have a number of negative consequences. Low wages were a major cause of worker dissatisfaction, but wage increases tended to outstrip increases in productivity.<sup>20</sup> In practice, wage levelling reduced the differentiation between unskilled and skilled workers in such a way that it acted as a disincentive for workers to improve their level of skill. Workers also had little incentive to raise output or increase their rates of productivity as a means of increasing their earnings.<sup>21</sup> Insufficient differential in wages also contributed towards the high levels of labour turnover as workers changed jobs in the hope of securing a higher wage.<sup>22</sup>

With the transition to the New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1921 and the restoration of market relations, the principle of wage levelling was effectively undermined. Wage levelling was now criticised for having had a negative impact on industrial productivity. A 10 September 1921 decree determined that, henceforth, wages were to be directly related to levels of output and any increases in payments were only to be permitted in relation to increases in productivity.<sup>23</sup> The grading system for the payment of wages and salaries was simplified to a seventeen point scale with a system of coefficients to determine differentials

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<sup>20</sup> Barker, *Some Problems of Incentives*, p. 54, and E.H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, vol. 1, London: Penguin, 1958, p. 394.

<sup>21</sup> Barker, *Some Problems of Incentives*, p. 43.

<sup>22</sup> Freeman, *Soviet Worker*, p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> *Osonovnoe polozhenie po tarifnom voprosu, Sobranie zakonov i rasporyazhenii RSFSR*, 1921, 67 / 513; see also Dewar, *Labour Policy*, pp. 211-12.

between unskilled and skilled workers as well as between waged workers and salaried employees. The bottom nine grades provided the scale for waged workers, differentiated on a ratio of roughly 1:3.5. Including salaried employees, the overall level of differentiation on the seventeen point scale was 1:8. The system was designed to encourage workers to acquire more skills, but the incentives diminished as workers improved their level of qualifications.<sup>24</sup> The system of grades and coefficients was subject to modifications throughout the interwar period.

In November 1921, People's Commissar for Labour, V.V. Shmidt, spoke at the *Zhenotdel* national congress about the need to improve labour protection measures for women and, more generally, on wages policy. He acknowledged the wide variation in wages paid to women, and that female workers, especially working girls, were often paid extremely low wages. This had allowed employers, including those in state industries, to exploit young women in particular by hiring them in place of more expensive male workers. Women were hired more readily because they were cheaper, not because they were more productive. Historical experience, Shmidt claimed, had shown men to be more productive workers than women in view of their physical strength.<sup>25</sup>

On 'equal pay for equal work', Shmidt claimed that if the policy was operative in reality employers would employ men rather than women because men were believed to be more productive. Current conditions of production, he claimed, required high levels of physical

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<sup>24</sup> Barker, *Some Problems of Incentives*, pp. 44-7.

<sup>25</sup> RGASPI 17/10/10/150-2, 171-2, dated 3 November 1921. See also Wood, *Baba and the Comrade*, p. 158.

strength and men were more capable of providing this.<sup>26</sup> He argued, therefore, that the proper implementation of ‘equal pay for equal work’ would lead to a displacement of women from production, but that this would be a temporary phenomenon lasting until women achieved equivalent levels of productivity. He argued further that it was not in the interests of the trade unions to allow the replacement of one group of workers by another and that the labour organisations should protect the right to work of all women and men. It was not in women’s long term interests for their labour to be devalued in relation to men’s and their wages needed to be supported by the policy of ‘equal pay for equal work’.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear from this example that, despite Bolshevik rhetoric, age old prejudices against the employment of women remained in the interwar period. Employers looked to ways of minimising expenditure on wages by employing the cheapest sources of labour. It was commonly believed that men were more productive workers than women, despite the fact that individual studies did not always substantiate this. A study conducted at the ‘Dinamo’ factory in 1932, for example, concluded that there was no indication the women were less productive than men employed in the same job.<sup>28</sup>

The protective labour laws introduced by the Bolsheviks after October 1917 also had negative consequences for women’s pay and employment prospects in the interwar period, as well as differentials in wages. Speaking at a *Zhenotdel* meeting in 1923, Bolshevik activist Aleksandra Kollontai argued that employers preferred to hire older women and girls because

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<sup>26</sup> RGASPI 17/10/10/173.

