

Gender, Technology, and Industrial Relations: The English Carpet Industry, 1860-1895*

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Résumé

Cet exposé étudie l'antagonisme qui régnait entre les sexes dans l'industrie britannique du tapis pendant la dernière moitié du XIX^e siècle. On y voit comment la concurrence opposant les ouvriers aux ouvrières a influé sur les relations de travail et l'évolution des techniques de tissage des tapis.

Abstract

This paper examines gender antagonism in the British carpet industry in the last half of the nineteenth century. It examines how the competition for work between male and female workers affected labour relations and developments in the technology of carpet weaving.

Theoretically, industrial capitalism and the operation of the capitalist marketplace should have made gender and other social categories irrelevant to the division of labour in manufacturing.¹ That is not what happened.² Even today women and men generally work in different occupational categories, work at different jobs, do different tasks and work in physically separated environments.³ This paper is about the structuring and restructuring of sexual segregation of work in the nineteenth century carpet industry. It focuses on an industry in which technological innovations played a major role in supplying a mass consumer market, stimulating intense competition among firms, but did not substantially alter the division of labour by sex.

Carpet manufacture is a particularly interesting industry to study in order to explore how the actions by workers and capitalists in their continuing struggle over the terms and conditions of employment reproduced and restructured gender segregation.⁴ Gender issues were central to labour disputes in the Kidderminster carpet industry for the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. Kidderminster was the main centre of carpet making in England. The carpet weavers' union in Kidderminster was fiercely exclusionary, but the employers were persistent in finding ways to reduce their costs in the manufacture of floor coverings. Although Kidderminster was the centre of the trade, carpets were manufactured by large manufacturing concerns in Halifax, especially by the Crossleys, and in Rochdale by John Bright's mills. These firms were able to introduce women to working

on some of their carpet looms. Women were paid lower wages, especially in the early years of power-loom weaving, and provided much of the competitive stimulus for the cost-cutting strategies of the Kidderminster firms.

From the beginning, manufacturers of carpets engaged in intense competition with one another. Kidderminster, originally known for the manufacture of "Kidderminsters", a flat carpet made on hand looms, became the centre of the manufacture of carpets on the Brussels loom, a high quality and costly type of carpet. During the 1840s, Whytock in Scotland patented his tapestry hand loom which produced an imitation Brussels at a lower cost. Unlike the Brussels, which wove intricate patterns to create the carpet, the tapestry loom involved a simplified weaving process and used less expensive worsted yarn on which the pattern of the carpet had already been printed before the carpet was woven. These tapestries were cheaper to produce and hence cheaper for consumers to purchase than Brussels and appealed to a growing middle-class market. In 1846 Whytock sold his patent rights to the growing Crossley firm of Halifax. Shortly thereafter, three Kidderminster firms acquired licenses from Crossley to produce tapestry carpets. However, Halifax became the major centre of this sector of the industry, and by 1850 nearly half of the tapestry looms were operated by the Crossleys at their Dean Clough mills. The Crossley firm had become the single largest carpet firm in the country.

The Crossleys faced competition from the American carpet industry and attempted to apply power to their manufacture and pur-

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chased the rights to a number of inventions. But, it was the cotton-spinning firm of John Bright and Sons which achieved the first success in imitating the traditional Brussels on a power loom. They undersold the Kidderminster Brussels by about twenty per cent and, within a short time, Bright's carpets were in great demand. At the same time Erasmus Bigelow, the major American carpet manufacturer, invented a steam-powered loom to weave traditional Brussels, and the British patent rights were purchased by the Crossleys. Francis Crossley had been attempting to apply power to produce both the traditional and tapestry carpets for some time. He had hired John Collier, a machine maker, to work at Dean Clough to invent power looms to weave both Brussels and tapestries. They were successful in creating a steam-powered tapestry loom. For a time the Crossleys had a monopoly of the patents for successful power looms.

The monopoly was broken by John Bright who had stopped producing his own type of carpet because it had lost its market to the better quality traditional Brussels and tapestries produced on the Bigelow and Collier power looms. Brights began manufacturing tapestries on a power loom, and in 1859 the Crossleys initiated a celebrated lawsuit against Bright for infringing their patent rights. The suit was not settled until 1864 and was decided in John Bright's favour. However, the Crossleys were successful in defending their patent rights in other challenges they made from 1858 to 1863. One case was appealed to the House of Lords. Both Brights and Crossleys concentrated their production on tapestry carpets.

The power loom had an output many times greater than the hand loom, and samples of Bigelow's Brussels carpets shown at the Great Exhibition in 1851 were judged to be superior to the hand-loomed goods at the Exhibition. Within two years, the firms of Worth, Brinton and Dixon in Kidderminster had leased the rights from the Crossleys and were making power-loomed Brussels. Thereafter power weaving quickly displaced hand-loom weaving in Kidderminster.

