

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY – Tuesday 8 March 2005

On 8 March 2005 the Groupe La Poste celebrated its second annual International Women's Day, at the suggestion of the Comité pour l'histoire de La Poste (CHP) and with the participation of the Mission Recherche de La Poste (MR), at its headquarters.

The topic of the conference was "le facteur est une femme" ("The mail carrier is a woman") and "le nouveau postier est une postière" ("the new postal employee is a woman").

The following speakers were invited to present papers: Josette Le Naour, award winner in the autobiographical competition "Mémoire de femmes, une vie aux PTT" ("Women's Recollections of a Life with the PTT"), whose paper was published by the CHP in 2002; Marie Cartier, lecturer in sociology at the University of Nantes and author of *Les Facteurs et leurs tournées* (published by Belin in 2003, with the support of the CHP); Yannick L'Horty, economist and professor at the University of Evry, co-author with Thierry Laurent, of the report *Nouveaux postiers, nouvelles attentes*, under the auspices of the MR. The following is a summary of each speaker's paper.

Josette LE NAOUR

A Woman Mail Carrier Who Went "All Over the Place"

The organizers of the conference have asked me to describe my occupation as a mail carrier who went everywhere. I had to search deep down in my memories, since I am already part of the history of the post office! It all began thirty years ago when the first women were beginning to work in distributing the mail.

As a mail carrier in all areas, I worked in town as well as in the country. In 1971 I was a mail carrier in a rural area, a small district of the haute-Marne, in Andelot, where I began as a "rouleur" (a "sub"), helping as needed with irregular service needs. There were two women to assist ten men, and I did this job for about five years. Then I became a mail carrier in town. This was in Provins in 1976, a small town with a population of about 15,000, and there were three women and eight men. I did this work for about fifteen years. As an carrier in all areas, I was a substitute for two-thirds of my postal career. I was tenured on my route for only seven years. As a "factrice tout terrain," I had a walking-cycling route and then an automobile route.

From the beginning of my PTT career, I was hired mainly as a driver but also as a cyclist-walker, and I was basically a substitute deliverer. This means that I soon became familiar with all types of terrain. I was constantly alternating and changing routes according to other carriers' leave time and time off; I would sometimes do six different routes in six days! What made me unique in the two places where I worked was that I was the only woman driver. This came as a surprise



to the men and even more so to our customers. Everyone was a bit mistrustful at first; “Will she know what to do? This is no job for a woman!” This attitude made me “blow my stack” rather often.

The first place I will recall is Andelot, in the countryside. Sparsely populated, with a widespread population of about 1,000, there were three villages of 400-700 inhabitants each in the area; the rest of the inhabitants were dispersed in several different hamlets, tiny localities, and separate farms. Travel was accomplished on isolated roads that were nearly impassable in winter, which lasted from November to April there. Snow and ice were everyday occurrences.

As an alternate on those six motor routes, I learned how to do controlled skids, but sometimes I lost control! We had tires with cleats in the trunk of our little truck that were for emergencies. But there were only two for the front of the vehicle, which made the rear end spin its wheels. Many a time I had to put them on in an icy wind, in a fit of anger with tears in my eyes. I could never adjust the driver’s seat of any of the vehicles I drove for my size. I would have to move the seat forward and sometimes raise it, using old phone books or wooden blocks.

I had a lot of worries on these routes. I was afraid of having car trouble or getting lost on the long roadways through manorial forests. I dressed “tough,” with a beret and a pack of smokes! Of course the advantage to these motor routes was the protection from inclement weather and no heavy loads to carry. Even though it was hot inside the car in the summer time, it was nice to be able to sit down. But driving door to door was demanding: getting in and out of the car two hundred times each morning just about broke my back. Yes, it really was “all over the place.” There were many isolated farms where the family subscribed to the daily paper mainly so that they would see the mail carrier every day.

