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# Negotiating Respectability: White Women in the Public Service of Southern Rhodesia

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White women in Southern Rhodesia were so much better off than black men, let alone black women, that their own experiences of gender inequality seemed inconsequential. Not surprisingly, studies on women in Africa have tended to concentrate less on the experiences of white women than on black women yet, in a number of ways, the experiences of white women provide important lessons on women's struggles and experiences as well as help in historicizing modern exploitation of women by capital in post colonial societies. A historical evaluation of white women in the Public Service illuminates on the various strategies used by women to subvert unfair labour relations. Before independence, white as opposed to black women were the first to access and dominate in formal employment in the Public Service. These women faced widespread gender discrimination in the work place some of which continued in the post-colonial era. Years of protracted negotiations and contestations between white women and their Public Service employer, whose patriarchal ideology pervaded employment policy, shaped the roles and status of women in general during and after independence. This paper is about these protracted struggles. It is, however, not concerned with the African women who entered the Service in the later period of colonial rule, nor is it about their experiences in the post colonial era. The clerical administrative branch of the Public Service will be used to illustrate the main arguments of the paper.

**Keywords:** Public service, respectability, gender discrepancies, patriarchal ideology, negotiating, protracted struggles.

## INTRODUCTION

This study is a historical analysis of the experiences of white women in the Public Service of colonial Zimbabwe with a special focus on their responses to the work regime. It uses archival documents from the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), to a larger extent, in making its conclusions. Official correspondences have helped to evaluate the attitudes and responses of the government towards the employment of white women. It also employs various commissions that set out to investigate and recommend on the plight of white women. These commissions helped to unravel both the official views as well as the views of white women and their various organisations. Also important were newspapers

which too helped to illustrate the dominant gender ideologies and the reactions thereto by white women in relationship to their employment in the public service. Secondary sources such as works by Goodwin and Hancock [1] also help to contextualise my analysis.

Respectability implies a state in which one receives proper attention/treatment or reasonably good treatment. It is not only relative but also dynamic. The Rhodesian society being heterogeneous, respectability for women did not always have the same definition within the society let alone amongst the women and, perhaps, this complicated their negotiation rather than enhance it. Respectability also assumed different shapes over the

years meaning that what was considered proper attention for employed women in 1930 could be different in the 1970s. Notwithstanding, a generally accepted package of what white women considered to be reasonably good treatment at the workplace can be established. This package included, but was not limited to, parity between men and women on salaries; removal of the marriage bar; improvement of grading systems with increased promotion avenues for women; and the removal of occupational segregation.

There were, however, some women to whom respectability was hinged on the recognition that they were also mothers or/and wives and, therefore, preferred lower salaries than men as well as different/unequal conditions of service since this would give them flexible working conditions to accommodate their duties as wives or/and mothers. Reporting in 1952, the Chegwiddden Survey of the Public Service observed that:

“There [was] no popular demand amongst married women Civil Servants for the abolition of the marriage bar, nor do they desire to assume the obligations which would be the necessary corollary of permanent and pensionable employment. They prefer for example, to be free to take their holidays when their husbands are on leave, to transfer from one centre to another with their husbands, and to relinquish their employment at short notice for domestic reasons” [2].

The marriage bar referred to the ‘stringent’ conditions of service that were placed upon married women which denied them access to a number of benefits, including pensions, enjoyed by single and permanently employed women. There were indeed some advantages that came with the marriage bar as stated by the Chegwiddden survey and for those married women who preferred the continuity of the marriage bar, this was the kind of respectability they desired, a respectability that would accommodate their motherhood and positions as wives.

Gender discrepancies were, however, pervasive in the Service affecting single and widowed women as well. Over time, women began to challenge the whole gender biased work regime especially salary disparities. Increasingly, equal pay for equal work between men and women, was becoming the respectable thing for a woman worker. The continuous struggle for this and other improvements on the employment conditions of women is what this study describes as ‘negotiating respectability.’ Though the struggle for greater respect for women as employees in their own right included some men and their associations, this discussion will focus specifically on the contributions of white women.

