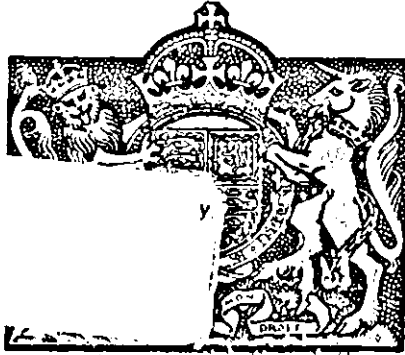


A Study of Absenteeism
among women

by
S. Wyatt, etc.



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A STUDY OF ABSENTEEISM AMONG WOMEN

BY

**S. WYATT, R. MARRIOTT
and D. E. R. HUGHES**

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PREFACE

This report gives an account of a limited study of absenteeism among women, carried out on random samples of the personnel at two Royal Ordnance Factories. The inquiry was undertaken by the Industrial Health Research Board of the Medical Research Council, at the request of the Ministry of Supply. It was concerned with the amount and distribution of absenteeism among women, rather than with its causes. Details such as the type of work and the numbers employed in the factories have been omitted for security reasons. Despite the restricted scope of the investigation, the results are considered sufficiently interesting to merit publication, and it is hoped that the work may serve as a guide to similar investigations in other war factories.

6th August, 1943.

A STUDY OF ABSENTEEISM AMONG WOMEN

BY

S. WYATT, D.Sc., R. MARRIOTT, B.Sc., and D. E. R. HUGHES

(Working for the Industrial Health Research Board)

1.—NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE INQUIRY

The main purpose of this inquiry was to ascertain the amount and distribution of absenteeism in random samples of women workers in factories, over periods of six weeks. The method of sampling adopted was to take names at regular intervals from a list of the workers employed. Results were obtained from two factories, viz. :—

Factory	Period of inquiry	No. of workers in sample
A	6 weeks ending 11/8/42 ..	819
B	6 weeks ending 27/6/42 ..	495

The periods chosen were unaffected by leave and annual holidays, and the observations were made at a time of the year when absenteeism is usually relatively low.

The workers included in the study were employed on the three-shift system, and shifts were changed weekly. The daily and weekly hours of work, excluding the meal break of 30 minutes, were :—

Factory		Morning shift (Mon. to Sat.)	Afternoon shift (Sun. to Fri.)	Night shift (Sun. to Fri.)
A	{ Daily	7½	6½	8½
	{ Weekly	45	39	51
B	{ Daily	7½	7½	7½
	{ Weekly	45	45	45

On analysing the results, it was found that 51 women from Factory A and 15 women from Factory B were absent for the whole period ; as most of these had probably left the factories, they have been excluded from the tables which follow. In Factory A, the proportion of married women was 44·8 per cent. and in Factory B it was 57·7 per cent.

2.—RESULTS OBTAINED

A. Distribution of shift absences

In a period of six weeks, different workers may be absent for the same shift, or for a varying number of shifts, in different weeks. Thus one individual may lose a single shift each week, but another may be absent for three shifts in one week, five shifts in another, and so on. A general summary of the number of shifts lost in different parts of the period is given in Table I.

The results show, in the first place, that the percentage of women who were absent for some part of the six weeks was 84·5 and 70·5 in Factories A and B, respectively. The figures for married women were 87·9 and 75·9, while for single women they were 82·1 and 63·1 per cent. A majority of both married and single women were absent for a varying number of shifts in different weeks.

Secondly, the number of women who were absent for some part of each week was 7·0 per cent. in Factory A and 0·6 per cent. in Factory B. The number who regularly lost one or two shifts each week was only one per cent. in Factory A and was nil in Factory B. These results lend little or no support to the view, which was fairly widespread at the time of the inquiry, that in each factory there were a number of workers who persistently took one or two shifts off each week for no valid reason.