From the 1860s manufacturers and weavers struggled over the issue of the supply of labour for carpet weaving. In 1864 the employers formed an association which listed among its aims: the prevention of strikes and disagreements; the control of labour supply; the protection of the trade in matters connected with wages and the employment of work people, "as well as the consideration of

all subjects directly or indirectly affecting the trade."⁵ In 1865 the manufacturers' association announced a new scheme for training apprentices which would increase the numbers of apprentices and have them begin their work at a younger age than previously. The manufacturers had offered to increase weavers' wages by about twelve-and-a-quarter per cent and expected that the workers would not resist what the employers called their "ultimatum" on the issue of apprentice labour.⁶ In response, the weavers waged an unsuccessful strike but formed a trade union which began with nearly five hundred members, enrolling ninety-seven per cent of the Brussels carpet weavers in Kidderminster and nearby Stourport.

The job of working Brussels looms was reserved for males from the start and remained male-dominated. Manufacturers could afford to pay male workers who made these high-priced carpets, and they had a supply of low-waged labour in lads who were being trained to become weavers by working as weavers' assistants. Tapestry manufacture presented different problems. Tapestry carpets were made primarily in the North and were gaining an increasing share of the market because of their relatively low cost. The market for tapestry carpets was highly competitive and more affected by trade recessions than the market for Brussels carpets. In the 1850s one of the firms making tapestries in Kidderminster went bankrupt. John Brinton's firm which produced both tapestries and Brussels took Francis Crossley's nephew, John Lewis, of Halifax, into partnership but ceased making tapestry carpet in the early 1860s. Only one Kidderminster manufacturer, William Green, continued to manufacture tapestries throughout the 1860s.

In England tapestries were made principally in Halifax, especially by the Crossleys, and in Rochdale by John Bright's firm. The Crossley and Bright firms engaged in intensely competitive business practices. In 1861 Brights introduced new machinery which produced three pieces of carpet in the same time that it had taken to make two and reduced the price paid for the work from one-and-a-half pence a yard to one pence a yard. The men resisted the reduction and the speed-up of work. Boys and girls were brought in to work the machines, and the strike was broken.⁷ During the strike, carpet weavers from Crossley's in Halifax came to protest with the Rochdale workers, and a number of men were charged in court with intimidating the factory hands.⁸ After the strike, men were rehired to work these tapestry machines at the reduced rate.

A few years later Brights, wishing to compete more successfully than they had with the giant Crossley firm, introduced a loom designed to be worked by women. The Crossleys then introduced a similar loom. Subsequently John Brinton in Kidderminster, who also happened to be Francis Crossley's father-in-law, wished to manufacture tapestries in competition, particularly with Bright's firm. He purchased "the best form of loom for women that could be found."⁹ The Kidderminster unionists sent representatives to the North and discovered that Brinton had not introduced exactly the same looms that were being worked by women in Rochdale and Halifax but had purchased looms which elsewhere were known as "men's machines". There was a difference between the "women's tapestry looms" and "men's tapestry looms". If the same kind of material was used in both machines, the man's loom would turn out a greater number of yards per hour than a woman's loom. This meant that in the other places in England where women and men both made the tapestry carpets, but on different machines, the cost of women's labour to the manufacturer was lower while men were more productive.¹⁰ Mr. Brinton, however, wished to pay women a "woman's wage" to work the more productive "man's machine" in Kidderminster.¹¹

A main contention of the weavers' association, and indeed what threatened them, was that there was an oversupply of male labour in Kidderminster. In part, this was due to the apprenticeship system insisted upon by the masters. As one of the men put it, "...it was a crying evil to see women getting into the trade." "The weavers were not situated like some other men, for they had no other occupation to turn to. They were bound to the loom without any alternative."¹² Apparently, when there was insufficient work for Brussels weavers, the men would work on tapestry looms. The Weavers' Association claimed that out of 160 men weaving tapestries in Kidderminster, 150 of them were Brussels weavers by training.¹³ Therefore, they saw one of their only alternative sources of employment being taken from them. At a meeting between Brinton and his workmen, one of the workers asked the employer, "if it would not be more humane, not to employ women when men were walking the streets."¹⁴ The unionists feared that once women were employed in the trade by Brinton, they would be hired on by other manufacturers, and eventually carpet weaving would become women's work, leaving the men permanently unemployed.

The women who were hired seemed ready to stand their ground. One of them wrote to the local newspaper,

I have the right to seek my labour at any price I like, and when and where I like; and the liberty I claim for myself I would gladly give for others. Then why should those *very big men* have their crowded meetings and throw off such big words from such little stomachs? Why should they meet and revile their betters. It is quite evident that the power loom weavers have no concern for any but self, or they would not bloc up the streets and the Marketplace puffing their dirty short pipes whilst women and girls have to do the hardest and heaviest work in the trade such as rug weaving, which requires both bone and muscle to perform it.¹⁵

Although the weavers would not permit women to join their union, the men attempted to meet with the women weavers to discuss the dispute. The women sent the weavers a memorandum saying that as long as the work and terms suited them, they would continue their work for Brinton.¹⁶ This response heightened the men's fear of redundancy and led some of the unionists to make angry public statements. A threatening letter, which received national press coverage, was published in the *Kidderminster Shuttle*. The letter, addressed to a Mr. Heverley, Cemetery-row, Kidderminster said,

mr heverley i dare say you thinks you are doing something Grand by sendding your daughters to rob we men and our wives and children of our dailey Bread But be carfull of What you are doing Because you and them will very likes get your Brains nock out so dont for get for we shant after saturday the first we get hold of will get something for it if we dont catch hold of them at the time we shal after it all quiet.¹⁷

Using a different approach, Noah Cooke, a member of the Weavers' Association known locally as the "weaver poet," published the following poem, signed as were all his poems, "N.C.", in the *Shuttle*,

The Lady Weaver

I'm a silly 'Lady Weaver,' and I'll use my best endeavour
To undermine the wages of the men;
Ay doing what I like I've brought about a 'strike.'
And now I'll vex them with my little pen.

