In the two decades of the 1920s and 1930s the Soviet regime employed contrasting recruitment and employment strategies in relation to women workers. The move from ‘protection’ to ‘equality’ in official policies towards female labour had far-reaching consequences not only for women workers but also for the Soviet labour force as a whole.¹ A brief examination will be made in this chapter of some of the basic indicators of changes in the rates of female employment and unemployment, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of the total industrial labour force constituted by women, the distribution of women workers in different sectors of the economy and by different levels of skill.² The very nature of female employment had changed by the end of the 1930s. Women were actively encouraged to work in jobs, and indeed entire sectors of the economy, which had formerly been dominated by men.

Working for wages and industrial labour were not new to Russian women. Many thousands of women had been employed in the tsarist economy as full-time, part-time and seasonal industrial labourers, as white-collar employees and as hired workers in other sectors of the economy. The employment of women had grown rapidly in virtually all of the industrial sectors of the economy during the First World War.³ According to data compiled by the Soviet statistician, L. Ye. Mints, by 1917 female workers (including girls and young women) constituted around 40 per cent of the industrial labour force.⁴ (See Appendixes 2 and 3.) From this time, however, the actual numbers of women in paid employment fell. Women began to lose their jobs as the levels of male unemployment rose and when soldiers returned from the front. During the upheaval of the 1917 revolutions and the civil war, many women undoubtedly also voluntarily gave up paid employment in urban areas in order to seek food and security in the villages.

The Bolshevik Party believed that sexual equality and the liberation of women could be achieved by the full participation
of women as paid workers in the production process. In his 'Speech at the Non-Party Conference of Women Workers' in 1919, Lenin argued that:

As long as women are engaged in housework their position is a restricted one. In order to achieve the complete emancipation of women and to make them really equal with men, we must have social economy, and the participation of women in general productive labour. Then women will occupy the same position as men.

Interestingly for this study Lenin proceeded to argue that:

This, of course, does not mean that women must be exactly equal with men in productivity of labour, amount of labour, length of the working day, conditions of labour, etc. But it does mean that women shall not be in an oppressed economic position compared with men.\(^5\)

Economic independence, therefore, was identified as an important element in achieving women's liberation and sexual equality. The Bolsheviks attempted to put these policies into practice after October 1917, but during the chaotic years of civil war and war communism it proved difficult for the Bolshevik Party to implement its social welfare programme, which was in part designed to ease the accommodation of women into the industrial labour force. During 1918 some of the trade unions made attempts to prevent the mass dismissal of women workers.\(^6\) The first Soviet Labour Code, issued in December 1918, imposed the duty of productive labour on all Soviet citizens of working age.\(^7\) Overall, except for a slight variation in 1920, the actual numbers of women in industrial employment declined steadily between 1918 and 1921/22 and the proportion of the industrial labour force constituted by women continued to fall until 1923/24.\(^8\) (See Appendix 2.)

After the years of turmoil due to war and revolution, the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921 saw the partial retraction of many war communist policies. The introduction of the NEP also signalled a period of stabilisation and restoration in the economy and allowed for an expansion in the size of the female industrial labour force. It was in these years in particular that social policy directives, scientific research and actual legislative enactments were