TABLE I

Percentages of married (M) and single (S) women who lost one shift, one or two shifts, etc., in different parts of the six-week periods

			Number of shifts lost per week																	
			1 Shift			1 to 2 Shifts			1 to 3 Shifts			1 to 4 Shifts			1 to 5 Shifts			1 to 6 Shifts		
			M.	S.	Both	M.	S.	Both	M.	S.	Both	M.	S.	Both	M.	S.	Both	M.	S.	Both
<i>Factory A</i>																				
In 6 out of 6 weeks	0.0	0.5	0.3	0.3	1.7	1.0	0.6	2.8	1.8	0.9	3.5	2.3	1.7	4.0	3.0	7.0	7.1	7.0		
.. 5 .. " 6	0.6	0.2	0.4	2.9	1.4	2.1	4.7	1.7	3.0	5.2	3.1	4.0	5.2	3.3	4.2	10.5	5.4	7.7		
.. 4 .. " 6	1.2	4.0	2.7	3.8	6.4	5.2	7.0	8.3	7.7	8.4	9.7	9.1	10.2	10.1	10.1	17.2	13.0	14.8		
.. 3 .. " 6	4.7	4.5	4.6	9.6	9.2	9.4	12.2	12.0	12.1	13.7	13.2	13.4	14.8	14.2	14.5	18.6	17.0	17.7		
.. 2 .. " 6	3.8	10.6	7.5	10.2	16.0	13.4	12.2	17.2	15.0	14.2	17.9	16.3	14.8	18.2	16.7	18.6	21.0	19.9		
.. 1 .. " 6	10.5	13.0	11.8	13.1	15.6	14.5	14.0	16.7	15.5	14.2	17.2	15.9	14.5	17.2	16.0	16.0	18.6	17.4		
Total	20.8	32.8	27.3	39.9	50.3	45.6	50.7	58.7	55.1	56.6	64.6	61.0	61.2	67.0	64.5	87.9	82.1	84.5		
<i>Factory B</i>																				
In 6 out of 6 weeks	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1	0.0	0.6		
.. 5 .. " 6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.2	0.4	0.0	0.2	1.1	0.0	0.6	2.5	1.5	2.1		
.. 4 .. " 6	1.1	0.5	0.8	1.4	0.5	1.0	2.9	1.0	2.1	2.9	1.0	2.1	2.9	1.5	2.3	6.9	5.4	6.3		
.. 3 .. " 6	1.4	3.0	2.1	2.9	3.4	3.1	4.0	3.4	3.7	4.7	3.9	4.4	7.2	4.9	6.2	15.2	8.4	12.3		
.. 2 .. " 6	9.0	6.4	7.9	12.6	7.4	10.4	14.1	7.9	11.4	15.9	8.4	12.7	17.7	8.8	14.0	26.7	13.8	21.3		
.. 1 .. " 6	17.7	31.0	23.3	21.6	31.4	25.9	22.4	33.4	27.1	22.4	33.4	27.1	22.7	33.4	27.3	23.5	34.0	27.9		
Total	29.2	40.9	34.1	38.5	42.7	40.4	43.8	45.7	44.5	46.3	46.7	46.5	51.6	48.6	50.4	75.9	63.1	70.5		

Thirdly, the percentages of women who were absent in at least four weeks out of six were :—

Factory	Married	Single	Both
A ..	34.7	25.5	29.5
B ..	10.5	6.9	9.0

Thus absenteeism in these periods was higher for married than for single women and was much higher in Factory A than in Factory B. At the other extreme, the percentages who were never absent, or were absent in only one week out of six, were :—

Factory	Married	Single	Both
A ..	28.1	36.5	32.9
B ..	47.6	70.9	57.4

In this case, the figures for single women were higher than for the married, and they were higher in Factory B than in Factory A. In other words, absenteeism among married women, as compared with that for single women, tended to be spread over a greater part of the six weeks, and this tendency was more marked in Factory A than in Factory B.