I've a perfect legal right to side with selfish might,
To bring reduction in the carpet trade.
The face for gain is keen, competition between,
And men's enormous wages can't be paid.

I'm a willing thoughtless tool to serve
despotic rule,
But I can wink my pretty eye at that,
What is consequence to me if I can only get
A taller feather waving in my hat?¹⁸

Gender antagonism was so apparent in Kidderminster during the strike that an agent of the National Union of Working Women, who had come to Kidderminster to form a branch of the association, postponed taking any action fearing hostility from the male weavers.¹⁹

It is likely that the discovery by the

opposed hiring women.²¹ In the end, the weavers refused to bend and rather than employ men on his tapestry looms or pay men's wages to the women, Brinton moved the looms to Leeds where he produced tapestry carpets using female weavers until the fall of 1878.

What is interesting about this dispute is that it was directed against women as potential competitors for employment. The employer was not attempting to replace men with women but merely to add females to his weaving work force to make a new type of carpet. This produced a concerted and militant response on the part of the union to exclude wo-

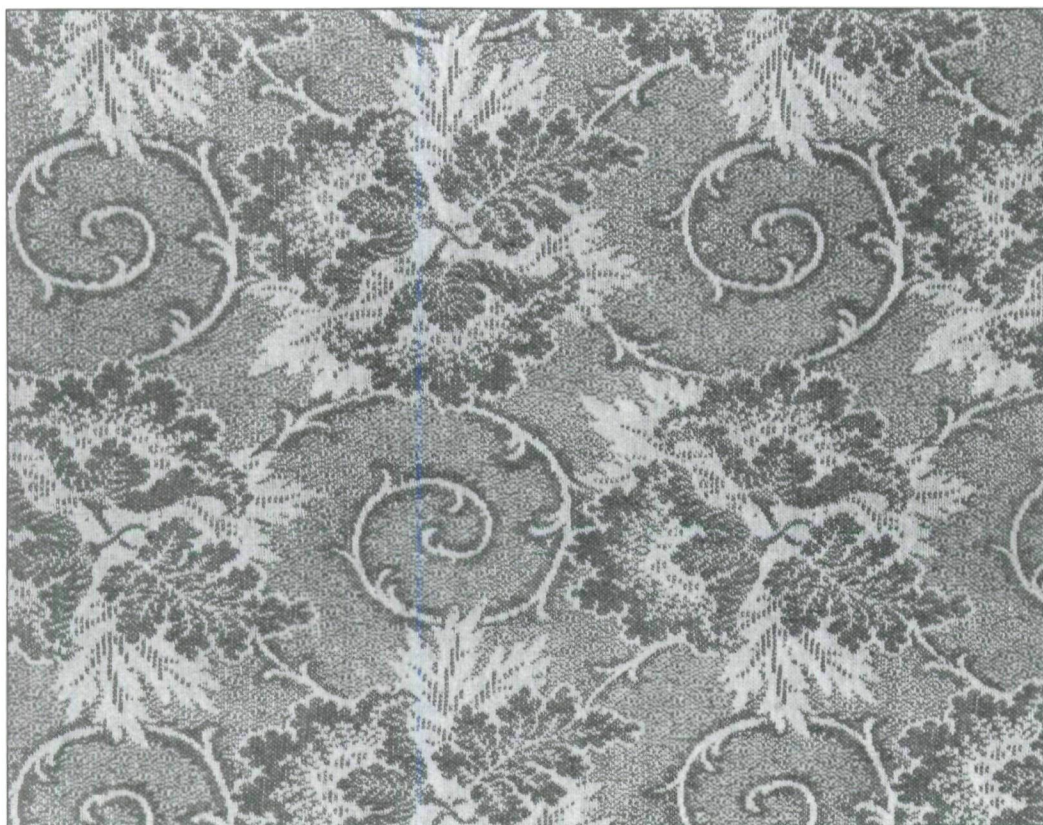


Fig. 1
Length of carpeting probably made in Kidderminster, second half of the nineteenth century and used in Paris, Ontario. (Courtesy of Royal Ontario Museum, ROM 969.279, gift of Mrs. W.L. Houlding)

unionists that Brinton was attempting to undercut his competition, including fellow manufacturers in Kidderminster, lost him the support of the Employers' Association. There is evidence that not all of the employers supported Brinton's actions in the first place. Mr. Hughes was interviewed by a deputation of his work people about the impending strike. He was asked if he would lock out his workers if there was a strike against Brinton. Hughes replied that he would not; he was not a member of the employers' association and would have nothing to do with it or with the present struggle.²⁰ Other employers in the town also

men from weaving any type of carpet in Kidderminster. The dispute reveals some of the pressures faced by employers to save on labour costs in highly competitive industries. It also underscores the male weavers' fear of job loss to women if females were allowed into the trade. Some of the conditions around which victory would turn in such disputes are suggested as well. As it turns out, this was simply the first skirmish in what was to be a continuing struggle.