<sup>27</sup> RGASPI 17/10/10/173.

<sup>28</sup> GARF 5451/16/ 966/7.

they were less likely to become pregnant and, thereby, make claims on the enterprise for maternity entitlements.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the pre-revolutionary period, women were now sometimes regarded as *more* costly because of the demands placed on their time by their domestic and child care responsibilities.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the Soviet government introduced legislation around this time that made the dismissal of women who were pregnant or with dependent children illegal.<sup>31</sup>

Workers' incomes in Soviet Russia were composed of more than a monetary wage, and a number of factors need to be taken into account when considering rates of pay. Maternity payments were one of a range of social insurance and welfare benefits available to workers. The government also sponsored a network of 'mother and child welfare centres' and nurseries, although these remained underdeveloped throughout the interwar period. Other supplementary payments included sickness and disability benefits as well as pensions. Those in paid employment were given access to cheap accommodation, rest homes and sanatoria, to education and health facilities and vocational training, as well as to supplies of scarce and rationed goods. Such provisions were more readily available in urban rather than rural areas and contributed to the inequalities of income between industrial and agricultural workers.

Whilst the system of social insurance payments and welfare benefits, and the taxation system, may have operated to some extent in such a way as to have a levelling impact on actual incomes, other factors contributed towards inequalities in pay. The monetary wage could be

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<sup>29</sup> RGASPI 17/10/11/140, dated 5 November 1923.

<sup>30</sup> McDermid and Hillyar, *Women and Work in Russia*, p. 195.

<sup>31</sup> Ilic, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy*, pp. 59-61.

supplemented by the payment of bonuses for production above the basic norm of output, with awards for exemplary work (such as the economic use of materials or the introduction of labour saving production methods), and by payments in kind. Such payments could account for significant disparities in actual incomes, but are not always easy to measure. Even in tasks where women and men were employed at the same grade, men were often more likely to be rewarded with bonuses which boosted their income, as Kingsbury and Fairchild highlighted using examples from Elektozavod in 1930:

... with payment including a bonus based on output, the difference in the earnings of the sexes within one grade amounted to from three to five per cent. Women in the third grade of work, for example, were receiving an average monthly wage of 98 rubles, men 100 rubles; in the fourth grade, women were averaging 110 rubles, men 118 rubles; in the fifth grade, women 122 rubles, men 128 rubles.<sup>32</sup>

The gendered foundations of Soviet protective laws allowed identified groups of workers to supplement their incomes, whilst restricting the employment potential of others. Male workers were able to supplement their basic wage by overtime work and on night shifts, where the employment of women was restricted. Higher wages were paid to workers employed in dangerous occupations and in underground tasks, where the employment of women was strictly prohibited. Women's overall earning potential, therefore, was constrained in comparison with men's. Women's maximum earnings were, on the whole, 'lower than that

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<sup>32</sup> Kingsbury and Fairchild, *Factory, Family and Woman*, pp. 49-50.

of men'.<sup>33</sup> Such factors need to be taken into account when assessing the inequalities in wages between women and men.

Wage variations were not only a function of labour productivity and legal regulations. Actual incomes were subject to variations, not only between urban and rural areas or between different regions of the country, but also between and within the various industrial sectors. In the period immediately following the revolution and during NEP, workers employed in privately-owned enterprises were likely to receive higher wages than those in state-run enterprises. Workers employed in the male-dominated heavy industrial sector were likely to be paid more than those in the female-dominated light industrial and service sectors. Full-time and permanent jobs in the industrial sector, where men constituted the majority of the labour force before the Second World War, were often better paid than part-time, seasonal, temporary and casual jobs, which may have been more suited to women's employment needs. On the other hand, white-collar work, where the employment of women expanded significantly in the interwar years, was more highly remunerated than shop-floor jobs in industry.