It is not clear when the first women were employed in the Public Service of Southern Rhodesia. However, by 1910 there is evidence that few women were already in Public Service employment taking up clerical duties [3]. The numbers increased over time especially during the First World War when many women joined the Service to replace men that had gone to the war front [4]. White women in the Public Service of Southern Rhodesia experienced widespread gender discriminations in their conditions of service (See Kufakurinani [4] for a greater discussion on these). These ranged from salary disparities, unfair grading systems to unequal access to promotion avenues. The recruitment policies were also equally discriminatory on gender lines [5]. As I demonstrate in a different paper, married women, however, fared worse because it was believed that their primary occupation and commitment was housewifery as opposed to employment [6]. It is these gender discriminations that women began to challenge as improper treatment beginning as early as the First World War.

### **Encounter with the Public Service**

Women in the Public Service faced widespread discrimination at virtually all levels of employment in the Public Service. Taking the example of recruitment policies, notwithstanding changes over time, women were generally discriminated against. As early as the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the Public Service discouraged the employment of “very attractive” women [7] and encouraged the employment of a woman who had “attained the age of at least 17 years and is unmarried or a widow” (Government Notice no. 401, 9 October 1917). For some time until the thirties, once married, a woman was obliged to resign for good. These policies, however, changed to accommodate the increasing demand for women labour over the years. The Second World War, in particular, strained the staff complement of the Public Service as men went to the war front. Married women could now be recruited on part time or temporary basis. All these developments were hinged on the belief that the woman’s priority, even more so if married, was her domestic responsibilities at home.

The recruitment policy also entrenched occupational segregation. This occupational “crowding”, as Bergman [8] called it, excluded women from certain jobs and directed them to occupations such as the clerical administrative work. A 1917 report by the Committee on Lady Clerks and Typists in the Service is quite revealing on the state’s sanctioning of occupational crowding. Part of the report read:

“A great part of the work in the Junior Service must be described as ‘routine’, a considerable amount of which might, with perhaps some slight qualifications, be further described ‘mechanical’, requiring for its efficiency very little initiative or knowledge. Work of this nature can be done by ladies with efficiency at least equal to that of male cost at a less cost.” [3].

In 1927 C. Duff, the Secretary to the Department of the Colonial State buttressed the Government’s position on work occupations for women. He wrote:

“The policy of the Government is that women clerks should be employed for stenography and typing and the record work in the various offices, but that for other duties, male clerks should be employed who will, in time, become available to fill senior administrative posts” (NAZ S246/645, Conditions of Service Department Committee 1917-1931, Letter from C. E. Duff to the Secretary Department of Agriculture, 16 August 1927).

Notwithstanding the inclusion of women into traditionally male occupations after the 1950s, the trends of occupational crowding remained a feature of Rhodesian society.

The conditions of service for women also demonstrated huge gender disparities and were relatively poor. This situation was a worldwide phenomenon in industrialized nations. In terms of remuneration for instance, women got less than men even for the same work. Salary disparities were rationalised on the grounds that “... female staff has always been unstable because the young ones leave to marry, or if they remain after marriage are frequently absent for domestic reasons, or throw up their jobs altogether” [9]. For single women, lower salaries than men were also rationalised on the grounds that they had only themselves to take care of while for married women it was argued that they had their husbands to take care of them. The situation was more complex. Women labour, as insinuated by the Committee on Lady Clerks and Typists cited above, was also valued for being cheap and therefore good for economising.

As for the grading system, according to the evidence obtained by the Godlonton Commission of 1939, promotions were slow; insufficient distinction was made between officers with special qualifications and those who had indifferent or no qualification and between fully trained shorthand-typists and clerks with little or no training. Except in appointments to the Senior Grade, promotion was based on sheer seniority and there was little scope of encouragement for the efficient officer [10]. In 1961, the Women’s Section of the Administrative and

Clerical Branch of the Public Servant’s Association (hereafter called the Women’s Section or simply the Section) described the existing grading structure of the women’s section as “most unwieldy and unrealistic [causing] much discontent in this service because of the many anomalies” [11].