The bicycle routes where I also was a substitute on foot offered a different kind of sport! With two bags in back, one in front and two on my back – one for regular mail and the other for financial correspondence, money order funds, and registered letters! We had to have our own bicycle, whose frame was usually not up to the weight of our load. Just keeping my balance was no mean feat! Forget having to learn how to ride in the snow or over ice: sometimes I would have to lift my bike and pick up all the mail that had fallen onto the wet snow! But I had to keep my chin up. The summer was very hot in these areas, and it wasn’t easy for a woman to pedal a bicycle carrying up to thirty kilos of mail at times. But regardless of being in a car or on a bike, we women didn’t have the right to complain. We kept on hearing the same old song: “Equal pay for equal work! We don’t want any ‘little women’ distributing the mail.”

Now I’ll talk about working in town, in Provins. At first I was the only woman postal employee who worked as a driver. And I also did the same kind of work I was doing in Andelot, covering four so-called rural routes. On the other hand, I also learned to drive in town, on small streets that were sometimes one way. I was a sub on package routes. I felt like a chauffeur-delivery person in town, and often had to doublepark. I went to businesses in the industrial part of town. There the weight of the parcels often gave me a pain ... in the back! This was especially due to the fact that I also had to leave off the mailbags that had been prepared for other carriers. These were transported in large chestnut-colored containers destined for different routes; the bags were

heavy to lift and carry. Oh, and I almost forgot that I also had to pick up mail from various mailboxes in town and out of town twice a day.

I'm explaining this route in detail because it was not a favorite of my co-workers. When I became tenured, this is the route I was given because I was the last hired. But I still liked it better than being a sub. Finally! I soon developed little habits, formed landmarks, and came to know my own customers. What a relief! After two or three years on this infamous route, my back gave out! On medical advice and at my own request, I became a walking-cycling deliverer once again. It was less strenuous but more like a sport! My concern was that I no longer had a tenured route. One had to turn up somehow... because I had become a sub again!

Fortunately a regular walking route soon opened up after someone retired, and I was able to "buy" as we used to say, a walking-cycling route. I ended my career as a mail deliverer like that, on my bike! I was even happier to discover that the route was in the neighborhood where I lived, in a low-income housing area. I knew the route well, so there were few problems. One last thing happened when I had an unexpected health problem: I had to give up my job as a mail carrier and do window work for the last few years before retirement. But that's another story of postal life.

In conclusion, I would say that this occupation was physically demanding, whatever mode of transportation – bicycle or car – was required, but it was very interesting and gave us a lot of free time for family, appointments, and leisure. Don't forget that we had our afternoons free, after a good nap! Looking back, I'm proud to have been a mail carrier and to have been a part of one big family. Even today, a few years into retirement, people still call me "the mail lady:" it's my badge of distinction.

Marie CARTIER

Are Women Mail Carriers The Same As Any Other?

My research on mail carriers is not primarily based on gender and difference. Instead it is guided by the issue of lesser civil servants' social status and examines generational differences among these workers, by identifying three different generations of mail carriers: a generation of men from a country, rural, and/or peasant background, with a primary school diploma, that entered the workforce between the 1950s and 1970s after passing examinations that were not very selective; an intermediate generation recruited between 1970 and 1983; and the generation of new carriers who passed examinations that had become highly selective in the face of massive unemployment and the attrition of public service jobs. More and more frequently members of this last group had earned their baccalaureate degree.

The first women mail carriers appear in the middle of the intermediate generation. Although women had been carrying mail for generations, they were only officially admitted to postal examinations from 1974 on. The integration of women into the profession was rapid; in the 1990s there were nearly as many women and men carriers. The women who became carriers

between 1975 and 1983 came from different backgrounds. If we look at their class background and level of schooling, they resemble the men who were recruited in the 50s and 60s. In fact they were often these men's wives. Other younger women, single or divorced, had finished high school and were seeking the independence of salaried work. Other young women with a baccalaureate degree or public service credential (BEP) had originally chosen to work as secretaries, bookkeepers, or social workers but were kept out of their chosen occupations by unemployment conditions.