One of the most significant determinants of income variation was the basic system of payment. Workers were paid by either piece-rates or by time-rates. The official wage scales set out only the minimum level of payment for each grade, but in the 1920s 'actual earnings were far in excess of the wage scales'.<sup>34</sup> Despite official concern over the extensive use of piece-rates, workers employed under these conditions were more easily able to supplement

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<sup>33</sup> Kingsbury and Fairchild, *Factory, Family and Woman*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>34</sup> Dewar, *Labour Policy*, p. 135.

their basic wage by raising levels of output in excess of the established norm s.<sup>35</sup> Insofar as 'equal pay for equal work' was concerned, Dewar conceded that, 'thus, workers of the same grade and skill, often working under identical conditions, received totally different wages'.<sup>36</sup> Louis Fischer similarly pointed out that 'men on the same job, on the same kind of machine, earn different incomes. Individual effort and ability determine earning power'.<sup>37</sup> More men were employed on a system of piece-rate payments, leaving women in a disadvantageous position.

The Soviet government and trade unions collected detailed data on the changing structure and composition of the industrial labour force and wage rates during the interwar period. Some of this data has found its way into publications, but much more survives in the archives. These studies took place at the level of individual enterprises and in different regions of the country. In their generalised and summative format they offer an overview of the composition of the Soviet labour force according to levels of skill, and thereby wage differentials, as well as sex, age and even occasionally ethnic origin.

In addition to the studies of labour force composition, the government statistical bureaux undertook the collection of detailed wage data in the mid-1920s and again in 1934. These data set out the actual average basic monetary wage payments made to workers employed in different sectors of industry for the whole month of March in the years from 1924 to 1928,

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<sup>35</sup> Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, pp. 383-93.

<sup>36</sup> Dewar, *Labour Policy*, p. 136.

<sup>37</sup> Louis Fischer, *Machines and Men in Russia*, New York: H. Smith, 1932, p. 160.



and in October in 1934.<sup>38</sup> Some of the published data give an indication of the proportion of the labour force employed on a system of piece-rate payments, the average level of skill, including grade coefficient, the number of days worked during the month, as well as the proportional breakdown of wage payments to workers according to a set of cohorts. They also give an indication of the different rates of pay earned by women and men.

Women's wage rates remained substantially lower than men's throughout the interwar period, and this contributed to their general social inequality.<sup>39</sup> It is commonly accepted that this was because women were less skilled (with lower levels of literacy, education and vocational training) than men, and that they worked fewer hours. According to this argument, therefore, women were in receipt of a 'market wage' which reflected their lesser contribution to industrial productivity and output. Kingsbury and Fairchild suggest:

Women, at present, still have less training and education than men; as their lives are now organised it may be that they have less enduring energy. At all events, they do work requiring less skill, on the average, than men do and their output tends to be lower. They earn, therefore, a correspondingly less wage than men earn, but only a correspondingly less wage.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> 144,000 women workers were included in the March 1924 study; 179,600 in March 1925; and 193,000 women (and 450,300 men) in March 1926. See A. Rashin, 'Zarabotnaya plata rabotnits v 1924-1926 gg.', *Statisticheskoe obozrenie*, no. 2, 1927, p. 73.

<sup>39</sup> On social inequality, see, for example, A. Artyukhina, 'XIV s"ezd VKP(b) i nashi zadachi', *Kommunistka*, no. 1, 1926, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Kingsbury and Fairchild, *Factory, Family and Woman*, p. 52.

The relative improvement in women's earnings in the 1920s, it has been suggested, can be accounted for by slight changes in the length of the working day (women now worked longer hours than men in some industries) and by the fact that more women were in paid employment, largely at the expense of the jobs of young workers who were being displaced from the labour force.<sup>41</sup> The widening of pay differentials in the 1930s, brought about by Stalin's reforms of wage payments, benefited white-collar employees rather than blue-collar workers, and tended to raise the wages of those in already more highly paid jobs, who tended to be men rather than women.<sup>42</sup> A more detailed study of the available wage data allows us to test these hypotheses.

#### Women's Wages in the 1920s:

An investigation of the materials and statistical data about the differences in wage rates between women and men in the 1920s reveals the following trends.<sup>43</sup> On average for all sectors of industry, the relative difference between women and men's daily and monthly earnings in the years 1924 to 1926 varied insignificantly. Women's wages ranged around 64.3 per cent of men's daily wages and 63 per cent of monthly levels of pay. The gap between women's and men's earnings was far less pronounced in the light industrial sectors, where the majority of women workers were employed, than in the male-dominated heavy industrial

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<sup>41</sup> Bergson, *Structure of Soviet Wages*, pp. 73-6.