In November 1878 Brinton moved his tapestry looms back to Kidderminster and hired men to work them at the price that men

were paid in the north. The looms, called "Moxon looms", had been "speeded" to produce substantially more yardage in the amount of time they were worked than the other type of tapestry loom, called the "Smith Loom", which was worked in Kidderminster by men. The union refused to accept what would amount to a lowering of the men's wages in making tapestries. They resolved to strike if Brinton refused to pay one-and-a-half pence per yard plus twenty per cent for work done on both types of looms. Brinton was offering to pay the men working the Moxon looms only one-and-a-half pence per yard. The men had learned that the other tapestry manufacturers in town would refuse to pay their men working Smith looms more than Brinton was paying for the weaving of tapestries on the Moxon loom.²² The unionists resolved that "men weaving on Moxon Looms be treated in every respect as free Union Men," and that the union would not admit the principle of fixing the price of weaving by the speed of the loom.²³ Rather than sustain a strike, the unionists and Brinton agreed to submit the dispute to arbitration.

The arbitration took place at the end of April 1879 and was decided for Brinton. According to the decision Brinton was to pay what was paid in the North, and the price of one-and-a-half pence per yard would include extra tuners and other assistants to the weavers not formerly provided in Kidderminster. It is notable that it was the number of tuners that would have been needed if women worked the looms that Brinton had used in his argument in 1874 against paying men's wages to women to make tapestries on what must have been the Moxon loom. It is likely, however, that Brinton was willing to pay Kidderminster men more in 1879 than he would have paid women in 1874 because the loom had been "extra speeded."²⁴

The dispute over the making of tapestries in Kidderminster reveals the ongoing struggle between workers and manufacturers. It shows the competitive pressures on manufacturers to lower production costs by one means or another. It also suggests that many employers could not succeed in these manoeuvres without the support of other employers. The very competition which caused them to cut labour costs also could weaken their position in disputes with unions.²⁵ On the union's side it shows the struggle to retain wage levels and jobs in the face of employer cost-cutting strategies. As Richard Price has put it, "it is in the continual search from both sides for a better bargain that the dynamic of the labour process in labour's history can be seen to lie."²⁶ The

search for a "better bargain" in tapestry production was influenced by gender issues, and the outcome in Kidderminster, at least for the moment, was the continuation of an all-male carpet work force. However, the men had to put up with a reduction in their wages when John Brinton figured out how to get increased productivity from his capital and from his work force, as well as lower labour costs without disturbing the gender division of labour.

Events in tapestry-making in 1881 show that the downward trend in wages would continue in Kidderminster. Crossleys had lowered their rates on the Dandy loom, and Dixon's firm introduced it at Kidderminster paying their male tapestry weavers the same rates being paid by Crossley who was employing women. The Moxon loom weavers were then under pressure to work at the same rate as Dandy loom weavers. The union protested, but in the end agreed to the manufacturers' terms for tapestry weaving.²⁷

Only two years later, Henry Dixon, who had helped to mediate the 1874 dispute between the union and John Brinton, and who had indicated to the unionists that he would never hire women, became embroiled in the most rancorous labour dispute witnessed in nineteenth century Kidderminster. The year 1883 was not a good one for the carpet industry. Although there was a brisk demand for Brussels toward the end of the year, the tapestry trade was in bad shape.²⁸ In late fall, at Henry Dixon's factory, tapestry looms were altered, and women were hired to work the converted looms to make a new fabric, Medici plush, a velvet material to be used for draperies. The male weavers at Dixon's sent a deputation to their employer to protest. They were told that women would continue to be employed because, "it was not man's work, it was not a carpet that was made on the loom and it was not a Smith loom."²⁹ The Smith loom was only worked by men, and Dixon probably thought that he would be able to introduce the women without trouble from the union, if he could convince the men that their own looms were not in jeopardy and that, technically, the women were not weaving carpets. However, the men were not to be so easily convinced that "dilution" and redundancy would not follow if women were allowed to weave in Kidderminster. Two deputations from the Weavers' Association went to see Henry Dixon in January and in early February, but they were unsuccessful in convincing Mr. Dixon to remove the women in his mill. Near the end of February Dixon's weavers went on strike.

The issue of women weaving had been a sore point with the Kidderminster unionists ever since the dispute with Brinton's in 1874. In fact women had been introduced as weavers on another new process, the Royal Axminster, but because a non-union shop, and one not engaged in Brussels manufacture, had hired the women, the unionists had not acted.³⁰ During the Dixon dispute and strike, which lasted until the end of April, union meetings on the issue of female labour and on the negotiations with the manufacturers drew enormous crowds. Around 1,400 members participated in business meetings during the period, and at one of them, tickets were handed out as the union officials wanted to keep out non-unionists and reporters, some of whom had been writing about the feud in a manner unsympathetic to the union.³¹

