

## Feminisation of the Labour Process in the Communication Industry: The Case of the Telephone Operators, 1876-1904.

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Article abstract

This article uses concepts coming from studies of the feminization of different occupations to investigate how the occupation of telephone operator came to be a female job ghetto. Its main theme is that the feminization of operating was central to the rapid growth of the telephone industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Contrary to general findings in the literature on feminization, the study suggests that labelling the operator's occupation as a female job increased, rather than reduced, its social status, although it did not improve its wages. It also indicates that whereas the job definition changed to suit female characteristics, its actual performance continued to involve commonly recognised male features to which the female operators had to adapt.

# Feminisation of the Labour Process in the Communication Industry:

## The Case of the Telephone Operators, 1876-1904.

Michèle Martin

IN EARLY 1880, THE FIRST WOMAN was hired by Bell Telephone Co. as an operator in the Main Exchange in Montreal, and soon after the company's managers in Toronto also hired a woman. Thus began the replacement of an all male operating labour force by one that was entirely female. At the time, the use of "boys" as operators was said to be a total failure. A Bell Telephone Company manager stated that if the company continued with boys as operators, "it was virtually facing bankruptcy."<sup>1</sup>

This article examines the process of feminisation in the telephone industry. It especially focuses on the Bell Telephone Company<sup>2</sup> in Ontario and Quebec, with particular emphasis on Montreal and Toronto.

### I

DURING THE LAST DECADE, the issue of feminisation has occasioned a growing debate among social scientists, especially feminist writers. Much has been said, about the feminisation of teaching,<sup>3</sup> of office work,<sup>4</sup> and of domestic labour.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Early operators' file, Bell Company's Historical Collection (hereafter called BCHC).

<sup>2</sup>This decision is based on the fact that most data are from Bell Telephone Co. However, some data from other telephone companies in the United States and Canada show that competitive businesses were using more or less identical hiring policies. Hence, examples from other companies will also be employed when relevant.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Alison Prentice, "The Feminisation of Teaching in British North America and Canada, 1845-1875," *Social History*, 3(1975), 5-20; and M. Danylewycz and A. Prentice, "Teachers' Work," *Labour/Le Travail*, 17 (1986), 58-80; M. Grumet, "Pedagogy for Patriarchy: The Feminisation of Teaching," *Interchange*, 12 (1981), 165-84.

<sup>4</sup>See G.B. Lowe, "Women, Work and the Office: The Feminisation of Clerical Occupations

Michèle Martin, "Feminisation of the Labour Process in the Communication Industry: The Case of the Telephone Operators, 1876-1904," *Labour/Le Travail*, 22 (Fall 1988), 139-162.

Prentice's "The Feminisation of Teaching in British North America and Canada, 1845-1875," presents a largely economic analysis of the phenomenon. She argues that the creation of a public school system promoting the grading of school children "led to the feminisation of the teaching labour force." The feminisation of teaching brought cheap and effective teachers to a section of the system which was considered unattractive by men. Low wages for women allowed school boards to give higher wages to male, career-oriented teachers. However, the social acceptance of women as teachers was essential,<sup>6</sup> and contemporary beliefs such as the degrading of the profession by its feminisation, the ineptitude of women at discipline, and the identification of women with truncated career paths had to be overcome.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the willingness of women to take badly paid teaching jobs with difficult working conditions, where they were in a position of subordination, was due, according to Prentice, to a crowded female labour market coupled with women's personal choice to work outside the home.<sup>8</sup> In short, Prentice argues that a change in educational organisation due to the building of a public school system, the existence of a large female reserve army of labour, and the changing social role of women are the main factors which influenced the feminisation of teaching in the mid-nineteenth century.

Danylewycz, *et al.*, also recognised economic factors as central in the feminisation of teaching. Yet, in "The Evolution of the Sexual Division of Labour in Teaching: A Nineteenth Ontario and Quebec Case Study," they suggest that other elements have also influenced the evolution of the feminisation of teaching, especially in Ontario and Quebec. In Ontario, for instance, age structure, ethnicity, and the household status of teachers were also responsible for the change in elementary school teaching, while in Quebec alternatives in terms of job openings for men, and male under-schooling in comparison to women, encouraged the feminisation of teaching in elementary school.<sup>9</sup>

Lowe's "Women, Work and the Office" supports these arguments as well. Lowe argues that the transition from small entrepreneurial capitalism to corporate capitalism led to the feminisation of office work. He identifies four models used to account for feminisation: the "consumer choice" model;

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in Canada, 1901-1931," *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 5 (1980), 361-81; "Class, Job and Gender in the Canadian Office," *Labour/Le Travail* 10 (1982), 11-37.

<sup>5</sup>See B. Curtis, "Capital, the State, and the Origins of the Working-Class Household" and L. Briskin, "Domestic Labour: A Methodological Discussion," in B. Fox, ed., *Hidden in the Household* (Toronto 1980), 101-34, 135-72.

<sup>6</sup>Prentice, "Feminisation," 6-7.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 16-7.

<sup>9</sup>M. Danylewycz, *et al.*, "The Evolution of the Sexual Division of Labour in Teaching: A Nineteenth Century Ontario and Quebec Case Study," *Social History*, 16 (1983), 81-109.

the "reserve army of labour" model; the "demand" model; and the "segmentation" model.<sup>10</sup> However, none of these presents a satisfactory explanation for the feminisation of telephone operators.

The "consumer" choice model is "based on the concept of rational economic choice" made subjectively upon a family consensus in view of economic necessities of the household. Women are assumed to exercise free choice and the model explains work rates in terms of subjective processes rather than socio-economic variables.<sup>11</sup> The second model uses the Marxist concept of "reserve army of labour" to explain the place of women in the labour force. This model, developed by Braverman, emphasizes the ways in which capital has created a supply of cheap female labour related to the decreasing or increasing demand on the labour market made by the requirements of capitalists.<sup>12</sup> It is helpful in explaining the position of women after they have been integrated into the labour market, and in shedding light on the process of their exploitation by capitalist industry. The "demand" model is concerned with the occupational segregation of women through the manipulation of job requirements. This model argues that an increased supply of female labour is caused by the growing demand for women in certain occupations. Gender discrimination in terms of specific occupations is "reinforced by the process of sex-labelling." The labour supply is manipulated by capital in terms of job requirements and wages.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the "segmentation" model, proposed by Edwards, gives the "structural properties" as the basic elements of the process of feminisation of an occupation. It suggests that sex-based dimensions of power and inequality can be related to the fragmentation of the labour force in the labour process developed by corporate capitalism. Sex differentiation would be due to changes in productive process, mostly brought about by the technologisation of the work place. This would create "sub-markets" constituted of new occupations with different characteristics and working conditions.<sup>14</sup>

While each model identifies some factors influencing the process of the feminisation of occupations, none of them furnishes an adequate explanation. While the "consumer choice" model suggests a weak concept of rational and conscious choice subjectively made by women, the "reserve army of labour market" model, although it explains women's inferior position within the labour force in capitalist production, does not give the essential elements to understand the process through which women are hired in the first place. The "demand" and the "segmentation" models furnish more concrete conceptions. For the case with which I am concerned — telephone operating — the

<sup>10</sup>Lowe, "Women, Work, and the Office."