B. Frequency of short and longer absences

The results have been analysed to show the number of workers who were absent for one shift, two shifts, etc. (whether consecutive or not) per week. This was done for each of the six weeks, and the results so obtained were then combined and averaged (Table II).

TABLE II
Percentages of married (M) and single (S) women who lost one shift, two shifts, etc., in an average week

Shifts lost	Factory A			Factory B		
	M.	S.	Both	M.	S.	Both
1	20.9	21.7	21.3	14.6	12.1	13.5
2	8.0	7.0	7.4	2.9	1.2	2.2
3	4.2	3.0	3.6	1.8	1.0	1.5
4	2.2	1.7	1.9	1.1	0.9	1.0
5	1.6	0.8	1.2	0.9	0.5	0.7
6	8.3	4.7	6.3	6.8	3.6	5.4
Total ..	45.2	38.9	41.7	28.1	19.3	24.3

Thus, on the average, 41.7 per cent. of the women in Factory A, and 24.3 per cent. in Factory B, were absent for some part of the week. Married women were absent more frequently than single women, and they also tended to be absent for longer periods. For both married and single women, absences of one shift per week were by far the most common. The next in order of frequency (except in one group) were full week (six shifts) absences. These were due mainly to sickness, and they were more numerous for married than for single women.

The results in Table II represent the averages of the morning, afternoon, and night shifts. There were, however, certain differences between these shifts, which are demonstrated by Table III.

The results show that absenteeism for both married and single women was highest on the morning shift. This increase on the morning shift was particularly noticeable in Factory A, especially for absences of one to three shifts per week. In Factory B, it was most apparent for single shift absences. Casual absences of one or two shifts per week are often due to personal needs

TABLE III

Percentages of married (M) and single (S) women who lost one shift, two shifts, etc., in an average week when employed on the morning, afternoon, and night shifts

Factory A

Shifts lost	Morning shift			Afternoon shift			Night shift		
	M.	S.	Both	M.	S.	Both	M.	S.	Both
1	26.5	26.7	26.6	18.8	21.3	20.4	17.3	16.2	16.7
2	15.4	12.0	13.5	4.8	4.9	4.8	3.7	3.5	3.6
3	7.9	4.8	6.2	2.2	1.6	1.8	2.5	2.6	2.6
4	3.9	2.6	3.2	1.2	1.6	1.4	1.6	0.8	1.2
5	2.3	0.7	1.4	0.9	0.7	0.8	1.8	1.2	1.5
6	11.4	4.9	7.8	6.4	4.2	5.1	7.2	5.0	6.0
Total ..	67.4	51.7	58.7	34.3	34.3	34.3	34.1	29.3	31.6

Factory B

1	19.3	15.3	17.6	11.2	8.9	10.2	13.2	12.1	12.7
2	3.6	2.0	2.9	3.2	0.7	2.2	2.0	1.0	1.6
3	2.0	1.0	1.6	1.4	1.2	1.4	2.0	0.7	1.5
4	1.1	0.2	0.7	1.8	1.5	1.7	0.5	1.0	0.7
5	1.1	0.2	0.7	0.2	0.7	0.4	1.4	0.5	1.0
6	7.4	3.7	5.8	6.7	3.2	5.2	6.3	3.9	5.3
Total ..	34.5	22.4	29.3	24.5	16.2	21.1	25.4	19.2	22.8

or desires, and their frequency is usually a measure of the extent to which these needs conflict with the hours of work. Longer absences, on the other hand, are often associated with sickness: hence they are likely to be distributed more evenly over the morning, afternoon and night shifts.

The preceding results refer to the number of workers who lost from one to six shifts per week. The shifts lost might be either consecutive or discontinuous, and only the total number lost per week was considered. It is also possible to arrange the results so as to show the frequency of single shift absences, two consecutive shift absences, etc., in the period of six weeks. The results obtained by this method of treatment are given in Table IV.