The weavers organized processions and demonstrations to underline their concerns. Weavers who remained at work were harassed; strikers were accused of physical violence and some of them received summonses. The unionists became increasingly outraged when Dixon hired black legs to replace the striking workers. It was reported that the crowds were so unruly that "gentlemen who had prominent positions in the town and were among the largest ratepayers had not been able to pass to and from their works."³² Finally, the demonstrations reached a point at the beginning of the second week of April that members of the Watch Committee and the Magistrate agreed to obtain outside assistance from the Birmingham police. The appearance of a number of policemen from Birmingham further outraged the crowds who pelted them with stones and attempted to storm Dixon's mill. A second detachment of Birmingham police was sent for and then finally, the Magistrate telegraphed for the Third Dragoon Guards who arrived in Kidderminster late in the day on 9 April 1884. A union meeting of about 1,400 people passed a "vote of indignation" with regard to the Watch Committee and the Magistrate who had sent for the police and soldiers "to interfere with the rights and liberties of the people."³³ Noah Cooke wrote a poem to commemorate the events,

The Terrible Riots of Kidderminster

What shame that a master can't do as he likes
Without being menaced and harass'd with
'strikes;'
What's the use having power if 'tis to be
curbed
And each good design by the rabble
disturbed?

Because he begins making Medici plush,
Those tyrants of weavers bear down with a
rush,
Demanding that Dixey shall follow their will,
And turn off the women that weave at their
mill!³⁴

Dixon had decided to introduce this new manufacture because the tapestry trade was doing poorly. He had begun it by altering four of his tapestry looms to make the Medici plush, intending to use them either temporarily or in addition to new looms made specifically to weave the new material. What angered the unionists was the employment of women when men needed work. As one of the unionists put it, "all they wanted to do was to prevent Messrs. Dixon employing females on the looms when there was plenty of male labour walking about ready and anxious to work...There was not only in Kidderminster, but throughout the country, a surplus of male labour, and they should only be doing their duty in doing all they could in getting men employed on new fabrics."³⁵

Following the appearance of the troops in Kidderminster, John Brinton, now a Member of Parliament for Kidderminster, had decided to do something to end the dispute because "the honour of the constituency was at stake in that journalists had portrayed mob scenes at Kidderminster. It was declared that people were afraid to go into the city."³⁶ A conference was held in Brinton's office between Messrs. Dixon and the heads of the Weavers' Association. After five hours, an agreement was reached. The terms were that Mr. Dixon would hire four lads on the altered tapestry machines and four females on the new plush looms. He guaranteed to keep the male youth employed for six months or put them on new plush machines. He further agreed to employ male youth or women in equal numbers on future machines. He agreed to hire back forty-five men immediately and another fifteen in ten days, leaving a large number of former hands unemployed. Dixon's and other firms would try to find work for those remaining unemployed.

In this dispute the union had been forced to give official sanction the principle of women weaving on looms.³⁷ It was an inopportune time for a strike. Although the Brussels trade was brisk, many employers were overstocked and could withstand a general strike if one was called. The tapestry trade was in decline, and tapestry-loom workers were demoralized.³⁸ Many weavers and young men who had trained as creelers were without employment.

Henry Dixon was apparently heavily invested in the tapestry trade and was trying to save that portion of his business by diversifying and hiring women to make Medici plush at "women's wages." Although there is no evidence to suggest why Dixon refused to go along with hiring men at women's wages to avoid a strike, it is possible that he did not realize the intensity of feeling on the part of the men to keep the trade all male, and/or there was enough evidence available about how the unionized men might fight to have their wages raised if only men were hired. The compromise agreement continued to segregate women's and men's labour on carpet looms but permitted women to work in equal numbers with men on plush looms which were designed to be worked by women. Half a loaf was apparently better than no loaf at all, even if it meant that lads would be doing work thought of as women's work and would be paid a woman's wage for doing it. It is important to realize that the union managed to retain what they defined as men's work (weaving on a "man's loom") for males and staked a partial claim to what was defined as women's work because of the employment situation for men in Kidderminster. By doing this, they sexually integrated the making of plush on the new looms and maintained for men the exclusive use of tapestry looms. The employers in any case were able to have the work done at women's wages.

There was one last skirmish in the nineteenth century between the unionists and manufacturers over gender. At the time of the Dixon dispute, women were working Royal Axminster carpet looms in a non-union shop. The Royal Axminster Spool Loom was introduced by the firm of Tomkinson and Adams in 1878. The carpet woven on these looms was similar to the Wilton, but it used less yarn than Wilton's and, therefore, sold for less money. This process was important for manufacturers who wished to extend their manufacture to profit from the expanding trade at the lower priced end of the market. At the time they were brought to Kidderminster, the Royal Axminster looms were being worked in America by women. As Mr. Tomkinson told the men during their meetings about the gender issue in 1895, "it never entered our heads at the time to employ men because women were employed in America upon it—one able to manage two looms."³⁹ When they were introduced, they were thought to be "women's machines." Until 1878 Tomkinson and Adams had been employing women to

work "the old rug setting loom" ever since the firm opening in 1870. Tomkinson reported that at the time he began his business it was impossible to get men to work the rug looms in Kidderminster.

The Royal Axminster was a light power loom which was more easily worked and was more productive than the rug loom, and so the firm put women to work on it instead of on the heavier hand loom. For Tomkinson and Adams, heavy women's labour was replaced by light women's labour. In point of fact, the Royal Axminster carpet, made by women, had displaced the Wilton carpet, made by men, in the marketplace.⁴⁰ For the men of Kidderminster, women were replacing men in the making of carpets.