Thus the first women mail carriers do not represent a socially homogeneous population. Their relationship to the work of a mail carrier was highly variable. For some, as for their male counterparts, it was a privileged and empowering occupation that allowed them to be "in the field" and form social relations with the people who lived on their route. For these women, as well as for the men carriers, "having a regular route" was the primary value of the occupation. However, because of their weak seniority, the women became eligible for the "sale of neighborhood routes," as it was called, long after their male co-workers. For other women, this type of working class employment that was physically demanding was a step down the job ladder. These women tried to move up by taking internal tests or requesting a transfer to a mail sorting center. Women's arrival in distribution centers gave rise to rivalries and conflicts but also solidarities and alliances. The multiple aspects and implications of the study of the integration of women into this profession continues to be a worthwhile and ongoing project.

Yannick L'HORTY *

**The new mailman is a woman:
Gender and generations in an internal work market**

In a large business concern whose staff enjoy a protected status, compensation, recruitment, and mobility are all organized around a set of administrative procedures rather than by using an offer-request comparison. Such a business has its own "internal market," as defined by Doeringer and Piore (1971), as opposed to an "outside market" where compensation, training, and work assignments are determined by commercial fine-tuning. In internal markets, progress toward seniority is a privilege that leads to more equitable salaries. The historical regression of internal work markets is given as one of the causes of the growing inequities in the area of compensation (Gautié 2002).

The Post Office provides a special field for the study of internal work markets. It is a business of sizeable proportions: after the State, it is the second largest employer in France, with over 320,000 agents of which 220,000 are civil servants. Migration beyond the post office, however, is weak: employees often start young and remain for life. So the Post Office has every reason to be specially affected by the great transformations in the structure of the workforce and work markets, particularly by the increase of women's involvement.

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In this article I intend to document the relationship between gender and generations in an internal work market like the French post office through the use of statistical sources. We begin by attempting to define “the new postal employees” by means of the *Socioscope*, an internal work satisfaction survey devised by La Poste in 2002. We found that although it is possible to invent and utilize several different definitions of the new generations of postal workers, there is no single definition where women are not massively over-represented. From that point of view, the generational turnover coincides with a gender split that is much more evident at La Poste than in all other businesses on the whole. We then analyze the evidence provided by INSEE employment surveys that allow us to compare postal workers with representatives in other sectors from a historical perspective. Even in related sectors like banking, telecommunications, or transportation, the relative increase in the number of working women is evident across all age groups, but it is exclusively concentrated among younger generations at La Poste. This case sheds light on a particularity of internal work markets where age is confused with seniority (the assumption being that new hires are young) but also with gender (new hires are women) and, to a lesser extent, with level of education.

The new postal employee is a woman

In order to evaluate the role of women in the new generations of postal workers, it is important to strictly define these new negations before applying this definition to a statistical source. Our source is the Socioscope that La Poste uses as an indicator of the degree of “satisfaction” derived from one’s status as a postal employee and as a communications tool. A sampling of 6,300 employees was used; this was enough to fine-tune our search criteria.¹ We set up four possible parameters for our definition of new postal employees (see box below). The first two definitions use only one variable taken from the Socioscope (seniority or age), whereas the following two use the intersection of several variables (seniority and age; seniority, age, sex, and level of education).

Four definitions of new postal employees

- **New Hires:** according to this definition, new employees are those with less than ten years of seniority; according to the data in Socioscope, 1,312 postal employees or 21.5% of all agents at La Poste have less than 10 years of seniority.
- **Young People:** Here new employees are simply defined as those who are under 35. This represents 1,047 employees or 17.1 % of all postal agents.
- **Young and New Hires:** in this case, new postal employees are those who have less than 10 years seniority AND are under 35. This more restrictive definition allowed us to identify 837 employees as new, based on the data sample taken from Socioscope, or 13.7% of all agents of La Poste.
- More often than not, new postal employees are **young people with low seniority, a high educational level, and women:** this definition using multiple criteria is the result of an automatic method of Ascending Hierarchical Classification that uses the variables of seniority, age, level of education, and sex. According to this approach, in the Socioscope from 2002, 1,039 postal employees or about 17% of all agents of La Poste were classified as new employees.