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>12</sup>H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism* (New York 1974), 385.

<sup>13</sup>Lowe, "Women, Work, and the Office," 368.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 369-70.

former model suggests that operating work became a female occupation because of changes made by the telephone industry in terms of job requirements. Sexually stereotyped requirements were assigned to the occupation, and with these came low wages. On the other hand, the "segmentation" model would emphasize that this new assignment of requirements was due to the fact that operator's work was segmented from other occupations and did not require high skills. Moreover, the level of stability did not have to be high because it was easy to train new operators. Training time for that occupation correspond to the time necessary to subject the operators to the switchboard.

However, according to Lowe, the segmentation model largely explains the feminisation of office work. Fragmentation of the work rendered the job unattractive to skilled workers. This opened the occupation to women through a "secondary labour market of female clerks."<sup>15</sup> In effect the manipulation of sex-labelled job characteristics by the employers resulted in the appropriation by men of the most interesting and rewarding positions in the office and left the "minor tasks" to women. Those were at the bottom of the hierarchy of occupations in bureaucratic organisations and required qualifications usually attributed to women in a patriarchal society: obedience and submissiveness.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, another debate on the process of feminisation is concerned with domestic work. In "Capital, the State and the Origins of the Working-Class Household," B. Curtis investigates how domestic labour became women's work. This is a result, he says, of the separation of household and industry under capitalism, and was sustained by state activity. "It is the state that reproduces labour power in the commodity form and that reproduces the oppression [or subordination] to which the unemployed domestic worker is subject."<sup>17</sup> From the struggle of the working-class against exploitative working conditions, and for a domestic life, emerged the working-class household with women in the subordinated position of full-time houseworkers without economic power<sup>18</sup>: in periods of high labour demand, women participated in certain sectors of the labour market, and when unemployed, they were dependent on their husbands. "Their condition as housewives structure[d] their participation in production in capitalist industries [and] ... discipline[d] them in relations of subordination and dependence ...."<sup>19</sup> Thus, women's

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 375-6.

<sup>17</sup>B. Curtis, "Capital," 131. Note that B. Fox shows that women are not simply a labour reserve as Curtis implies, but continually occupy certain sectors of the paid labour force. See Fox, *Hidden in the Household*. On the debate on domestic labour, see also M. Barrett and R. Hamilton, eds., *Politics of Diversity* (London 1986). B. Taylor's *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, (New York 1983) outlines changing domestic politics in nineteenth-century England.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 113-4, emphasis added.

subordination was not simply the result of sexist attitudes, says L. Briskin in "Domestic Labour," "rather, it [was] *firmly rooted in the material conditions of women's lives*, primarily in the institution of the family."<sup>20</sup> A definite split occurred between domestic labour and capitalist production which forced women into labour consisting mainly of the reproduction of the labour force.

In their respective analyses of the feminisation of the domestic labour, Briskin and Curtis argue the centrality of women's subordination for understanding the expansion of the capitalist economy. It is an essential element of the manipulation of women as domestic workers and as wage labourers. Indeed, the concept of subordination, which is also discussed in Luxton's *More than a Labour of Love*,<sup>21</sup> but which is absent from the previously reviewed studies, is indispensable to understanding not only women's acceptance of second rate and low waged jobs, but their willingness to take occupations whose demands include patience, obedience and submissiveness. Women's subordination, institutionalized in the family and the workplace, is central to the moral regulation of women in the public realm. Here it works to incite women to consider their work as a "labour of love." Telephone operating had many of the characteristics of a labour of love.

The degree of feminisation of an occupation is affected by the state of the labour market, and the financial structure of the organisation within which the process occurs. Moreover, the traditional attitudes towards women in the society in which the process occurs influence the characteristics attached to the job.<sup>22</sup> Other factors such as age structure, ethnicity, household status, job openings, and level of education have also to be taken into consideration to account for the timing of the phenomenon. Finally, there seems to be a general consensus among researchers that the feminisation of an occupation results in a decrease of its social status and in a reduction in its pay.

These assumptions suggested in the debate on job feminisation do not satisfactorily explain the process of feminisation of the operating labour force in the telephone industry. Indeed, although the latter passed from an entirely male to an entirely female force, the telephone company's administrators who organized the hiring of women seemed to imply that the job had never been suitable to the male personality, although the work was directly related to the handling and repairing of technical apparatuses, a domain commonly reserved to men.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the feminisation of the operating occupation

<sup>20</sup>L. Briskin, "Domestic Labour," 137, emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup>M. Luxton, *More than a Labour of Love* (Toronto 1980).

<sup>22</sup>Women's subordination resulting from economic structures caused them to accept occupations characterised by low-wages, low-status jobs, and requiring such characteristics as obedience and submissiveness.

<sup>23</sup>Although a few occupations needing some technical skill, for example bookbinders, were given to women, it is a fact that these jobs were mainly attributed to men.



*Operators working in the small telephone exchange of Peterborough in 1889. It shows Manager H.W. Kent and his staff in the operating room. As you can see, in some small exchanges, there were still more "boys" than "girls" operating the telephone. (Photo 14193, Courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection)*

did not undermine its economic status and was not due to a new fragmentation of work within the operating workplace. Rather, it appears that the job of operator acquired a higher social status after its feminisation and, although the job was low-waged, the wages did not decrease, at least in absolute terms, after the feminisation of the labour force. Wages for female workers stayed relatively the same as for male workers. Finally, unlike the case of teaching and office work, operators were not confined to inferior position, but had access to the highest degrees of a hierarchical scale, created within the operating labour force.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Here the phenomenon may be compared to that examined by R. Edwards in *Contested Terrain* (London 1979). In "bureaucratic control," Edwards points out, a hierarchy is created within each occupation, giving the illusion of advancement in the general hierarchy of the enterprise. However, although it is relatively easy to climb the hierarchical scale within a specific occupation, it is very difficult to have access to other "job families" rated at a higher

This article investigates how the occupation of telephone operator came to be a female job ghetto. Its main theme is that the process of feminisation of operating work was central to the rapid development of the telephone industry in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The particular characteristics of the women operators facilitated the telephone industry's transition from a small-scale enterprise to a modern corporate capitalist monopoly. In effect, the telephone system represented a general, public system producing individual, private telephone calls. The work of the operators as mediators in the production of telephone calls placed them in a paradoxical situation in which their intervention was essential in the connection of subscribers on telephone lines and, at the same time, was resented as an obstruction to the privacy of these calls. This situation in which the operators were a necessity and a nuisance at the same time created contradictions which the telephone business attempted to resolve in developing a set of moral regulations to be applied to the female operators. In fact, the feminisation of the operating work occurred during the mid-Victorian period, in a context of intense moral regulation for those women working in the public sphere. As mediators between subscribers, the operators had to imitate the "moral values" conveyed by those with whom they were regularly in contact. Rules and regulations coming from the company gradually covered not only the technical aspects of their formation but their "moral education" as well. Thus, feminisation brought no decline to the job's social status, that is, honour, but rather created some moral barriers intended to improve the public "image" of the telephone system and, thus to activate the development of the enterprise. The features of the female operating labour force in question were its adaptability first to the "military" discipline necessary to work on increasingly mechanized switchboards in huge central offices, then to the growing administrative control and moral regulation, finally to the wide variety of customers' demands. The definition of the operating work was dramatically altered during the period from its creation in 1876 to its near elimination in the early 1920s, with the coming of automatic switchboards.