It is likely that the unionists did not protest the introduction of women on the Royal Axminster Spool Looms in 1878 because Tomkinson and Adams was a non-union shop and because in people's minds at that time what Tomkinson was doing was replacing one woman's loom with another. The men simply did not foresee the rapid expansion in the Axminster trade that would come in the next fifteen years and what it would mean for their own employment.

The issue of women working the Axminster looms first came up in the spring of 1891 and then again in early summer at union committee meetings.⁴¹ In June men from one of the firms working the Royal Axminster looms had approached the committee about doing something concerning the employment of women on the looms as they were willing to work at the same price as the girls were being paid.⁴² Nothing further was done concerning the issue until it arose again in 1894. During the intervening years, the union was dealing with unemployment and falling wage levels due to a rapidly declining tapestry trade and may not have felt the time was right to approach the manufacturers employing women to weave the Royal Axminsters.⁴³

By the spring of 1894 unemployment among the union men had increased even more, and the question of women's employment on the Axminster looms became an issue again.⁴⁴ A deputation from the union met with Mr. Tomkinson who was not only a major manufacturer of Axminsters but also was Mayor of Kidderminster. According to a union spokesman, the mayor listened to their arguments and said that he would consult with his partner about the matter. However, the Mayor believed that the looms "are so fragile that the men would knock them to pieces."⁴⁵ In

a subsequent letter to the union, Tomkinson wrote that he had nothing more to say about the matter; the loom was a "woman's loom."⁴⁶ The once militant and forceful union seemed to be subdued and placatory in its posture in this dispute. There was a general trade depression, and by year's end the only branch of the Kidderminster industry that seemed to be thriving was the Royal Axminster.⁴⁷

Finally, in early February 1895 the unionists again discussed the problem of the employment of women on the Axminster looms and what could be done to convince employers to hire men instead of women. Many unionists believed that it would not be long before the Axminster trade would be the staple trade of Kidderminster.⁴⁸ One of the unionists said he had learned that men worked these looms in Glasgow at night. The men decided to approach Mayor Tomkinson again to ask his help in convening a meeting between all the Axminster manufacturers of Kidderminster and union representatives.

The conference was held in early March attended by members of the Weavers' Association and the heads of six Axminster firms. The unionists used the fact that women and men both worked the plush looms to suggest

that women's looms were not too fragile for men to work. They argued that men turn out more and better work than women. As one of the weavers put it, it was only "natural for men were better able to manage machinery, whether it was heavy or light, while men did not require as much assistance."⁴⁹

The Mayor argued that women had been working these looms for fifteen years in England, and he had never heard it said that the work was unsuitable for women. "In fact an authority told his firm that theirs was not only a model factory, but that the employment was a model employment for women."⁵⁰ In addition, the Mayor told the men that some of his firm's (female) employees had told him, "they did not think the work was hard enough for men. Some had worked for the firm for 14, 10, 9 years and some said it was harder to work a sewing machine than to work an Axminster."⁵¹ What seems to have been the focus of the employers' statements to the union is that if work was suitable for women, it could not also be appropriate for men. The union, on the other hand, was trying to get the employers to see that the male unemployment level was such that they would be willing to do women's work at women's wages.



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Fig. 2

Piece of Brussels carpeting made in England about 1900 and used in a house in Wingham, Ontario. (Courtesy of Royal Ontario Museum, ROM 966.286.24, gift of Mrs. O.G. Rogers)

The discussion then turned to the employment of married women. The Mayor said that he was opposed to the employment of married women, and his firm did not hire them, except in special and unusual circumstances. The other employers present agreed that, while it may not be a hard and fast rule because some women have worked with their firms since girlhood, as much as possible they also discouraged married women from working. The unionists then asked the employers if they would take on men to work looms vacated by married women. The employers were non-committal. Exasperated, and seemingly defeated, the men asked the manufacturers "for some little hope" to give the young men. What the union asked for was that preference should be given to young men who would work for the same wages paid to women until a fair proportion of men and women work the Axminster looms.⁵² The employers said they would speak with their foremen but made no promises. And, that was the end of the matter except for the usual outpouring of letters to the *Shuttle*, arguing for and against the union's position, and a poem from an unemployed weaver which went as follows,

Mary had a little loom and unto it did go
 And every Saturday afternoon you should
 have seen the show.
 With veil, kid gloves and gaiters too, she goes
 out on the mash.
 She fairly knocks the men out now because
 she gets the cash.⁵³

The union never was successful in getting the employers to hire men in place of women on those looms or in sexually integrating the work on the Royal Axminsters.⁵⁴

This final dispute about women's employment was conducted when the union was in a weakened position due to unemployment in the industry. The men had allowed women to gain entry into carpet weaving in the 1870s on what was thought to be a rug loom, not realizing that only fifteen years later their work would contribute to the high rates of male unemployment in the district. The employers were in a much stronger position than were the men. In the first place some of the firms, like

Tomkinson and Adams, primarily manufactured Axminsters, not Brussels, so the union could not threaten them with a strike. Secondly, in contrast to earlier disputes over tapestry looms, the Axminster trade was flourishing relative to the other types of carpets, a situation which also strengthened the employers' hand. Unlike the 1880s conflict involving the Weavers Association and Dixons, the struggle did not restructure gender segregation. Rather, the process under contention remained sex-typed as female.