¹ A detailed description of these criteria and our results is found in Laurent and L’Horty (2004).

Since the age and seniority distributions are statistically very interdependent, the various grouping of postal agents activated by the application of these definitions represents a significant intersection. For more than 80% of all postal workers, the classification as old or new employee remains unchanged according to any of our four definitions. If a person is not a new postal employee according to one of these four definitions, there is a 95% chance that the same person is not an employee according to another definition. When a person is a new employee according to one of these definitions, there is nearly an 80% chance that the person is classifiable as an employee according to another definition.

The most remarkable outcome is that when we apply one or another of these definitions, the role of women is systematically stronger among new employees than among less recent hires (Table 1). If one of every two postal employees in the overall population is a woman, this proportion is quite different among older and new postal workers. Nearly 60% of all new workers are women according to any of the four established definitions. But 45% of older (in terms of seniority) workers are women according to each of these definitions. This over-representation of women among new postal workers in relation to older ones is doubled by an over-representation of high school graduates (*bacheliers*), with more distinct differences according to the definitions and the more significant gaps between new and old postal employees.

Table 1 – Distribution of employees by gender and level of education

		Under 35	Less than 10 years seniority	Under 35 and less than 10 years seniority	Automatic method by age, seniority, education, and gender
% of women	New postal employees group	60.2	61	59,9	60,6
	Older postal employees group	45.5	44.4	46.1	45.4
% of high school graduates	New postal employees group	79.1	70.1	82	82.8
	Older postal employees group	50.8	51.6	51.5	50

Commentary: If new postal employees are defined as the group of employees under age 35, this represents 60.2 % women among new employees and 4.5 % women among older employees.

Source : Socioscope, 2002.

The New Postal Employee is a Young Person

The INSEE employment surveys may be used to study a specific business, La Poste, because it is a large-scale business that represents a single branch of the aggregate of French business activity at the 700 level (branch 64.1A whose title is “National Post Office”). This allows us to classify postal employees using a sample that is large enough to permit our simple statistical criteria and then present them as a representative indication of the entire group.² We compared postal employees with the activities of other staff members in three business sectors similar to La Poste in the context of the NAF: transportation, banking and insurance, and telecommunications. Our comparison also addresses statistical data for all three sectors as a group. This gave us four points of comparison in each instance used to classify the postal employees.

A turnover in manpower does not always correspond to a turnover where one generation replaces the previous one. In all economic areas, in transportation, or to a lesser extent, in telecommunications, a turnover in the workforce is a reality that spans all age groups: the number of workers with over five years of seniority decreased in the 1990s for older workers as well as the middle-aged and younger workers. In other words, employment became less stable for all age groups. However, for banking and at the Post Office, the turnover of manpower was also a generational turnover. It did not affect older workers and affected the middle-aged group only slightly. It had the greatest effect on the youngest group where the proportion of workers with over five years of seniority dropped sharply (three out of four young postal workers had over five years of seniority in 1990 vs. fewer than one out of every two in 2001). Although La Poste ranked higher than the other sectors in 1990 from the standpoint of young employees’ seniority, it strongly converged in 2001 to a point where the seniority count was almost identical to the corresponding level in the other sectors.

So the new postal employees are in fact young people. This is not at all a random occurrence. In the economic sector on the whole, newly salaried employees in many businesses are often middle aged or older workers. It is possible to be “new” without being young. But at the Post Office, being older often does correspond to seniority and the “new hires” are in fact young. All things being equal, young postal employees still always have more seniority than other young salaried workers in general or young salaried workers in banking, transportation, or telecommunications.