### Confronting the Injustice

White women in the Service used different ways to challenge gender disparities and the poor conditions of service. They employed a range of subtle ways to subvert unfair labour relations. Women challenged the system first in their individual capacity and second through their representative bodies such as the Women’s Section and the Civil Service Women’s Association (CSWA). As individuals, women could simply resign when fed up by conditions of service. At times women would unleash their frustrations through the media. Commenting on the salary disparities, one woman wrote in 1955, “... if a woman must continue to receive only four-fifths of a man’s pay, I suggest that she be required to work only four-fifths of the time he puts in and does the remaining fifth at overtime rates.” She added; “time has come for this injustice to cease” [9].

The post-Second World War era was characterized by intensified campaigns for widespread reforms on women’s employment. Several factors help explain the intensity of women’s campaigns, after World War II, for reforms such as gender parity on the workplace. Developments outside Southern Rhodesia played a significant role. For example, Britain extended parity to its civil servants in 1955 and hoped to have raised the pay for “most women civil servants by degrees until it equaled that of men by 1960” [12]. Commenting on this development, Miss Eva Wilkins, Chairwoman of CSWA, admitted that opinion in the then Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was “quite strongly influenced” by events in Britain [12]. Within the Federation itself, Nyasaland was first to take up the principle of “equal pay for the same job” before Southern Rhodesia. Such developments inspired white women in the Southern Rhodesia Public Service to battle for equality.

The determination by white women to have equality in the Service also had a racial dimension. *The Record* of 4 February 1957 noted, that “it is a natural consequence of the conference resolution of 1956 that Africans entering the civil service should be paid the same salary as a European that the woman officers should also desire equal pay” [13]. If Africans would be employed in the Service on the same salary as Europeans, this would mean that the salaries for white women would

consequently be lower than that of the African men. As the Women's Branch of the Administrative and Clerical Association of Southern Rhodesia acknowledged, "no normal woman would be prepared to compete with non-Europeans on a lower salary than the African is receiving" (NAZ S3279/11/109, Employment of women in Southern Rhodesia Public Service 1955-1965, letter from Secretary of Justice and Internal affairs to the Secretary to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2 March 1961). There were, however, some women organisations, such as the Salisbury Business and professional Women's Club, which did advocate for the extension of salary parity between sexes regardless of race (Muriel Rosin Papers, Women Law Library – University of Zimbabwe, Letter from Salisbury Business and professional Women's Club to Muriel Rosin, dated 16 January 1961).

The campaigns for reforms on women's employment would ultimately affect the black women as well. This explains why, in 1961, there were fears that extension of parity to white women would have a negative impact on state revenues as this would mean increasing salaries for black women as well to match their male counterparts. The estimate for such a move was put at £200, 000 pounds per month (NAZ S3279/11/109, Employment of Women in Southern Rhodesia Public Service 1955-1965, Cabinet Memorandum from Minister of the Treasury, 17 August 1961). For this reason, and many others, parity was conveniently accepted in principle but not in practice. In some ways, the fears by the state confirm the argument made in this paper that developments in the circles of white women employment also had a bearing on the experiences of black women employed in the Service then and beyond. The excuse given by the state is a clear example of the continued interest by capital in perpetuating the exploitation of women labour. This exploitation continued into the post-colonial state.

The fight for equal pay for equal work between the sexes was an arduous one which was won merely in principle during the colonial era. The intensification of the liberation struggle saw the state diverting its attention to 'more pertinent' issues of the day. It was only after the war that labour laws were introduced in the 1980s which recognised, without exceptions, the concept of equal pay for equal work between men and women. Part of the Minimum Wages Act no. 4 of 1980 read, "... no employer should discriminate in the payment of wages to an employee on the grounds of race, sex or age..." (Minimum Wages Act no. 4, 1980). Equality between sexes on the workplace was to be engraved in labour regulations that followed such as the Labour Relations Act of 1985. These were, to a certain extent, fruits of a protracted struggle between women and capital and this

struggle had its roots in the colonial period. Indeed, as Mrs. Chimombe, a black woman, recalls when she joined the Service in 1982 as Registry Clerk, salary disparities between men and women doing the same work no longer existed (Mrs. Chimombe, personal communication, Strathaven, 21 October 2010).