This study is concerned with the characteristics of the operating work which were used in its definition as "women's work." What factors motivated the telephone industry to shift very early towards women operators, despite the technical nature of the job, the "risky" night shifts, and patriarchal attitudes about women's work outside the home?

## II

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TELEPHONE system coincided with a wave of capitalist

level of the general hierarchy of the enterprise. For the operators, for instance, it was near to impossible to become local managers, except in very small rural exchanges and, then, they were paid as supervisors.



concentration in Canadian industry. Small entrepreneurial businesses were becoming large capitalist firms. In this competition, the development of technical means of communication, through which capitalists could rapidly get relevant information on national and international markets, played a central role.<sup>25</sup> A network of telegraphic communication already existed which had considerably shortened the circulation time of invested capital. However, the telegraph was relatively slow and access to it was limited by the mastery of specific skills. When the telephone came on the market, it represented the "ideal" means through which business transactions could be made from person to person. Bell Telephone Company's management was quick to understand the utility of the telephone for businessmen and oriented its development from the outset to please that group of subscribers. Before direct-dial systems, telephone operators mediated between subscribers.

In order to understand the extension of the telephone system (with particular attention to the Bell Company's development in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario), it is useful to divide its expansion into two stages based partly on the improvement of the technical means, partly on the economic and political climate. The first period, 1876 to 1889, was that of the establishment of Bell Telephone Company. During the first years, from 1876 to 1880, a certain number of independent companies had started in the business, some using A.G. Bell's invention, others employing Edison's. However, in 1880 Bell's company, represented by C.F. Sise, an American businessman, bought most of these businesses in Montreal and Toronto, as well as in the other towns and cities of Quebec and Ontario. Bell's company began to feel its way towards the realisation of what would become one of the biggest private monopolies in Canada. The technical means of the telephone were still in an experimental stage and their performance, although advertised as "wonderful" in the newspapers of that time, created much frustration and despair for both management and subscribers. The switchboards had a capacity of fifty lines and were operated manually. When there were more than fifty subscribers in an exchange, two or more sections of the switchboard, which were interconnected by conducting strips known as "trunk," were necessary. If a subscriber was calling someone on a different section of the switchboard, the two sections had to be plugged or switched together. This job was done by "switch-boys" under the operators' command. Unlike the operators, the switch-boys did not have any direct contact with the subscribers.<sup>26</sup> In this type of telephone system, the operating work

<sup>25</sup>I analyze the role of communication in the process of accumulation in "Communication as Circulation: A Political Economic Analysis," paper presented at the meeting of the International Association of Communication Studies, Montreal, 25 May 1987. See also my "Communication and Social Forms: A Historical Study of the Development of the Telephone, 1876-1920," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1987.

<sup>26</sup>"'Bread Toaster' to Common Battery: Mostly about Boy Telephone Operators and Operating Conditions in the Nineteenth-Century," unpublished manuscript, 1943, Operators-Boy file, BCHC.

actually constituted the most reliable part of the telephone business.

The second stage, from 1890 to 1904, was the period of confirmation. It involved some major developments of the technical means of telephoning which attracted a larger number of subscribers. One major development was the enlargement of the switchboards and the elimination of the switch-boy's job. Operators could then carry out the whole process of connecting two subscribers' calls. This was a period of continual, although not spectacular growth, which was accompanied by a more formal organization of the operating labour force. The company began to impose a hierarchical structure on operators based on formal rules and regulations. In this period women replaced men as operators.<sup>27</sup>

At the beginning of its expansion, the telephone system was operated by a male labour force. As the telephone industry developed, however, the telephone companies started to hire women for the operating work, asserting that their personalities were "better suited" to the work. By the end of the 1880s, almost all telephone operators were women. Indeed, the job of operator became a prototypical job ghetto from which the male labour force was almost entirely barred. Nonetheless, during the first years of the telephone's development, telephone companies, including Bell Exchange, had hired "boys" as operators. According to a manager who worked as a male operator in 1878, "it was most natural to use boys as operators in the first telephone exchanges. Boys and young men had served as telegraph operators from the beginning. Then, too, it was unthinkable in the early eighties that a girl should be out after 10 o'clock so that the operating staff on the night shift was of necessity male."<sup>28</sup>

In the mid-Victorian era, the period of the early development of the telephone, official discourse presented men as assertive and aggressive and women as submissive and passive. A woman was expected to be patient, tactful, prudent, as well as forceful and courageous within her family in order to "use to the advantage the limitless and indivisible affection she owe[d] her husband." At the same time, she was required to be intelligent, discerning, firm, and energetic with her children to "properly direct their education." This difference in social expectations for men and women was based on the distinct role to which each gender was subordinated:

A young lady, unlike a young man, is not in the least required to be present in the public sphere; on the contrary, it is in the interior of the family, under the eyes of her parents, that

<sup>27</sup>The job of operator was labelled "female only" long before it actually became an entirely female job. Indeed, it had been recognized as a woman's occupation while there are still male operators working on the night shifts. This will be discussed later.