<sup>42</sup> Bergson, *Structure of Soviet Wages*, pp. 124-6.

<sup>43</sup> Data cited here are from Rashin, 'Zarabotnaya plata', pp. 73-8.

sectors, where women were more likely to be employed as semi-skilled, unskilled and auxiliary workers.

Statistical data offer a more detailed breakdown of wages. Women were more likely to be located in the low to middle wage ranges, whilst men were more likely to be found in the middle to high ranges. Only 0.5 per cent of women in industrial employment, compared with 13.4 per cent of men, earned more than one hundred rubles per month in 1926. Yet the differences between women's and men's earnings can only be partly accounted for by the fact that women workers were concentrated in the unskilled and lesser skilled, and thereby the lower paying, jobs.

A more detailed study of the daily wage rates for women and men employed in the same jobs, that is of 'equal pay for equal work', reveals the extent of the wage gap. Even for skilled and semi-skilled workers in a variety of industries women's pay ranged from a low of 72.2 per cent (lathe operators in the military supply industries in March 1924) to 99.1 per cent (dyers in the cotton textiles industry also in March 1924). Whereas some of the jobs investigated witnessed improvements in women's relative pay rates by March 1926, others saw a decline (including dyers).

Rates of pay were even more differentiated for women and men in unskilled jobs. For example, unskilled women workers in the paper industry earned only 51.6 per cent of the equivalent male monthly wage in 1926. Women in the garment industry fared much better, receiving 94.2 per cent of the equivalent male wage. The official explanation for this discrepancy pointed to women's weaker physical capacity and the ready supply of labour for

such jobs. In unskilled jobs requiring less physical strength, in the food and printing industry, for example, the gap between women and men's earnings was significantly less pronounced.

The patterns of wage differentiation found in industry were repeated in the white-collar sector. A study of the earnings of white-collar workers in 1926 revealed a far lower level of differentiation between women and men.<sup>44</sup> Yet even here, where there was a potential to earn higher wages than in industry, women were concentrated in the lower and middle wage ranges, and were significantly less likely to be found in the more highly paid jobs. Only 5.7 per cent of women, compared to 23.7 per cent of men, earned more than one hundred rubles per month.

For white-collar workers, the earnings of women and men employed in the same job could vary greatly: women book-keepers earned only 74.4 per cent of their male counterparts in 1926, although female supervisors earned 96.7 per cent of the wages of their male colleagues. More women were to be found in the lower paying white-collar jobs, and men dominated the professions attracting higher rates of pay.

A study of women workers in the textile industry in March 1927 offers a variety of explanations for women's lower levels of pay.<sup>45</sup> This study suggested that women's monthly earnings were lower than men's, even in comparison with daily earnings, because women

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<sup>44</sup> E. Reshetova, 'Differentsiatsiya zarabotnoi platy sluzhashchikh v Marte 1926', *Statistika truda*, no. 11-12, 1926, cited in Rashin, 'Zarabotnaya plata'.

<sup>45</sup> V. Borodin, 'Zhenskii trud v tekstil'noi promyshlennosti', *Statisticheskoe obozrenie*, no. 9, 1928, pp. 62-7.

were more often absent from work, simply 'resting' or because of leave relating to pregnancy and child birth. (It is important to note here, however, that other studies of absenteeism in industry provide evidence that would challenge this claim, especially if maternity leave is taken into account). As in other sectors of industry, women are found clustered in the lower income groups, with only 15.1 per cent earning more than 60 rubles per month, compared with 50.5 per cent of men in this sector. Women received lower wages, it was argued, because they had fewer qualifications and lower levels of skill than men. The average grade for women workers in the textile industry was 4.1, as compared to 5.7 for men. For the textile industry as a whole, the vast majority of women (almost 90 per cent) were working in grades three to six, with extremely few rising to grade seven or above. As in other sectors of industry, mostly men were to be found in the higher grades, especially grades nine to thirteen. The absence of women from the higher grades was offered as an explanatory factor accounting for their lower levels of pay.