TABLE IV

Numbers of one shift absences, two consecutive shift absences, etc., in the period of six weeks. (Results expressed as percentages of the total number of absences in each group.)

Factory	Length of absence in shifts	Married	Single	Both
A	1	65.2	71.2	68.3
	2	10.9	10.9	10.9
	3	4.5	4.2	4.4
	4	2.5	2.1	2.3
	5	1.8	1.4	1.6
	6	15.0	10.2	12.6
B	1	57.4	66.9	60.6
	2	7.4	6.4	7.0
	3	5.5	4.8	5.3
	4	3.5	1.6	2.8
	5	2.9	2.4	2.7
	6	23.4	17.9	21.5

These results show that more than 60 per cent. of the total number of absences were from single shifts. They were relatively more numerous for single than for married women. As the length of the absence increased, the frequency decreased, rapidly at first but more slowly afterwards. As already stated, the increase in the number of full week absences (six shifts) was due mainly to sickness of one or more weeks.

Although single shift absences were by far the most common, it does not follow that they accounted for most of the time lost. The percentage of shifts lost through absences of different length is given in Table V.

TABLE V
Percentages of shifts lost through absences of different length

Length of absence, in shifts	Factory A					
	Married		Single		Both	
1	749	31.1	832	39.1	1,581	34.9
2	250	10.4	254	11.9	504	11.1
3	156	6.5	147	6.9	303	6.7
4	116	4.8	100	4.7	216	4.8
5	105	4.4	80	3.8	185	4.1
6	1,032	42.8	714	33.6	1,746	38.5
	Factory B					
1	280	22.3	168	30.4	448	24.8
2	72	5.7	32	5.8	104	5.8
3	81	6.5	36	6.5	117	6.5
4	68	5.4	16	2.9	84	4.6
5	70	5.6	30	5.4	100	5.5
6	684	54.5	270	48.9	954	52.8

It will be seen that single shift absences accounted for 34.9 per cent. of the total number of shifts lost in Factory A, and for 24.8 per cent. in Factory B. The corresponding figures for full week absences (six shifts) were 38.5 and 52.8 per cent., respectively. Thus more time was lost through full week absences than through single shift absences. In both factories, married women, as compared with single women, lost proportionately less time through single shift absences than through full week absences.

C. Absenteeism on each day of the week

The amount of absenteeism for married and single women on each day of the week is given in Table VI, which shows the number absent from each shift, expressed as a percentage of the number who should have been at work.

These figures show, in the first place, that absenteeism on the morning shift was higher than on the afternoon and night shifts, especially in Factory A. In both factories, the amount of absenteeism on the afternoon and night shifts was very similar.

Secondly, absenteeism on all shifts was higher for married than for single women. In Factory A, this difference was particularly noticeable on the morning shift and was least apparent on the afternoon shift.

Thirdly, in Factory A, absenteeism for both married and single women tended to increase from Sunday to Wednesday, but this was followed by a decrease, especially on pay-day, which was Friday for the morning and afternoon shifts and Thursday for the night shift. The lower absenteeism on pay-day was followed by a rise.

TABLE VI
Shift absenteeism on each day of the week
Factory A

Shift	Group	Sun.	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.	Avg.
Morning ..	Married ..	—	29.5	29.8	30.2	23.0	17.7	46.0	29.4
	Single ..	—	17.8	17.7	18.5	14.9	9.7	29.9	18.1
	Both ..	—	23.0	23.0	23.6	18.5	13.2	36.9	23.0
Afternoon ..	Married ..	14.1	13.7	14.6	17.6	13.0	9.7	—	13.7
	Single ..	11.2	12.2	14.1	14.8	10.7	7.6	—	11.8
	Both ..	12.5	12.8	14.3	16.0	11.7	8.4	—	12.6
Night ..	Married ..	13.8	14.8	15.8	17.5	11.4	17.2	—	15.1
	Single ..	9.6	10.4	12.3	13.3	9.3	14.9	—	11.6
	Both ..	11.6	12.5	13.9	15.3	10.3	15.9	—	13.2
Average ..	Married ..	14.0	19.4	20.1	21.8	15.8	14.8	46.0	19.4
	Single ..	10.5	13.6	14.8	15.6	11.8	10.5	29.9	13.9
	Both ..	12.0	16.2	17.2	18.4	13.6	12.5	36.9	16.4