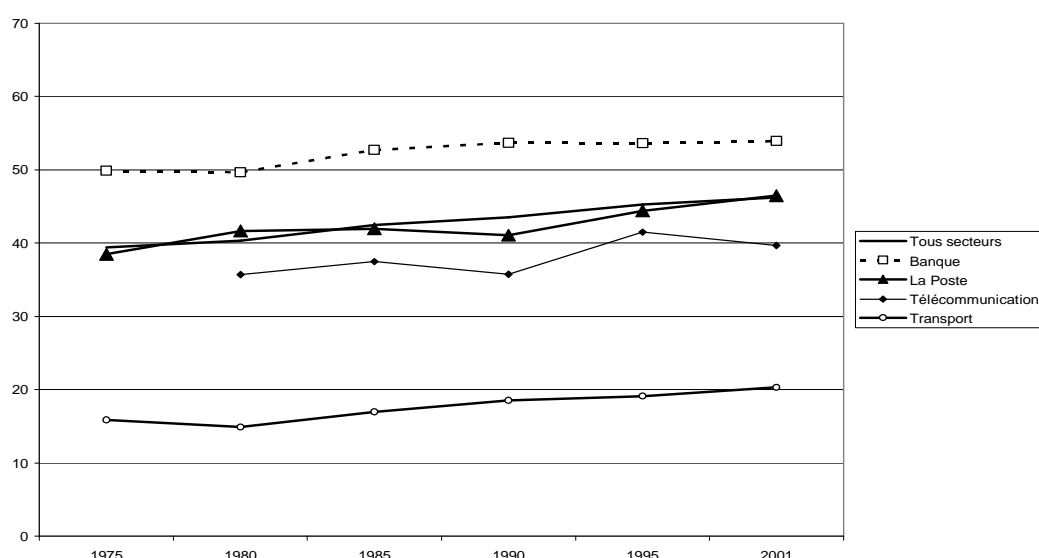
These observations demonstrate the fact that job security is much stronger at La Poste than elsewhere. New employees usually begin their careers there at a young age and stay for their entire their professional life. This is why La Poste is more affected by demographic aging; it also explains why the turnover of manpower at La Poste corresponds to a generational turnover. These are the characteristics of an internal work market.

² A detailed description of these criteria and our results is found in Laurent and L’Horty (2004).

The generational turnover leading to a gender split

With the data from the employment survey, we noticed that the development of women's work activity had become a reality in all sectors over the last thirty years, although differences in rank were perpetuated. Transportation always had a higher population of men (20% women), whereas banking always involved more women (over 50%). La Poste occupied a middle ground and behaved very similarly to the rest of the economy. It would seem that La Poste was "feminized" at the same pace as the average of all other sectors of economic activity (graph 1).

Graph 1. Change in the number of women at La Poste and in other sectors of the economy



Commentary: According to the employment survey taken in 1975, women accounted for 50% of banking staff.

Source: INSEE, Employment survey

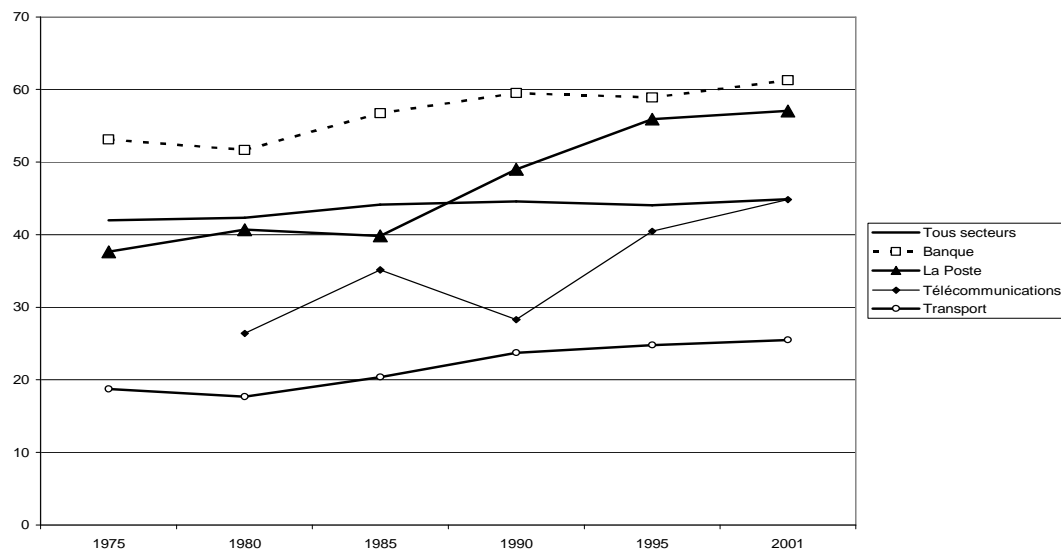
Banque=Banking Télécommunications=Telecommunications Transport=Transportation