Wage differences were far less defined *within* individual grades. Yet, even here, men were often assigned a slightly higher grade coefficient than women working on the same job. As a result, women's wages could be as much as 13 per cent lower than men's for the same job. Few of these jobs placed significant physical demands on workers. Male 'strength', therefore, could not in itself explain this difference. Some tasks, it was argued, were slightly more complex than others, and women were often assigned to the less complex tasks within the same grade as male colleagues. Yet, even taking this into account, in most jobs men's wages still exceeded women's by up to eight per cent. Occasionally, such variations in grading and coefficients sometimes favoured women, who could earn more than their male colleagues for the same, or broadly similar, tasks. Where women were paid less, it was argued, they were marginally less 'qualified' for the job.

A variety of factors accounted for these differences in levels of 'qualifications', most notably age and length of work experience (*stazh*). Women workers in the textile industry were, on the whole, younger and less experienced in industrial employment than their male colleagues. Yet even where women did have a long record of industrial employment, it appears that they were less likely to be promoted to more highly skilled work than men. Despite significant increases in wage payments in the 1920s, there is no evidence of improvement in women's relative wage rates for the textile industry as a whole from 1924 to 1927. In fact, there had been no improvement even over the pre-revolutionary differentials in pay between women and men.

The study of women workers in the textile industry also includes an analysis of the household budgets of textile workers' families using data collected in November 1926. In view of the relatively low wages paid to textile workers, secondary wages made an important contribution to the incomes of families headed by textile workers. In such families, secondary wages constituted 28.3 per cent of household income, compared to only seven per cent in other households. In these years, the wives and adult daughters of male textile workers were more likely to be in employment than those of married male workers in other sectors. Women in this sector, therefore, unless they themselves were heads of households, were regarded as secondary wage earners. This factor alone, it could be argued, may have been used to justify their lower rates of pay. As may be expected, time budget surveys revealed that women spent marginally less time than men working for wages, but only a matter of a few minutes per day, but they had by far the greater responsibility for unpaid household management.

Customary Wages:

Not all contemporary observers were willing to accept the official explanations for the inequalities of pay between women and men. Two case studies illustrate this point.

In a study of women's labour in the Moscow region, Nefedov argued that women workers had traditionally been paid less than men simply because they were women.<sup>46</sup> Nefedov argued that such factors as the level of productivity, the costs and benefits of employing women instead of men and the impact of labour protection measures had not been adequately studied. For Moscow industries as a whole, by the 1920s women's wages had improved relative to men's in comparison with pre-revolutionary levels of pay (using data for 1908). Women received only 59.9 per cent of the male wage in 1908, but this had increased to 70.1 per cent by 1923. Yet, for some reason, the proportion had declined again to 64.1 per cent by 1925. Individual sectors of industry offered different results, however. What appears to have been the case from the statistical evidence provided by Nefedov can be summarised briefly: the industrial sectors where the discrepancies between women and men's pay had been greatest (metallurgy and printing, for example) witnessed a closing of the pay gap by the 1920s; but where women had received a greater proportion of the male wage than average, the pay gap had increased. The most notable decline in women's relative wages was witnessed in the chemical industry. Women earned 84.7 per cent of the male wage in 1908, but this had declined to 73.1 per cent by 1925.

Nefedov argued that it was no longer acceptable to pay a woman less simply because she was a woman (using the derogatory term *baba* in inverted commas). Workers needed to take 'equal pay for equal work' seriously, and adopt this as practice in their collective and tariff

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<sup>46</sup> M. Nefedov, *Zhenskii trud v Moskovskoi gubernii*, Moscow, 1926, pp. 38-43.

agreements. In future, improvements in women's wages would result from wage rises for all workers.<sup>47</sup> Wage rises could also be the outcome of increases in productivity and, most importantly, improvements in women's qualifications.<sup>48</sup>

A 1929 study by Goltsman focused specifically on the wages of women white-collar workers.<sup>49</sup> Goltsman noted that women were less likely to find employment in the most demanding and complex jobs in the administrative and service sector, but they dominated the more simple and routine tasks, such as typing and cleaning. Many important administrative posts, and even jobs in trade, had been closed to women in tsarist times, meaning that after 1917 women had little experience of professional practice. According to Goltsman, in some areas of work conservative attitudes had survived the revolution, and many still considered women by nature unsuited to professional employment. Such attitudes also hindered women's professional promotion.