<sup>28</sup>"'Bread Toaster' to Common Battery," Operators -Boy file, BCHC.

she ought to reveal all the treasures of purity, modesty, humility, and piety, which her heart possesses. These are the best qualities, the most beautiful ornaments of the young girl.<sup>29</sup>

This image of modest, pure and submissive women was particularly widespread in the dominant and middle classes which attempted to convey their "ideal" moral virtues to the other classes through magazines and newspapers. An article entitled "The Family," in *Le monde illustré*, a newspaper written by philanthropically minded bourgeois and middle class ladies but intended for lower-middle and working classes,<sup>30</sup> made it clear that a woman

... ought never to seek other than the pure pleasures which the interior of the family offers to her. Woman's life, that life full of love, self-denial, and sacrifice, should only be lived there; so that the obscurity of her surroundings might make her virtues shine forth more brightly.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, since woman's place was in the interior of her family, she was not allowed to go outside of it alone, particularly not in the evening. According to the Catholic church, these "feeble creatures ought never to be left ... without effective control and supervision."<sup>32</sup> This constant supervision was to be performed by their husbands, parents or by a responsible person, approved by the parents, to protect women against "a liberal current of ideas" and against "pronounced tendencies towards excessive liberty."<sup>33</sup> This protective attitude towards women's "fragility" and "vulnerability" applied to their social rights as well. Because women had to be protected, their guardians needed the power necessary to subdue the "dangers." In as much as men were to be the protectors, they required control of the means of protection. Since one of them was the material means provided by labour, men's power was extended to women's right to have a job as well. Hence, women's work was socially ill-regarded, and that which was available usually was in the form of low-status and low-paid jobs. As the Archbishop of Montreal stated,

The ignorance of some and the ill-will of others work to produce an unfortunate situation in which people come to believe that equality [between men and women] involves identical rights, and women are urged to enter into a ridiculous and odious revolt with men on a field

<sup>29</sup>*Mandements, lettres pastorales, circulaires, et autres documents*, 9(1882), 439, Diocese of Montreal Historical Collection (hereafter DMHC).

<sup>30</sup>The periodical gave advices on how to economise, low budget recipes, etc..

<sup>31</sup>"The Family," *Le Monde Illustré*, 1884. This is not to say that all working-class women followed this advice.

<sup>32</sup>*Mandements, Lettres Pastorales, Circulaires et autres Documents*, 13 (1901), 453, DMHC.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 9 (1887), 66.

of combat where neither the conditions of the struggle nor the chances of success could possibly be equal. The realisation of such theories would be obnoxious to women and the family, and would shortly lead to the fall of one and the ruin of the other.<sup>34</sup>

Equal opportunity at work would cause family breakdown and women's "fall." This was a common patriarchal discourse during the first periods of development of the telephone industry and one which guided its employment policies. Joan Sangster stresses that Mackenzie King's "perceptions of the operators reflect[ed] a Victorian image of woman," and that the Ontario press sustained that view as well. In the press reports of the 1907 telephone operators' strike, "it was the moral, rather than the economic, question of woman labour which was emphasized." This Victorian view of woman was not restricted to the dominant class, however. According to Sangster, trade unionists held similar opinions. "The views of many craft unionists were dominated by their belief that woman's role was primarily a maternal and domestic one." Moreover, "it was woman's contribution to the home rather than her status as a worker, which was most often stressed in the labour press. In fact, concern that woman's wage labour would destroy the family was very strong."<sup>35</sup> This concern was general. The telephone industry recruited its first operators among a group of "boys" who were already employed as telegraph messengers and who knew a little about electrical communication, although they were by no means skilled labourers. Besides, young men were "cheaper" than mature and married men.<sup>36</sup> These young telegraph messengers were paid only by the message, and very poorly so.

### *The operators' work*

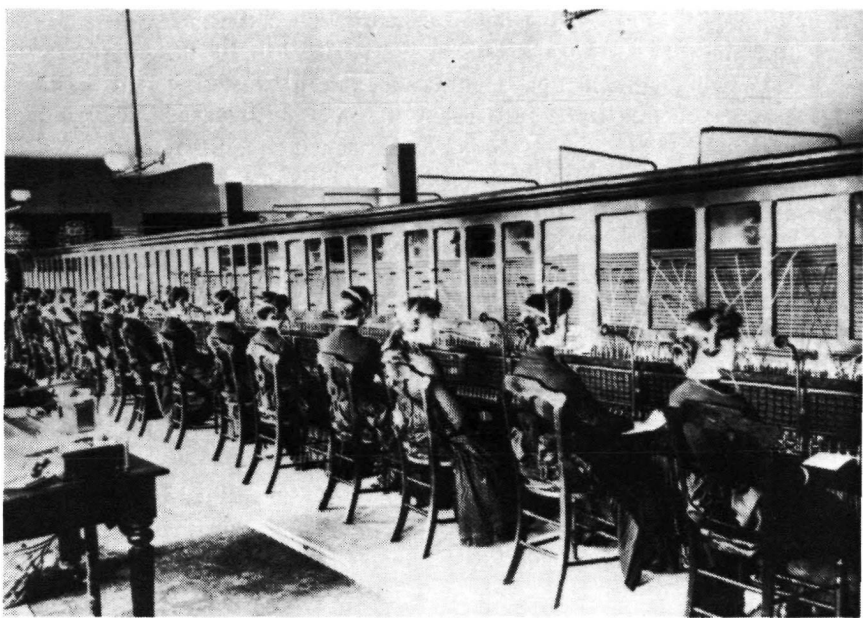
IN THE EARLY 1880S, when the telephone industry started hiring operators, the labour process was largely unstructured. It consisted mainly of improvised work on an unsophisticated technical instrument which provided an irregular production in quality and quantity. No specific conditions were required. In fact, the only requirements attached to the job of operator were to be male and young: "They were boys 16 or 17 years old, and young imps, immune to all discipline."<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the telephone company pioneers and managers had not "envisioned

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 14 (1909), 577.

<sup>35</sup>Joan Sangster, "The 1907 Bell Telephone Strike: Organizing workers," *Labour/Le Travail* 3 (Fall 1978), 122-3, 126-7. Although Sangster's study is concerned with a period not covered by this paper, it is safe to state that these social prejudices expressed in 1907 must have been even stronger earlier.

<sup>36</sup>This was also true for other occupations. See Danylewycz, "Evolution," 101.

<sup>37</sup>K.M. Schmith, "I Was Your Old 'Hello Girl'," *The Saturday Post*, 12 July 1930.



*First multiple switchboard in Montreal installed in the British Empire Assurance Company Building, April 1886. At that period, all the operating labour force in big exchanges was constituted of women. (Photo #3109 Courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection)*

the fact, later proved by experience, that *men and boys were temperamentally unsuited* to the exacting duties of switchboard operation, and that this work was *destined to be performed by members of the opposite sex.*<sup>38</sup> The larger the operating rooms, the more undisciplined were the “boys.” John J. Carty, an operator during this period, remembered that male operators were very “wild.” William J. Clarke related the “fondness for clowning and practical jokes of the boys and young men employed in the operating room” when he was one of them. These jokes were “often at the expense of the subscriber.” Moreover, male operators were not submissive and when “subscribers were rude the boys did not always turn the other cheek but matched insult for insult and curse for curse.” Furthermore, according to Clarke, the boys were inclined to “wrestling on the floor,” failing to answer incoming calls. Their training was very casual. They would “drop into the office during a slack period on Saturday and Sunday to learn how to operate the

<sup>38</sup>F.B. Jewett, “The Social Implication of Scientific Research in Electrical Communication,” *Bell Telephone Quarterly*, 14 (1936), 205-18. Emphasis added.