Several women resorted to resignations or transfer as a way of registering their discontent. Apparently, transfers from one department to another were easy then. Resignations too, by women in the Service were very common. With increasing demand for women labour, resignations became a serious cause of concern to the state. In the early 1950s, the Chegwiddden report noted that married women were shunning the Public Service and taking up employment in the private sector [2]. In 1964, for instance, P. Dunn, Secretary to the Public Service Board lamented; "we have a continued turnover of females leaving for better pasture. Only this morning Education Department conveyed their concern at the resignation of a good female accounts clerk who had obtained a job at £10 per month more" (NAZ S3454/32/4 Recruitment to the Government Service: Local recruitment 1948-1964, Minute Sheet M8, 7 July 1964).

As early as the First World War, white women negotiated, in their associations, for respectable conditions of service. During the war, CSWA stood up to represent women over their remuneration, which was being eroded by the inflationary war economy. Most of the women who were in the Public Service during this time were doing clerical office work. At a meeting held in September 1918, the Association made two recommendations on the improvement of women's salaries. The first read as follows; "that the lady clerks employed in the civil service be granted the same privileges as those extended to the lady clerks in the commercial branch of the BSAC by granting war allowances" (NAZ A/3/7/23 Civil Service, Women Clerks and Typists, Letter from Committee of CSWA to the Secretary Department of the Administrator, 5 October 1918). The second resolution read; "that the minimum salary for lady clerks be increased to £14 per menses instead of £12.10/-, which latter amount under present conditions is totally inadequate" (NAZ A/3/7/23, Letter from Committee of CSWA to the Secretary Department of the Administrator, 5 October 1918). These resolutions were forwarded to the Advisory Committee. Unfortunately, their requests were turned down on the grounds that their existing salaries were sufficient.

The resolutions made by CSWA did not, however, challenge the gender inequities of the civil service despite the fact that some women, as will be shown, had written to CWSA demanding that this be looked into. Rather,

these resolutions sought to improve the welfare of white women without upsetting the gender stereotypes of the Service/Rhodesian society. The state only made half-hearted responses to these demands. Notwithstanding CSWA silence on gender disparities obtaining in the Service, individual women aired their views in this. For instance, one woman clerk, Miss Reynolds, wrote to CSWA in 1918 as follows; "so many of us are filling the position of men but the remuneration do not come to the same, and seeing that ladies are a very great commercial asset to the Government we should be considered in this regard" (NAZ A/3/7/23 Civil Service, Women Clerks and Typists, Letter from L. Reynolds to V. Godbolt, Acting Secretary for Civil Service Woman Association (CSWA), 26 October 1918). In the same year another woman clerk writing to CSWA suggested that "a similar grant to that made to the men should be made to ladies, to enable them to meet their increased expenses" (NAZ A/3/7/23 Civil Service, Women Clerks and Typists, Letter from D. E. Lawrence Mines Office Gatooma the Acting Sec CSWA, 3 October 1918). All these calls were to no avail.

As an association, CSWA did not display zeal towards the issue of salary parity between women and men. Admittedly, information on the activities of this association is thin. However, the little that is available demonstrates that the Association did not demand a radical change of the status quo. For example, in the 1950s, when the issue of parity for women in the British Civil Service was the talk of the day, Miss Wilkin, the Chairwoman of CSWA, said that for Southern Rhodesia, this was not the right path yet. *The Rhodesian Herald* of 27 June, 1955, reported Wilkin's position as follows; "Southern Rhodesian's women civil servants are now concerned at present with getting the opportunity to do jobs now done by men, than with pressing for equal pay for men and women in the Service" [12] This contradicts with evidence provided above were some women had demanded equality of pay with men way before this period. Wilkin's position emphasises the differences that existed between women and their expectations of what was respectable at the workplace.

If CSWA did not openly come up to represent women on the question of parity in the Service, they were other representative bodies which did. The Women's Section of the Administrative and Clerical Branch of the Public Servant's Association (to be referred to as Women's Section) was vigorous in its criticism of the salary disparities. Recommendations submitted by the Association to the Paterson Commission are quite revealing. The Women Section wrote:

"Women feel strongly more than ever that the qualified

women should receive parity with her male counterpart in the Service, not only the same salary scales but the same conditions of service throughout the qualified scales." [11]

In the same submission, the Section also pointed out that "the women of the service as a whole are very concerned with the questions of parity and feel that it is perhaps one of the most important issues that should be discussed" [11].