Factory B

Morning ..	Married ..	—	15.2	13.9	13.7	13.9	13.0	16.8	14.4
	Single ..	—	9.4	6.4	6.2	7.4	7.9	11.6	8.1
	Both ..	—	12.7	10.7	10.5	11.1	10.8	14.6	11.8
Afternoon ..	Married ..	13.4	10.1	11.2	10.3	10.6	11.4	—	11.2
	Single ..	8.4	7.6	6.9	7.4	5.2	6.9	—	7.1
	Both ..	11.3	9.1	9.4	9.1	8.3	9.5	—	9.4
Night ..	Married ..	13.9	9.6	12.3	10.1	10.3	12.6	—	11.5
	Single ..	8.9	6.2	7.1	6.9	5.9	9.6	—	7.4
	Both ..	11.8	8.1	10.1	8.8	8.4	11.4	—	9.8
Average ..	Married ..	13.6	11.6	12.5	11.4	11.6	12.3	16.8	12.3
	Single ..	8.6	7.7	6.8	6.8	6.2	8.1	11.6	7.5
	Both ..	11.5	9.9	10.0	9.4	9.3	10.6	14.6	10.3

In Factory B, absenteeism was highest on Saturday and Sunday and was low on pay-day, which was Friday for the morning shift and Thursday for the afternoon and night shifts.

Fourthly, the higher absenteeism on Saturday morning, which was especially noticeable in Factory A, was due mainly to different workers being absent in different weeks and not to habitual absentees. This is shown by the following analysis, which gives the percentage of women who (a) worked both Saturdays, (b) were absent on one Saturday, and (c) were absent on both Saturdays in the period of six weeks.* Absences on Saturday morning which formed part of a longer absence have been excluded.

Factory A

	Married	Single	Both
At work on both Saturdays ..	38.5	53.0	46.7
Absent one Saturday ..	20.0	21.9	21.0
Absent both Saturdays ..	14.9	10.4	12.6

Since 46.0 per cent. of the married and 29.9 per cent. of the single women were absent on Saturday morning (Table VI), it would appear that only about one-third of these were regular absentees.

* Each worker was on the morning shift twice in six weeks and hence would normally work two Saturday mornings in this period.

Factory B

	Married	Single	Both
At work on both Saturdays ..	72.6	72.8	72.7
Absent one Saturday ..	11.9	9.8	11.0
Absent both Saturdays ..	0.7	0.0	0.4

In this factory there were practically no regular absentees.

D. Absenteeism and age

The relation between absenteeism and age was determined by classifying the workers in groups according to age, and finding the amount of absence for each age group. The results so obtained are given in Table VII.

TABLE VII

Percentage of possible shifts lost by workers in different age groups

Factory A

Age groups	Number in group			Percentage absenteeism		
	Married	Single	Both	Married	Single	Both
15-19.9 ..	2	111	113	—	15.2	15.2
20-24.9 ..	39	187	226	28.2	15.6	17.7
25-29.9 ..	54	59	113	25.0	10.6	17.4
30-39.9 ..	119	49	168	18.7	9.6	16.0
40-49.9 ..	85	10	95	15.5	11.7	15.1
50-59.9 ..	45	8	53	14.6	13.9	14.4

Factory B

20-24.9 ..	42	101	143	17.7	8.5	11.2
25-29.9 ..	64	41	105	14.2	11.6	13.2
30-39.9 ..	111	45	156	11.1	4.6	9.2
40-49.9 ..	59	15	74	9.3	2.3	7.9

Thus absenteeism was highest in the lower age groups (under 25) and then tended to decrease with increasing age. The only exception was in Factory A, where the absenteeism for single women in the age groups 40 to 60 tended to increase. The number of women in these groups was, however, too small for the finding to have any significance.