switchboard at which [they were] to start on Monday." The majority of the male operators were doing operating work on a part-time basis and were employed for other work either within the telephone companies or for other industries. In spite of that, some men who were operating asserted that there was the prospect of advancement within the telephone business, especially with Bell Telephone Company after its incorporation in 1880, and that since "most of them were ambitious," this "tended to keep them trying to do a good job in spite of the natural tendencies."<sup>39</sup>

Even after Bell Telephone Company started to hire women as day operators,<sup>40</sup> men continued to be hired during the day in order "to connect the calling lines with the trunk line to office called," or, in other words, to do the technical work necessary within the exchange. Besides, male operators continued to work on the evening and night shifts, some starting at 6:00 p.m., others at 10:00 p.m., according to the size of the exchange in which they were working. In big and busy offices, male operators were used as little as possible, and only during the period of the day where the business was quiet. However, company managers concluded that " ... boys as operators were proved complete and consistent failures. They were noisy, rude, impatient and talked back to subscribers, played tricks with wires, and on one another."<sup>41</sup> The company's response to such undisciplined behaviour was an attempt to enforce control over the male operators in order to meet the subscribers' complaints. In a letter to the local managers in Montreal, in response to a complaint he received against a male operator, L.B. McFarlane assessed Bell Telephone Company's expectations towards the operators' attitude with the subscribers: "He as well as other operators should know they have no business to talk back to a subscriber, and you can inform him that if we have any further complaint of this nature his services will be dispensed with."<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, disciplining male operators did not transform their "unsuitable characteristics" into suitable qualities for the operation of the telephone system.

<sup>39</sup>"'Bread Toasters' to Common Battery," 2, 3, 4, BCHC. In contrast to female operators, the prospect of advancement for male operators was not limited to that occupation. It involved other job families such as technicians and, even, managers.

<sup>40</sup>Shortly after Bell Telephone Co. started to hire women as operators, other independent telephone companies followed their example.

<sup>41</sup>K.M. Schmitt, "I was." These "unsuitable" characteristics, however, might have been intensified by the poor wages given to the operators. According to C.F. Sise, males would apply as operators only "as spare-time job as the income was too low." (C.F. Sise's Letter, 21 February 1887, BCHC). Since males had other possibilities of income — even within the telephone industry — they were not particularly attracted by the operator's work.

<sup>42</sup>Letter from L.B. McFarlane to C.E. Cutz, 7 July 1887, document #27144-44, BCHC. This worker was probably a night operator as the day operators were already women, especially in big cities.

## III

THE OPERATOR'S WORK did not represent a sub-market created by the telephone industry for women, however. The particularity of that job was that it involved both "masculine" and "feminine" tasks. It implied a technical knowledge of electricity to cope with frequent repairs; as a mediating job, it entailed a direct contact with subscribers, a sort of "labour of love."<sup>43</sup> It seems that, in 1876, the telephone business gave more importance to the technical aspect, and hired young men for the work. Undoubtedly, patriarchal attitudes were mainly responsible for that first decision. However, bad experiences with men made Bell Telephone Company managers realise that, to keep their few customers, they had to emphasize the characteristics attached to the mediating aspect of the occupation. The position of operator came to be seen as "naturally" women's work.

In 1880, Bell Telephone Company hired the first female operator to work in the Main Exchange in Montreal.<sup>44</sup> The early experience of the industry had already pointed to a few specific requirements for the operator's work which appeared essential to the expansion of the telephone system. The telephone company concentrated on matching poor wages with adequate characteristics for its operators. The particularity of the product — an instantaneous telephone call — and the essential role of the operators as mediators to produce it, created a situation in which users and operators were constantly interacting. Since the subscribers were mostly businessmen from the dominant and middle classes, the company's managers decided that "courtesy" and "discipline" were the most important qualities to "perform successfully the duties of ... [such] subordinate places" as telephone operators.<sup>45</sup> K.J. Dunstan, general manager for the Ontario district, insisted that "rules and discipline" were to be "strictly enforced" to insure operators' courtesy with users: "Mistakes may be overlooked, but lack of courtesy is an unpardonable offence. Subscribers will forgive a great deal if the operator is invariably pleasant and polite [and submissive], and the necessity of only employing educated and refined operators is very apparent."<sup>46</sup> The solution to that problem appeared to be hiring women as operators: "A woman would give better service and be a better agent," said C.F. Sise, general-manager of Bell Telephone Company.<sup>47</sup> It was suggested to employ "young women at salary

<sup>43</sup> Other occupations involved one or the other of these two characteristics. However, the case of the operators was unique in that the job became a female occupation *uniting* those two aspects.

<sup>44</sup> "Telephone History — Montreal," no date, BCHC.

<sup>45</sup> H.S. Coyle, "The Operating Forces of Modern Telephone Exchange," *Telephony*, 2 (1901), 218.

<sup>46</sup> K.J. Dunstan, "Office Management," no date, BCHC.

<sup>47</sup> Report of Meeting of C.F. Sise with Local-managers, 16-17 May 1887, document #26606, BCHC, 9.



*Miss Ida Gardner, At No. 1 standard switchboard. She was the first operator in Winchester, Ontario, 1897. (Photo #13720 Courtesy of Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection)*

not greater than commission amounts to commission men," the telegraph messengers, who treated the telephone as secondary to their own business, and acted very independently. "The young women would be *directly under the company's control*, would attend promptly to calls and are as a rule more honest and careful than men."<sup>48</sup> Hence, the company's attempt at structuring the labour force by starting a process of subjection of its male operators through enforcement of control and work discipline led to a process of feminisation of the occupation. The unresponsive behaviour of the male operators to the process of subjection forced the company's management to adopt a policy of hiring female operators.

The first woman was hired soon after "a conference between Mr. Forbes, president of the American company, Mr. Sise, Mr. Baker and myself [K.J. Dunstan] re. girls as telephone operators. Mr. Forbes said he believed they were used somewhere, did not know where and had heard nothing against

<sup>48</sup>Questionnaire from C.F. Sise to Local-managers, 16 May 1887, document #27344, BCHC, 3, emphasis added.