This case study of the Kidderminster carpet industry has shown how the attempts of male unionists and employers to gain a favourable employment bargain affected gender segregation in the industry. In the 1870s competition among firms and the relative strength of the union led to the union's victory in excluding women from tapestry carpet weaving in Kidderminster. However, five years later, the men had to accept work on a speeded loom at wages made lower by the employment of women in the North of England. In the 1880s as the tapestry trade declined, the union was able to retain the principle that only men would use carpet looms in Kidderminster, but to secure employment in a declining job market, they agreed to work with women at women's wages on a loom designed for women which made plush for curtains. Finally in the 1890s, when the union was hard pressed because of shrinking employment opportunities relative to the supply of male labour, the men were unable to exclude women from carpet weaving on looms touted as "women's looms," nor were they able to convince employers to integrate the sexes in the trade. The case of carpets reveals the complex interaction of factors which leads to gender segregation in particular historical instances. In some cases employers were primarily responsible for actions which led to the sex-typing of jobs. In other instances male unionists' exclusionary strategies retained jobs exclusively for men. Regardless of which side was victorious, the restructuring of work and the introduction of new technology reconfigured, but did not break down, the sexual segregation of jobs in the Kidderminster carpet firms.

NOTES

1. Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 3.

2. For studies of occupational segregation in the nineteenth century hosiery industry see Joy Parr, "Disaggregating the Sexual Division of Labour: A Transatlantic Case Study," *Comparative Studies*

- in *Society and History* 30, no. 3 (1899): 511–33; Nancy Grey Osterud, "Gender Divisions and the Organization of Work in the Leicester Hosiery Industry," in *Unequal Opportunity*, ed. Angela V. John (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 45–70; Sonya O. Rose, "Gender Segregation in the Transition to the Factory: The English Hosiery Industry 1850–1910," *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 1 (1987): 163–84. For the printing industry see Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers*, (London: Pluto Press, 1984); Ava Baron, "Contested Terrain Revisited: Gender and the Social Construction of Skill in the Printing Industry, 1850–1920," in *Transformations: Women, Work and Technology*, ed. Barbara Wright et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987). For a collection of studies on a variety of industries see David Knights and Hugh Willmott, eds., *Gender and the Labour Process* (Aldershot: Gower Publishing, 1986). Excellent analyses of theories of occupational segregation are the essays by Veronica Beechey, *Unequal Work* (London: Verso, 1987); Alison Scott, "Industrialisation, Gender Segregation and Stratification Theory," in *Gender and Stratification*, ed. Rosemary Crompton and Michael Man (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 154–89.
3. For analyses of contemporary job segregation by sex see Shirley Dex, *The Sexual Division of Work* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985); Catherine Hakim, "Job Segregation: Trends in the 1970s," *Employment Gazette*, (December 1981), 521–529; Barbara Reskin, *Sex Segregation in the Workplace: Trends, Explanations, Remedies* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1984); Patricia A. Roos, *Gender and Work: A Comparative Analysis of Industrial Societies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985); William T. Bielby and James N. Baron, "Men and Women at Work, Sex Segregation and Statistical Discrimination," *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no. 4 (1986): 759–99.
 4. For a study of gender and work in the American carpet industry see Susan Levine, *Labor's True Woman* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).
 5. Quoted in Alex Murie, *The Carpet Weavers of Kidderminster* (1966), 14.
 6. Murie, 15.
 7. Local Studies Library, Kidderminster, *Moxon Loom Arbitration Proceedings, 1879*. E III (3) Kid 677. *Carpet Trade Pamphlets*, 25.
 8. *The Rochdale Observer*, 30 November 1861, 5.
 9. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 24 October 1874, 5.
 10. There is some evidence that Brights and Crossleys hired men as well as women to work "the women's machines" at the "women's rate of pay." The unionists determined that the loom Bright's designed enabled women and men to earn the same wages. See *The Halifax Courier*, 31 October 1874, 4. A letter written to Crossley's manager, Mr. Musgrave, confirms this. Crossley said, "I object to this proposed plan of paying men one price and women another; let everything be done for a man that would be done for a woman—him have neither more nor less price. This is the plan that Brights adopt and in my opinion it is the only sound course." West Yorkshire Archive Service, Wakefield Yorkshire, the Crossley archives, c 300/B8/1 Francis Crossley's letters from Suffolk to his manager, Mr. Musgrave, letter dated 17 March 1870. On 18 November 1870 he wrote to Musgrave requesting information about the average cost of weaving all the tapestries the firm made. "What I mean is some are woven by men at 1 1/2d per yard; some by men at 1 1/5d per yd, some by men at 1d per yard and some by girls at 1d per yard and I want to know what is the average price for the whole we make."
 11. The machines that Brinton had purchased were principally used in Rochdale by John Bright's firm. It is possible, that Brinton was entering the trade to compete against Bright who was the major and long-term rival of his son-in-law, Francis Crossley. In the early 1870s Francis Crossley's firm introduced a new type of loom and hired women to work them, and while they had men working tapestry looms, by 1874 they were largely employing women for this work.
 12. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 17 October 1874, 8.
 13. *The Halifax Courier*, 17 October 1874.
 14. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 24 October 1874, 8.
 15. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 24 October 1874, 5.
 16. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 10 October 1874, 6.
 17. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 17 October 1874, 5.
 18. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 31 October 1874, 5.
 19. *Halifax Courier*, 17 October 1874, 4.
 20. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 24 October 1874, 8.
 21. See letter to the editor from a Brinton's weaver, *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 31 October 1874, 5. See also the Minutes of the Power Loom Carpet Weavers' Association meeting of 22 October 1874 at which the members gave a vote of thanks to Mayor Dixon, and Messrs. Hughes and Hamilton. On 24 October 1874, the minutes recorded that the membership gave a vote of thanks to Mr. W. Green "re the action taken in the matter." Dixon and Green both were tapestry manufacturers, and it is possible that Hughes and Hamilton were as well.
 22. Power Loom Carpet Weavers' Association, Minutes, 13 February 1879.
 23. Power Loom Carpet Weavers' Association, Minutes, 13 February 1879.
 24. As a comment on labour relations in this period, it is interesting to note that a few months after the arbitration award had been decided, there was a celebration at Brinton's in honour of the start up of a new "monstre" steam engine called the "Hercules". Apparently, it was Mrs. Brinton's idea that the firm give a fête to the employees. All of them, numbering 1,500, were invited to dinner. The workpeople decided to present John Brinton with an illuminated address, and gave Mrs. Brinton a bracelet. *The Kidderminster Shuttle* of 27 September 1879 commented,