The Salisbury Business and professional Women's Club also registered its disapproval of existing salary disparities. The Club submitted its views to the Public Service Board (Southern Rhodesia) and the Federal Services Commission in 1961 and appealed to the only woman in the Federal Parliament, Muriel Ena Rosin, to support their cause (Muriel Rosin Papers, Letter from Salisbury Business and professional Women's Club to Muriel Rosin, dated 16 January 1961). The Club also wanted the "principle of the rate for the job [to] be applied to all Public services, regardless of race or sex" (Muriel Rosin Papers, Letter from Salisbury Business and professional Women's Club to Muriel Rosin, dated 16 January 1961). If, in 1952, the Chegwiddden Commission failed to notice "any general desire on the part of the women staff generally that equality of pay should be introduced" [2], in 1961, this desire was glaringly noticeable.

The Women's Section also castigated the Government for its casual approach to women's plight on parity of salaries. They felt that they deserved to get a "voice" from Government yet for three years (1957-1960) the state was silent and nothing fruitful came out. The state used as one of its excuses for not implementing parity the fact that the Federal Government Services were yet to do so. Frustrated by such delaying gimmicks, the Women's Section wrote:

"This constant 'waiting' for Federal Government is a source of irritation to all territorial civil servants, and this Section cannot understand why the Southern Rhodesia Servants should be bound by Federal Government views." [11].

The Section was bitter about the Government's delaying tactics and failure to resolve women's concerns once and for all. This bitterness was probably made worse by the fact that in the same Federation, the Nyasaland Government had already started implementing the principle of 'equal pay for the same rate of work' without waiting for the Federal Government.

White women also challenged the justifications made

for lower salaries than men's. These women demonstrated that the assumptions made about the responsibilities they held in society in comparison to men, were reductionist and erroneous. There were women who also had family responsibilities not to mention widows. The case of Margery Ganswick is quite revealing. Asked to give her opinion on the reasons why women clerks should receive war allowances during the First World War, she wrote, "I have six brothers at the [war] front ... I am thus filling the place of at least one brother by assisting in the support of my mother and younger sister" (NAZ A/3/7/23, Civil Service; Women Clerks and Typists, Letter from the Controller of Customs offices, Bulawayo to the Acting Secretary Civil Service Women's Association, Salisbury 1 October 1918). Even outside the war circumstances, the existence of women who had family responsibilities just as men cannot be easily dismissed. One woman, disgruntled by the rationale given for paying lower salaries to women, wrote to the editor of *The Herald* in 1955, "a man may have a wife and children, but many women too, have dependants of one kind and another" [9]. This is what the colonial state deliberately and conveniently ignored.

Concerns were also raised on the injustices of the grading system. In 1939, the Godlonton Commission had investigated and recommended a number of issues about promotion and the grading system for women [10]. Notwithstanding the recommendations made in 1938 to improve the grading system for white women, they continued, as far as the 1960's and beyond, to be dissatisfaction with the grading systems. The Women's Section castigated the poor grading systems and noted that there was "much discontent in that section of the service [women's section] because of the many anomalies that existed [in the grading system]" [10].

The prejudice held against married women was also challenged. As early as 1946, women themselves were challenging the temporary employment of those who were married. Temporary employment for married women entailed a loss in benefits that were enjoyed by permanent employees such as pensions. At an annual congress of the Federation of Women's Institutes of Southern Rhodesia (FWISR) in 1946, it was proposed that, "the Government should recognise the principle of permanent employment for married women with academic and specialised qualifications" (NAZ S824/198/2 Federation of Women's Institutes, Federation of Women's Institutes of Southern Rhodesia, 20 August to 21 August 1946.) As noted earlier, the Chegwiddden Report, gives the impression that women did not really want to see this marriage bar removed. Given the resolution made by FWISR, the conclusion made by the

Chegwiddden Commission highlight the varied and sometimes contradicting expectations placed upon the Service by women. All these expectations demonstrate negotiations for respectability at different levels.