them.”<sup>49</sup> Sometime later, Mr. Dunstan in the Toronto exchange hired the “Misses Howell” as telephone operators.<sup>50</sup> These women and most female operators were mainly coming from lower-middle and respectable working classes. They were “girls”<sup>51</sup> who needed to earn some money and, at the same time, could meet the moral standard of subscribers coming from the dominant and upper-middle classes. On the other hand, subscribers had also some duties vis-à-vis the female operators, as a message in the telephone directories indicated: “Ladies are employed as operators; we ask for their courteous treatment.”<sup>52</sup> The occupation of telephone operator was a new opening for the large female reserve army of labour. An operator described the place of women on the labour market at that time: “Few jobs were open to women then; even most stenographers were male.”<sup>53</sup> Another operator of the 1880s reinforced that statement: “Employment for women back in the 80’s was limited to teaching school, factory work, restaurant and domestic work.”<sup>54</sup> Some women preferred telephone operating to teaching: “Teaching was prosaic, poorly paid and the profession was overcrowded.”<sup>55</sup> It appears, though, that female teachers and telephone operators were from the same classes. Moreover, some of the requirements for getting the jobs were similar. For instance, for both occupations, women had to present recommendations from three persons, including their clergymen.<sup>56</sup> Age limits were also imposed, and although Bell Telephone Company accepted women as young as fourteen years old as operators in the 1880s,<sup>57</sup> when the schools for operators started in 1900, the age limit increased to seventeen. Finally, women needed to have “good memories,” “be tall enough so that their arms would reach all lines on the switchboard and be slim enough so that they could fit into the narrow spaces allotted to the #1 standard switchboard positions.”<sup>58</sup> L.B. McFarlane, Bell Telephone Company’s manager for Canada East, declared in the *Daily Witness* that “in their selection the greatest care is exercised.

<sup>49</sup>K.J. Dunstan’s Life Story, BCHC. Mrs. Dunstan and Baker were local-managers respectively in Toronto and Hamilton, and Mr. Sise was general manager of Bell Telephone Co.

<sup>50</sup>K.J. Dunstan’s payroll, October 1880, document #2405b, BCHC.

<sup>51</sup>I use the word “girl” despite its sexist connotation, because it was the way the female operators were referred to by most people, including themselves.

<sup>52</sup>Telephone Directory, Halifax, N.S., March 1886, BCHC.

<sup>53</sup>K.M. Schmitt, 1930, *op.cit.*

<sup>54</sup>“60 Years at the Switchboard,” *Michigan Bell Magazine*, October 1940, BCHC. At that period, women could also be hired to work on typewriter machines, taking the place of male copyists and shorthand writers. See “New Industry,” *Montreal Daily Witness*, 4 January 1879.

<sup>55</sup>K.M. Schmitt, “I was.”

<sup>56</sup>Later, Bell Telephone Co. required five letters of recommendation. In addition to the three formers, one letter was required from a physician and one from a property owner.

<sup>57</sup>“60 Years at the Switchboard.”

<sup>58</sup>Quotations and Anecdotes file, BCHC.

They must be girls of irreproachable character, recommended by their clergymen."<sup>59</sup> With such requirements as recommendations from a clergyman, doctor and property owner, it is clear that these women could only be from "respectable" backgrounds.

However, the feminisation of the occupation of operator entailed some difficulties for the company. Indeed, although the telephone operating work required no particular skills, some technical knowledge in the field of electricity was useful. The telephone system in its early development constantly required minor repairs and adjustments which were effected by the "boys."<sup>60</sup> Since Bell Company's managers thought women incapable of doing electrical work, for a few years after the hiring of the first woman as operator, boys continued to be hired to do the technical aspect of the job. While women answered the subscribers, the young men were connecting the busy lines with the trunk. However, this was inconvenient, said a female operator at that time, as the boys were playing tricks on the female operators whom they did not like.<sup>61</sup> The problem was resolved by the company's managers who provided all female operators with a "small book on telephone troubles and how to remove them," a book which helped the female operators to be "more self-reliant and to fix small troubles that will come up."<sup>62</sup> Thus, for equal wages, women provided the telephone industry with new labour power, furnishing not only the "feminine" qualities of submission and courtesy, but the "masculine" characteristics of technical and mechanical skills as well. In spite of changes applied to the job definition and its labelling as a "female" occupation, some essential aspects of the work remained traditional male domains to which the hired women had to adapt, at least until the end of the 1890s, when the improved technology eliminated the need for such interventions. It seems, then, that women had succeeded in adapting to the "male" characteristics of the work, while men had failed to adjust to its "female" features. For the telephone company, this represented a value which even its most chauvinist managers could not ignore.<sup>63</sup>

Yet, the process of feminisation of the operator's occupation did not

<sup>59</sup>"Across the Wires," *The Daily Witness*, 21 March, no date, in *McFarlane's Scrapbook*, document #12016, BCHC. Although there is no date on the article, the clipping was glued in McFarlane's scrapbook among other newspaper clippings dated of the end of the 1890s.

<sup>60</sup>Actually, several of these young men became later technicians, linemen, and, even, managers for Bell Telephone Co.

<sup>61</sup>K.M. Schmitt, "I was."

<sup>62</sup>Document #27344, BCHC, 7.

<sup>63</sup>Since women were considered useless and inefficient in technical and mechanical work, some companies's managers had serious reservations. (Document 27344, BCHC, 5) These, however, faded when confronted some female operators, especially in small towns, who had effected — with the aid of the instructions in the small book — all the work necessary to maintain the telephone exchange in working condition.

happen instantly. As an operator remarked: "Elimination of the masculine touch ... was not made with one gesture. It covered a long period of years."<sup>64</sup> On the one hand, in that mid-Victorian society so very protective of "ladies' virtues," "some people thought that it was pretty hazardous to allow women to be at work at night alone."<sup>65</sup> Since the "traffic load" was much lighter at night than during the day, the company continued to hire male operators for the evening and night duties for many years after women had started as day operators. The first hiring of a woman as night operator occurred in 1888.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, even male day operators were not eliminated all at once. Rather, women gradually replaced the "boys" as they were promoted to higher wage jobs, as they quit, as they were dismissed for bad conduct, or as jobs were opened.

Still, the job, by then, was seen as a female occupation which, as B. Lalonde, a female operator in Ottawa put it: "requires a lot of *devotion* and brings very little gratitude from the public." The operators were "women who have *put their femininity to the service of the community*. Very few men would be patient enough to perform the duties of a telephone operator."<sup>67</sup> An Ontario newspaper, *The Watchman*, gave a very accurate summary of the sex-labelled characteristics defining the operator work as a female job:

In the first place the clear feminine quality of voice suits best the delicate instrument. Then girls are usually more alert than boys, and always more patient. Women are more sensitive, *more amenable to discipline*, far gentler and more forbearing than men .... Boys and men are less patient. They have always an element of fight in them. When spoken to roughly and rudely they are not going to give the soft answer. Not they. And every man is a crank when he gets on a phone. The personal equation stands for naught. He is looking into the blank wooden receiver and it doesn't inspire him with respectful politeness.<sup>68</sup>

Apparently, then, woman's upbringing in Victorian society gave her all the necessary qualities to be a perfect operator. She was said to be "gifted" with "courtesy," "patience," "skillful hands." In addition, she possessed a "good voice" and a "quick ear," and was "alert," "active," "even-tempered," "adaptable," and "amendable."<sup>69</sup> As such, the female operator was considered "the heart of the place,"<sup>70</sup> "the most valuable asset that a telephone company possesses," "the stock in trade" of that company.<sup>71</sup> One of her major assets was her "voice." The "feminine" voice was considered "limitless" in

<sup>64</sup>K.M. Schmitt, "I was."