It is not for us to analyse the feeling with which Mr. Brinton is sometimes regarded by a section of the manufacturers and of the workpeople. His position as the head of the Brinton carpet trade is sufficient to account for the occasional jealousy of his brother-manufacturers, while the prominent part he and his partner are

compelled to take, by their position, in all questions between Capital and Labour exposes them from time to time to temporary unpopularity.

The illuminated address stated,

As those who have to gain their daily bread by manly toil, we are not unmindful of the value and dignity of labour; and we hope to be found faithful both in the discharge of its duties and in maintaining its just rights. But we do not forget how much Labour stands in need of Capital and how largely dependent it is upon the energy and capacity of those who direct the operations of Industry and who open up the markets of the world to its products.

The illuminated address still hangs on the wall in the Brinton's offices at their factory in Kidderminster. The article from the *Kidderminster Shuttle* was found in the Brintons Ltd., Diary Extracts, 1677 to 1888, K1-K399 in the Brinton company archives, called "The Muniments Room".

25. Elbaum, et al, "The Labour Process, Market Structure and Marxist Theory," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 3 (1979): 228.
26. Richard Price, "The Labour Process and Labour History," *Social History* 8, no. 1 (1983): 62.
27. Power Loom Carpet Weavers Association, Minutes, Coll. 705: 875, Box 1, 28 March 1881 through June 9, 1881.
28. *Kidderminster Shuttle* 8, December 1883, 5.
29. Power Loom Carpet Weavers Association, Minutes, 6 December 1883.
30. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 15 March 1884, 6.
31. Power Loom Carpet Weavers Association, Minutes covering the period 29 February 1884 to 10 April 1884.
32. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 29 March 1884, 5.
33. Power Loom Weavers Association Minutes, 9 April 1884.
34. Quoted in Arthur Smith, *Carpet Weaving and Trade Union Activity, Kidderminster and District* Microfilm, 66.
35. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 1 March 1884, 7.
36. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 19 April 1884, 5.
37. Women did weave on the heavy rug looms, which apparently the men refused to consider working. This was considered to be hard work for very low wages and was conveniently not considered to be within the purview of the union.
38. See report of the annual meeting of the Carpet Weavers' Association in *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 2 February 1884, 6.
39. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 9 March 1895, 8.
40. See letter from Thomas Edwards to the *Kidderminster Shuttle* 25 August 1894, 8.
41. Power Loom Carpet Weavers Association, Minutes, 22 April 1891 and 17 June 1891.
42. Power Loom Carpet Weavers Association, Minutes, 17 June 1891.
43. *Ibid.*, 2 July 1891, 13 July 1891, 19 October 1892, 11 January 1892.
44. *Ibid.*, 14 April 1894; 6 May 1894.
45. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 9 February 1895, 5.
46. *Ibid.*
47. See *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 22 September 1894, 5; 22 December 1894, 5; 29 December 1894, 5.
48. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 9 February 1895, 5.
49. *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 9 March 1895, 8.
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. The employers told the unionists that women's wages did not exceed fifteen shillings to one pound per week. One of the employers said that the women working for him averaged sixteen shillings which was more than girls earn for the same work in America. See *Kidderminster Shuttle*, 9 March 1895, 8.
53. Quoted by K. Tomkinson and G. Hall, *Kidderminster Since 1800*, 89.
54. See Arthur Smith, *Carpet Weaving and Trade Union Activity: Kidderminster and District*, Microfilm, 75; K. Tomkinson and G. Hall, *Kidderminster Since 1800*, 89.