E. Absenteeism and travelling time

In order to determine the relation between absenteeism and the time taken to reach the factory, it was necessary to ascertain for each worker her place of residence and her mode of travel, and then to find the time taken by the journey. The relevant facts have been summarised in Table VIII. They refer to Factory A only, as corresponding figures for Factory B were not available.

TABLE VIII

Relation between absenteeism and the time taken to reach the factory

Factory A

Travelling time (in minutes)	Number of workers	Percentage absenteeism				Average
		Morning shift	Afternoon shift	Night shift		
0-30	112	18.7	15.9	13.1	16.0	
30-60	386	22.3	11.8	12.6	15.7	
60-90	233	24.7	12.6	13.4	17.0	
90-120	37	34.7	19.4	18.7	21.7	

Thus, on the average, there was little difference in absenteeism between women who took from 0 to 30 and from 30 to 60 minutes to reach the factory. Above this limit, absenteeism increased with travelling time. On the afternoon and night shifts, absenteeism was least among workers who took from 30 to 60 minutes to travel, but on the morning shift it continued to increase as travelling time increased.

3.—SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

The chief tendencies and conclusions which emerged from this short-term inquiry may be summarised as follows :—

(1) Very few women were in the habit of losing one or two shifts each week. A large majority were absent for varying lengths of time at irregular intervals. Thus, whatever the main causes of absenteeism, they were not regularly recurrent but were as varied as individual needs and desires. This suggests the need for a study of the personal causes of absenteeism, and for an individual method of treatment, as well as attention to the general conditions of work.

(2) Married women lost more time than single women and, as a rule, their absences were spread over a greater number of weeks. They tended to have more longer and fewer shorter absences than single women.

(3) In a period of six weeks, 68·3 per cent. of the absences in Factory A and 60·6 per cent. in Factory B were from single shifts, but these accounted for only 34·9 per cent. of the total number of shifts lost in Factory A and 24·8 per cent. in Factory B. Larger proportions (38·5 per cent. in Factory A and 52·8 per cent. in Factory B) of the total time lost were due to full week absences. These results suggest that attempts to reduce absenteeism should be directed to single shift and to full week absences. The latter were due mainly to sickness.

(4) Absenteeism on the morning shift was higher than on the afternoon and night shifts, especially in Factory A. The excess on the morning shift was most noticeable in the case of single shift absences and was less apparent for longer absences. On all shifts, absenteeism was higher for married than for single women.

(5) Absenteeism varied on different days of the week. It was highest on Saturday and was low on pay-day. There was also a tendency for absenteeism to increase about the middle of the week.

The higher absenteeism on Saturday was particularly noticeable among married women, but the number of regular absentees was small.

(6) Younger women (up to 25 years of age) lost more time than older women. The inverse relation between absenteeism and age was particularly noticeable among married women but was less apparent among single women.

(7) Absenteeism in Factory A was much higher than in Factory B: otherwise the results obtained from the two factories had much in common. The higher absenteeism in Factory A must be considered in relation to :—

(a) the size of the factory, which, at the time of the inquiry, employed approximately five times more women than Factory B.

(b) its unusually rapid rate of growth ;

(c) its isolated position.

Factory A, therefore, had to cope specially with the problems attending large-scale employment. On the other hand, the proportion of married to single women was higher in Factory B, and this would have tended to increase its rate of absenteeism relatively to that in Factory A.

It should be borne in mind that these conclusions are based on results obtained from only two factories, and they must not be regarded as necessarily representative of the conditions in industry as a whole. It is hoped that this inquiry, which was part of a larger study of absenteeism, may serve as a guide to further investigations along similar lines.

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