<sup>65</sup>"Use of Women Operators at Night," *Quebec City Letters*, 1888, BCHC.

<sup>66</sup>K.M. Schmitt, "I was."

<sup>67</sup>B. Lalonde's Life Story, 1906, BCHC. Emphasis added.

<sup>68</sup>"Who Wouldn't Be a Telephone Girl?" *Watchman*, 12 June 1898.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup>"Héros inconnus et méconnus: la téléphoniste," *La Patrie*, 14 July 1908.

<sup>71</sup>"Treatment of Telephone Operators," *Telephony*, 8 (August 1904), 124-5.

terms of possibilities in the operation of the telephone.<sup>72</sup> The perfect operator had a "gentle voice; musical as the woodsy voices of a summer day," "sweetly distinct to the subscribers ... yet ... carefully articulated."<sup>73</sup> This voice was supposed to play "a big part in moulding the temper of the time. Irascible, petulant, hurried, the subscriber cannot help but feel the influence of that something which appeals to him as quiet, dignified, soothing, until his temper melts away as the mountain snows before the compelling chinook of the south west."<sup>74</sup> The operator's voice was transforming the technical work into a "labour of love."

Thus, the female operator was a great asset to the telephone business. Telephone companies's managers did not hesitate to say that she was instrumental in the growth of the telephone industry. As L.I. McMahon, a Bell Telephone Company's official, pointed out: "If ever the rush of girls into the business world was a blessing it was when they took possession of the telephone exchanges."<sup>75</sup> Yet, she was very poorly paid, and her working conditions were difficult, in spite of the improvement of her physical environment by Bell Telephone Company, with the addition of rest rooms, comfortable cafeterias, modern bathrooms, etc.<sup>76</sup> For that reason, this soothing effect that the operators exerted on the subscribers (who were still mostly male) and which was considered a "feminine" quality, was not to be found in all of them. Indeed, with the technical improvement of the telephone system, the task of operating was becoming increasingly exacting and the subscribers more and more demanding, so that only "girls with steady nerves and a phlegmatic constitution" could stand the constant pressure. Moreover, a hierarchy had been created within the operating labour force. In 1884, a female chief-

<sup>72</sup>"Voice Culture," *Mail*, 2 August 1916.

<sup>73</sup>"A Study of the Telephone Girl," *Telephony*, 9 (1905), 388-90.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup>"Girls Were Never Greater Blessing than When They Entered Phone Exchanges," *News*, 4 November 1916.

<sup>76</sup>Here I do not completely agree with Sangster who stated that the 1907 strike of the operators in Toronto was the significant event which brought more comfortable surroundings to the operators. (Sangster, "1907.") Indeed, already in 1896, the biggest exchanges were provided with an "early form of air conditioning, recreational and lunch rooms, steel locker for each worker, drying room (even for clothing), bathrooms where last fashion baths were available for operators if necessary." (H.G. Owen, *One Hundred Years*, Bell Canada Publication, 1980, BCHC, 12.) A telephone company's manager stressed that these improvements in the physical environment were not primarily for the operator's well being, but "I suppose the plan has its humanitarian side, but it is also a good business investment. Give your employees a pleasant and comfortable place in which to work, treat them with consideration and the results will more than repay for the trouble." ("Treatment of Telephone Operators.") This shows that many years before the Toronto strike, telephone companies had already understood some psychological principles at the basis of the employees' productivity.

operator had been appointed in Montreal, creating the first rank in a hierarchy that was to grow over the years, with the addition of female supervisors and assistant chief-operators. In fact, all these appointments were given to women, although men were still working as night operators.<sup>77</sup> These women's task was to exercise a tight control over the regular operators. The discipline imposed on the operators for the subscribers' satisfaction and the company's development was "unfriendly to relaxation." "You can't make an operator out of a nervous girl. That has been tried ... she produces a species of emotion which borders on hysteria," said McFarlane.<sup>78</sup> Hence, since the work was so demanding and nerve racking, the operators occasionally would loose their tempers and surprise the subscribers who were used to more consideration, especially from women. An operator describes some ways of dealing with "arrogant" subscribers: "There are plenty of ways one finds to avenge one's self upon the telephone bogs. You can give them the click of the 'busy back,' you can ring the bell in their ears, or you can simply — let them wait and rattle their hooks."<sup>79</sup>

In general, however, the operator's job was seen as a "respectable" occupation for women. Mary Rosetta Warren, an operator in Montreal from 1880 to 1891, clearly summarizes the "spirit" of the operators of that period: "I doubt whether the modern operator ever felt the *thrill and glamour* that we did in being part of the early telephone development .... It was a daily occurrence to be asked by a subscriber to say a few words to a gentleman who had never used a telephone before — *which made me feel very important.*"<sup>80</sup> In short, the company's decision to sex-label telephone operating as a female position did not, as generally suggested in the literature on feminisation, decrease its economic and social status but, rather, increased the qualitative requirements of the job, and made it possible for the company to obtain better educated and better qualified applicants. The feminisation of the operating work transformed a job which was considered at the outset as a part-time occupation of male operators into a "labour of love" for female operators. Although the female operators doing such work were considered to be finding their reward more in the "love" they received from the subscribers than in the wages they were given by the company, it gave women opportunities to be upwardly mobile, within the operator force. In fact, while the true operator

<sup>77</sup> However, there were no opportunities for women to get a promotion outside the operating labour force. They could not, for instance, be appointed as local-managers, the most lucrative position. Actually, the promotion of women as chief-operators and supervisors was due to patriarchal attitudes, since the managers felt that women would be more protective towards the young operators, like good mothers!

<sup>78</sup> "Across the Wires."

<sup>79</sup> "The Diary of a Telephone Girl," *The Saturday Evening Post*, 19 October 1907.

<sup>80</sup> M.R. Warren's Life Story, 1880-1891. Emphasis added. The story was told in 1937, which sheds more light on what she meant by "modern operator."

was invaluable to the company, the occupation offered by the telephone industry constituted one of the few opportunities of "decent" job for young women despite low wages attached to it.