In low and middle level administrative and service jobs, where women and men worked alongside each other, Goltsman noted that men received from 10 to 15 per cent higher wages than women. This pay gap increased significantly in the more highly paid areas of white-collar work, where far fewer women were employed. 'Conservative attitudes' on the part of

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<sup>47</sup> This view was endorsed by the trade unions. See, for example, A. Tikhomirova, 'III plenum VTsSPS i nashi zadachi', *Kommunistka*, no. 3, 1926, p. 47.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, O. Anikst, 'Kvalifikatsiya rabotnits', *Kommunistka*, no. 3, 1926, pp. 48-53.

<sup>49</sup> M. Goltsman, 'Zarabotnaya plata zhenshchin-sluzhashchikh', *Statisticheskoe obozrenie*, no. 5, 1929, pp. 58-60.



employers and supervisors were blamed for the persistence of wage inequalities. As earlier studies had shown, even where women and men were employed in exactly the same job, men were often paid more than women, by as much as 25-35 per cent in book-keeping, for example. This study also recognised that the relative rates of pay for women and men varied between the major cities and towns, as well as between enterprises.

#### Women's Wages in the 1930s:

There is far less data available for the study of women's wages in the 1930s. Despite the continued systematic gathering of wage data by the Soviet statistical agencies, in this decade rates of pay were rarely differentiated by sex. The data used here relate mostly to October 1934, with the addition of a few case studies located in the archives.

In October 1934, the Central Administration of National Economic Records (TsUNKhU) of the State Planning Commission (Gosplan) and the Statistical Sector of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS) gathered wages data from four separate machine-building enterprises.<sup>50</sup> The report, which does not appear to have been published, cautioned that the limited scope of the data provided insufficient evidence to be able to draw any general conclusions about women's wages, but it could be used to illustrate the typical situation in a number of enterprises. The study included only those workers who were employed for the

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<sup>50</sup> RGAE 4372/33/1010/1-5: 'Zarabotnaya plata zhenshchin v chetyrekh predpriyatiyakh Metallo i Elektropromyshlennosti', dated 7 March 1935. The study examined Elektrozavod, Dinamo, Gosshveimashina and Kol'chuginskii medeobratyvyayushchii zavod.

whole month of October 1934 and only those tasks where women and men worked alongside each other.

The report noted that women's level of skill, and consequently their wages, still lagged behind that of men. Women's predominant placement in the lower grades was accounted for by their younger age and shorter work experience. Yet, as was acknowledged, this was not a sufficient explanation. Again, this report complained of conservatism on the part of economic managers, who were reluctant to promote women to skilled work. The report offered details of hourly rates of pay, where, on the whole, women were paid less than men. However, there was significant evidence to suggest that in some of the female-dominated lower grades women's hourly rates of pay exceeded men's, but in the higher grades men were always paid more than women. The wage gap at these grades, it was argued, resulted partly from the different levels of technical know-how and productivity. The report concluded that, 'the discrepancy in wages between men and women is a consequence of women's lower qualifications and their lesser production experience'.<sup>51</sup>

The limited amount of published statistical data on women's wages in this period possibly draws on this data in part.<sup>52</sup> The published data is limited to the machine-building and the textile industries in October 1934, and a small number of occupations on state farms in September 1934. Despite the paucity of statistical data, there is again evidence to suggest that women workers in the lower grades were sometimes paid wages that exceeded those of their

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<sup>51</sup> RGAE 4372/33/1010/1ob.

<sup>52</sup> I.A. Kraval', *Zhenshchina v SSSR*, Moscow, 1937, pp. 111-13.

male colleagues. However, the wage gap moved rapidly in men's favour as the grade of work became higher.

#### Conclusion:

Even if it could be shown convincingly that women were paid a market wage in the Soviet Union in the interwar period, we would also need to examine the customary practices, sometimes supported by legal enactment, which denied women access to training and jobs in such a way that they could not improve their levels of skill and increase their earnings. A 'glass ceiling' clearly existed in the interwar Soviet Union, which women workers in industry and women white-collar employees found difficult to move beyond. Training and promotion took them so far, but rarely to the top. Long held prejudices against working women and sex discrimination in the workplace did not disappear overnight after the October revolution. From the evidence examined here, the Bolshevik agenda for the introduction and development of a socialist wages policy in the interwar period was far from dominated by a genuine discussion of the implementation of the principle of 'equal pay for equal work'.