In the 1960s, however, white women were more vocal in challenging the mentality that married women were to be employed temporarily to suit their domestic responsibilities. The Women's Section wrote;

"The obligations of a married woman whose husband is supporting her and her family rest first and for most with her husband and family, and should she seek employment with the Government, then it follows that she must abide by the conditions of service as laid down for all government employees. There should be no special concession for this type of employee to receive unpaid leave (as at present) so that her leave may coincide with her husband- this is discriminatory and there is nothing to balance this up for the woman who has no husband." (sic) [11]

White women in the Service were increasingly discontented with the marriage bar, which perpetuated discrimination and the settler patriarchal hegemony. In the light of this and other demands made for the end of the marriage bar, the conclusions made by the Chegwiddden Commission must also be treated with caution.

The Women's Section found the whole system of temporary employment unjust and abhorable. As already noted, married women were employed temporarily in permanent posts and this was for indefinite periods. As noted in the Paterson commission of enquiry, there were cases of women who served the Government for anything from 15-18 or more years, but still received no concessions in the way of holiday grants or pension funds. Bitter about such injustice, the Section wrote to the Paterson Commission:

"Not by any stretch of imagination can an employee be considered 'temporary' with 10, 15 or 20 years or more continuous service with the Government, and such cases should be considered for permanent conditions of employment.... The idea for the government is that all staff should be permanent employees" [11].

The Section was thus seeking sweeping reforms that would overhaul the employment policy on married women in the Service.

The occupational segregation, which was engraved in

the Service, was also challenged and in some circles criticized as discriminatory and unfounded. Realising that if Rhodesian girls did not take up nursing they could only specialise in shorthand typing, the FWISR in 1947 passed a resolution that “a technical school for girls be opened to give girls a wider range of careers to choose from when they come to earn their leaving” [14]. The resolution was, however, turned down by the state arguing that, “a population the size of Johannesburg would be needed to justify such a school” [14]. In essence, the state did not see itself striking a major benefit from this proposal hence its cold shoulder. Little efforts were thus made towards addressing occupational crowding at grass roots levels.

In 1961, the Women’s Section also challenged the occupational segregation in the Service. The Section was bitter about the exclusion of women from certain grades of the Service especially of greater responsibility. It registered women’s discontent as follows:

“The Women’s Section view with concern that no provision for women has been made on the executive grade in the latest Service’s Board Regulations.... When this was under discussion, the Women’s Section had been given to understand that provision would be made for women in this grade. It must be noted that there are numerous female accountants clerks in the Government Service.... We should submit that women should not be debarred from this grade [the executive grade] merely from the sex point of view, and in reverse the male should not be debarred from entering the Service with typing, shorthand of machine operating qualifications...” [11].

The Section was challenging the mentality that women were ideal for the manipulative and routine duties of the Service while men were destined for administrative posts. In a way it was also challenging the narrow avenues of advancement for women into more responsible posts. White women also demanded improvements on their conditions of service with regards to fringe benefits. The Women’s Section demanded that Saturdays be closed for work in the Public Service. They felt that this was necessary because in the “modern mechanized world, Saturday [was] becoming a necessary means of relaxation from the strains and stresses of high pressure put upon due to be speedier processes used in works and offices” [11]. This move was to be most welcome for women, since “there are little or no fringe benefits in the Service at present” [11]. If the Public Service was to make any concessions in this regard, the Women’s Section pointed out that salary or leave conditions for

women were not to be prejudiced. It seems this suggestion was eventually taken up and today generally Saturdays are holidays for Civil Servants.

### **Better Prospects in the Service?**

Widespread campaigns for better conditions of service did register some notable successes. For instance, an amendment was made in 1971 which allowed married women to be placed on the permanent staff. Each case would be considered on its merits. While, however, other officers would undergo probation for two years, a married woman wanting a permanent post would take five years [1]. The Public Service justified this arrangement on grounds that a woman had ‘to demonstrate over a period of time that she can successfully combine a career and her responsibilities as a housewife’ [1]. While the women’s campaigns may have contributed to the marriage bar eventually disappearing from the policy framework by independence, in practice it continued in subtle forms even beyond the colonial period. Mrs. Chimombe recollects that after independence in 1980, employers were generally against employing women with young children especially babies. In her interview for the job as Registry Clerk in 1882, she was asked about the ages of her children and, having been tipped, had to lie so that she could be considered for the job (Mrs. Chimombe, personal communication). The employer’s fear was that a woman with a young child would have greater diverted attention between work and family and in such a case, commitment to her work could easily be compromised.