#### IV

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO FIND a pay-roll book for the first period of expansion of the telephone business, as wages were based on arbitrary criteria such as age, discipline, quality of voice, etc., which manager McFarlane called the operator's "ability and experience."<sup>81</sup> However, operators' life stories give a fair account of the wages they earned when working for Bell Telephone Company. For example, during the 1880s, an operator earned \$8.00 per month for 12 hours — and sometimes 16 hours — of work per day.<sup>82</sup> Overtime was not paid and, often, operators worked two or three years without an increase. In addition, night operators, who were men, were better paid than day operators. Frank A. Field, for instance, who was a night operator in 1889 was paid \$25 per month.<sup>83</sup> L.I. McMahon stated that "girls came in not because they were cheaper, but because they were better."<sup>84</sup> In a way, he was right. A male day operator was paid \$8 per month in 1879, the same as a female operator in 1880. The difference, however, lay in the fact that the occupation of operator represented, for men, a job "secondary to their own business"<sup>85</sup> while, for women, it constituted a fulltime job. It seems that operators' wages varied according to other obscure criteria as well. For example, in 1880, Lillian W. Camp earned \$12 per month (soon raised to \$17.50) in Montreal while eleven years later, in the same city, Florence Hendry earned \$12 per month.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Margaret E. Helsby, who was also working in the Montreal Exchange, earned \$20 per month in 1889, while Ethel V. Hannaford earned \$12 per month in 1908 in Hamilton, both working nine hours per day.<sup>87</sup> These few examples show the arbitrariness of the operators' wages during the period studied. The common denominator, however, was that most of them were paid very little. Indeed, in a sample of seven operators working during the period from 1880 to 1902, five earned \$12 or less per month<sup>88</sup>, which certainly did not constitute living wages. As an operator pointed out: "We were just unsophisticated school girls who lived at home with our parents — but where else could we live on ten dollars a month?"<sup>89</sup> Even L.B. McFarlane said, in 1905, during hearings of the Select

<sup>81</sup>"Across the Wires."

<sup>82</sup>Mary Ann Burnett's Life Story, 1887, BCHC.

<sup>83</sup>F.A. Field's Life Story, 1889, BCHC.

<sup>84</sup>"Girls Were Never Greater Blessing ...."

<sup>85</sup>Document #27344, 3.

<sup>86</sup>L.W. Camp's Life Story, 1880-95; F. Hendry's Life Story, 1891-1931, BCHC.

<sup>87</sup>M.E. Helsby's Life Story, 1888-96; E.V. Hannaford's Life Story, 1908-17, BCHC.

<sup>88</sup>Life Stories of M. Hill, 1900; F. Hendry, 1891-1931; M.E. Helsby, 1888-96; M.A. Burnett, 1887-1916; M.I. Phillips, 1889-93; W. Chevalier, 1896.

Committee on the Telephone, that operators' wages "were probably insufficient to get along with respectability."<sup>90</sup> Yet, the job was considered "steady work ... which [gave] one a sense of security in case of illness ... and [provided] pension plans."<sup>91</sup> Besides, other female jobs were not much better paid. For instance, in 1901, in the clothing industry, female factory workers earned about \$16 per month while female workers in the book binding and publishing industry earned between \$15 and \$18 per month.<sup>92</sup> On the other hand, a 1879 *Montreal Daily Witness* reported that "the girls who can use the new typewriter machine ... are earning from \$10.00 to \$36.00 a week."<sup>93</sup> As for teachers, their wages varied greatly according to their classification and the place where they were teaching. In 1870, a third class female teacher earned between \$13 and \$20 per month while a first class teacher could earn as much as \$34 per month.<sup>94</sup> Finally, in 1889, women caretakers in school institutions earned around \$30 per month.<sup>95</sup> Perhaps women did not engage in the operator occupation for the pay alone which compared unfavourably with other jobs, but rather for the job status. The direct contact with the subscribers and the role of community agent rendered their job "glamorous" in comparison with teaching in obscure places or cleaning a building. Moreover, because of the "spirit of family" developed by Bell Telephone Company's patriarchal attitude, operators stated that they were "proud" to work for the telephone industry "which has contributed so much to the needs and comfort and convenience of civilization."<sup>96</sup> The telephone company seemed to be, for the young women, "a new door ... toward the economic independence for which they were striving,"<sup>97</sup> and a way to obtain some social recognition as useful members of the society. This seems to support Prentice's claim that women accepted poorly paid job outside the household in order to be provided with "respectable independence,"<sup>98</sup> even if the wages would not support them independently.

## V

## THE FEMINISATION OF THE OCCUPATION of operator in the telephone industry

<sup>89</sup>K.M. Schmitt, "I was."

<sup>90</sup>"Telephone Inquiry on Wages and Living Expenses," *Montreal Gazette*, 11 February 1906. Another inquiry occurred, started by the 1907 Bell Telephone strike. However, it does not contain relevant data related to the subject of this article, as its target was limited to the Toronto operators working in 1907.

<sup>91</sup>C.M. Cline's Life Story, 1907, BCHC.

<sup>92</sup>*Census of Canada*, III (Ottawa 1901).

<sup>93</sup>"A New Industry," *Montreal Daily Witness*, 4 January 1879.

<sup>94</sup>Prentice, "Feminisation," 14.

<sup>95</sup>Danylewycz and Prentice, "Teachers' Work," 75.

<sup>96</sup>Olive Geach's Life Story, 1918-20, BCHC.

<sup>97</sup>"60 Years at the Switchboard," 1940.

<sup>98</sup>Prentice, "Feminisation," 17.

brought new opportunities to women on the labour market. However, although this gave Bell Telephone Company the appearance of being a progressive employer, it is clear that the company started the process of feminisation of its operating labour force as a response to an acute problem of production which it had encountered with its male operators. After a few years of craftwork development, the telephone business started to expand more systematically, especially after the Bell Telephone Company was chartered in 1880. It is not a coincidence that the feminisation of the operator's occupation started with the incorporation of Bell Company. The high quality work produced by women contributed to the expansion of the telephone industry. Finally, the feminisation of the job of operator constituted, for the telephone industry, more efficient exploitation of its employees as it was paying equal wages for higher and better quality production by female operators. The process of feminisation of the operator's occupation supports some of the assumptions suggested in the different perspectives attempting to explain the process of feminisation of the labour force. The telephone industry manipulated the job requirements and applied stereotyped female qualities to the job of operator. Moreover, due to the technical segmentation of the labour process, the job was a low-skill occupation requiring low level of stability which corresponded to the sex-labelling assignation of low stability given to women. As it was, the level of turnover at the switchboard was very high as most operators left after one or two years either to marry, or because of physical or nervous breakdown due to the constant pressure exercised on them. Finally, women were forced, in some ways, to take that low-paid job, as the female reserve army of labour was large and the jobs open to women were few.

The operator occupation, however, did not represent a sub-market job involving a low social status. The job was a very important part of the production process of the telephone industry, and acquired a higher social status after being labelled as a "female" occupation, although its wages did not improve. This higher status was partly due to the fact that barriers of "respectability" were placed before prospective employers, and because certain behavioural demands were imposed on actual employees. Moreover, when the process of feminisation began, the job was not entirely defined as a female occupation. Some of its characteristics (for example, repairing electrical breakdown) were "male," and women had to adapt their socially recognised skills to these job demands. Thus, although the case of the telephone operators supports several conceptions of the reviewed researches on feminisation, there exist some differences at the level of its location in the structure of the organisation, as well as in term of social status and social mobility.

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