Notwithstanding some mileage and piecemeal reforms by the Public Service, the battle against gender disparities and poor conditions of service for women was far from being won by 1980. Occupational crowding was perpetuated as men continued to scorn “women’s work” such as typing and other clerical jobs. White women continued to receive lower salaries than men. Though grading structures for women were continuously changing, promotion avenues remained skewed as white women were excluded from posts of greater administrative responsibilities.

There are several factors that account for the continued unfair and poor conditions of service. Women did not always have a common agreement on what was respectable in as far as their employment was concerned. Writing to *The Rhodesia Herald* in 1930, one Mrs. R. Darlington actually complained over the employment of married women in the Service. She wrote:

“What does one get married for? I ask you, why, to keep

a house, rear a family perhaps, cook the meals, darn hubby's socks etc (sic). The married woman has a husband to keep her that's one reason why she gets married, to cease work. Who has the single girl to keep her?" [15].

She believed strongly in the notion of domesticity for married women, and for this lady, a married woman had to resign and take care of the family as a housewife. She signed her letter as follows, "I am etc. (Mrs.) R. Darlington (married and unemployed as it should be)" [15].

Indeed, many women accepted the status quo. In 1952, the Chegwiddden Commission reported that it was unable to "discern any general desire on the part of the women staff general that equality of pay should be introduced" (Chegwiddden Survey). Ms Edone Pethoram recalled, "At that stage we women accepted the disparity; we were brought up to it. We were not aggravated by the fact that men earned more than us" (Edone Pethoram, personal communication, Marlborough, 17 April 2007). Ms K. Divaris also felt strongly that being a domestic wife was the best thing for a woman. She remained a domestic wife and was never employed during the colonial era (Kiki Divaris, personal communication, Churchill, 10 October 2010). The attitudes displayed by these women are not surprising. As Pethoram succinctly puts it, the women had been brought up to these injustices and many naturally absorbed them as the norm. With quite a number of women still accepting the existing traditions, the success of women's cause in the Service was to be compromised.

One big blow to the success of women's cries for better prospects in the Service emanated from the fact that men were the ones who occupied the policy-making positions in Government. Wormarld summarised this situation as follows; "there were all men in the [higher] positions, there were no women. So if you were having problems you had to present it to a man and hopefully they would take your case through" (Elizabeth Wormarld, personal communication, Marlborough, 17 April 2007). A male dominated system had little sympathy with women concerns sometimes not deliberately, but simply because men did not have the same experience as women and as such men were least qualified to represent, or least of all understand, the interests of women. Many men remained slaves of their cultural gender constructions in the same way that some women had come to accept these constructions.

Many men generally remained intransigent. *The Record* of 4 February 1957 noted that representatives of the Administrative and Clerical Association were not all

completely behind the proposals of full equality for women regarding salaries [13]. D. H. Spafford, for instance, considered that such a step would discourage marriage and stated that traditionally the salary of a male officer was greater than that of a woman [13]. It is not clear how he thought parity would discourage marriage. J. I. Money, another representative, "expressed concern that by obtaining equality possibly women officers would suffer since in the majority of cases the head of department would prefer to select a male rather than a female to fill a vacant post" [13] Thus different men opposed the proposals for equality on various grounds.

The colonial state did not have the cause of white women employees at heart as seen in its hypocrisy and delaying tactics to resolve their issues. In 1961, the Women's Branch of the Administrative and Clerical Branch submitted to the Government a memorandum in which they proposed parity in the Service. In response to these proposals, the Government "agreed to parity of pay between man and women based on equal work and responsibility provided that the typing grade was kept entirely separate" (NAZ S3279/11/109, Employment of Women in Southern Rhodesia Public Service 1955-1965, Letter from Secretary of Justice and Internal affairs to the Secretary to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2 March 1961). Two points can be made on the Government's response. First, many women were to get a raw deal from this arrangement because they were in the typing grade which was to be kept "entirely separate." Second, the state only agreed to this in principle but delayed in implementation.

The decision on parity was conveniently referred to Nyasaland and the Federal Government, as "it was possible that their conditions of service would be affected" (Letter from Secretary of Justice and Internal affairs to the Secretary to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2 March 1961). The Federal Government was not yet taking up the principle of parity and on these grounds Southern Rhodesia suspended the implementation of equal pay for equal work. This was just buying time. Nyasaland had since started implementing the principle despite the fact that the Federal Government had not (NAZ S3279/11/109, Employment of women in Southern Rhodesia Public Service 1955-1965, Letter from Secretary of Justice and Internal affairs to the Secretary to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2 March 1961). The Southern Rhodesia Government conveniently dismissed the path taken by Nyasaland and followed developments in the Federal Service.

The colonial state appointed Committees and Commissions, which looked into the welfare of women in the Service ostensibly to improve their conditions of

service. One common thing about these Committees and Commissions was that they were all chaired by men. In my research I bumped into seven Committees and Commissions of Enquiry in the National Archives. Of these, only one had women members and these were only two out of its five members. It is possible that they were more Committees and Commissions of Enquiry but it is highly unlikely that trends in terms of women representation were any different. Such a scenario, made the probability of recommendations that would revolutionise women's conditions of service low. The Paterson Commission was the only one that came nearest to liberating women. The Commission even carried with it, in greater details, the views of women in the Public Service on their conditions of service. However, despite its 'liberal' stance on white women employees in the Service, it still carried with it gender prejudice on the workplace. For instance, while the Report recommended parity for women in the Service this was, however, to be restricted to the senior grades of the Service only arguing that it was at this point that "a woman has decided to make the Service her career" [11]. Thus at the lower grades, salary disparities between men and women were recommended to continue unabated.

At times when the commissions raised concerns about the injustices in white women's conditions of service, this was more in sympathy with the state than the women themselves. The Chegwiddden Commission for instance, criticised the narrow promotion avenues for women. Its report read:

"While again we do not suggest flinging doors wide open to equality between men and women Civil Servants, we feel that the present restrictions on the advancement of women in the Service are causing the state a loss of a good deal of administrative ability which is running to waste" [2]

Thus, the fears were that the state was losing out on its women employees because of skewed promotion avenues. Less attention was paid to how the women themselves were affected by the system of advancement in the Service. In this way, recommendations by the Report would only bring incidental benefits to women. On the whole, the Chegwiddden Report generally recommended the perpetuation of women's subordination in the Service.

## CONCLUSION

The experiences of white women in the Public Service of Southern Rhodesia highlight a number of things about

the women's plight in the Service. First, white women were not homogeneous and therefore their perspectives of what was respectable were different and sometimes contradicting. This did not help in winning their cause. Second, women resorted to various methods of negotiating for proper treatment in the workplace. These included resigning, exposing the unfair conditions of service in the press and campaigning through different women associations. Third, notwithstanding various setbacks, the women struggle registered some successes such as the removal of the marriage bar and the introduction of Saturdays as holidays for civil servants. The women also sowed the roots for the post-colonial legalisation of equal pay for equal work which had been accepted in principle by the Rhodesian state. Fourth, external forces played an important role in encouraging and inspiring women to seek reforms to their conditions of service.

Finally, a myriad of factors compromised the success of the struggle by white women. These included, among others, the domination of men in the Service as well as in the Commissions that investigated the welfare of women in the Service. The state was itself one of the worst obstacles to the women's cause as it sometimes employed cheap gimmicks to delay reform. The Rhodesian Society, for the most part, remained intransigency. Gender constructions were paramount in conditioning and stereotyping of women's roles and status and many Rhodesians, both male and female, subscribed to the notions of domesticity for women. The woman's primary responsibility was considered to be that of a housewife and mother. This thinking, helped shape the conditions of service for women not only in the Public Service but in commerce and industry as well. Perhaps the most important lesson from the experiences of the white women is that the key to lasting progressive reforms for women in the work place should necessarily include the mammoth task of dissipating unfair social constructions on gender.

## Abbreviations

CSWA - Civil Service Women's Association  
NAZ – National Archives of Zimbabwe

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