This perception is deceptive. In fact, changes in the number of women are very different according to age group (graph 2). The greatest change occurred in the under 35 group which saw an increase of 20 points in fifteen years, reaching 57% in 2001, a level that is comparable to the same figure for banking). The number of women is stable for the intermediate age groups; the figure seems to regress from the mid-1980s for older workers. This distinction by age group is clear when we look at the case of La Poste. In terms of the overall economy, in banking and transportation, the integration of women into the workforce is taking place across all age groups.

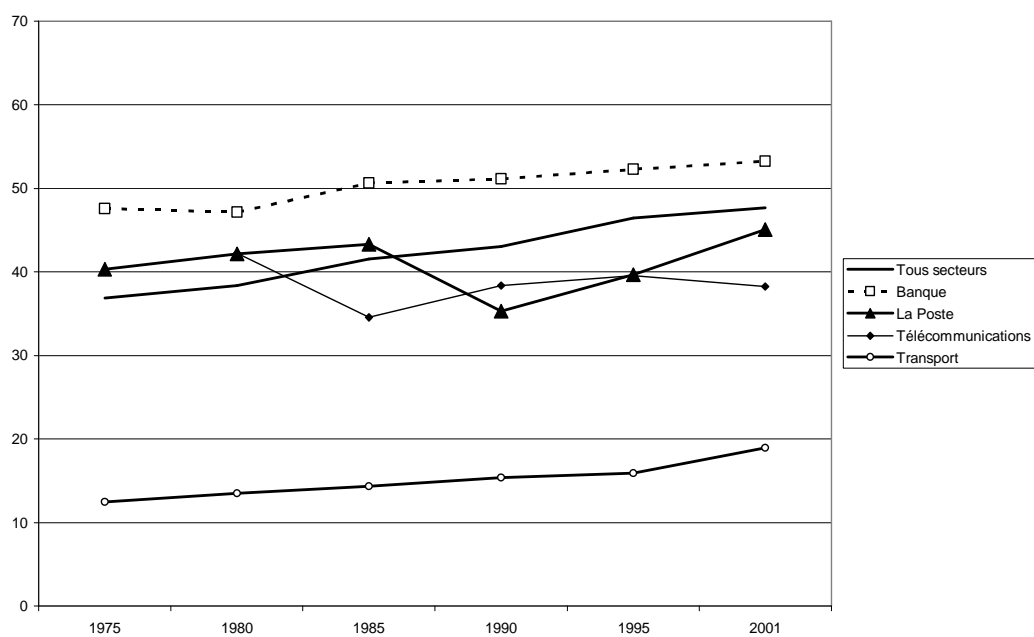
The average change masks a remarkable feature of how the data is structured. The number of women at La Poste appears to conform to the national average, but it deviates from this figure in each of the separate age groups. There is a growing majority of women among young people, even as they are a growing minority among older postal employees. Today the new postal worker is a woman, but this was not the case in 1990. Furthermore, since the turnover of postal

employees does correspond to a generational turnover, the postal employee of tomorrow, even if this is not a new person, will also be a woman.

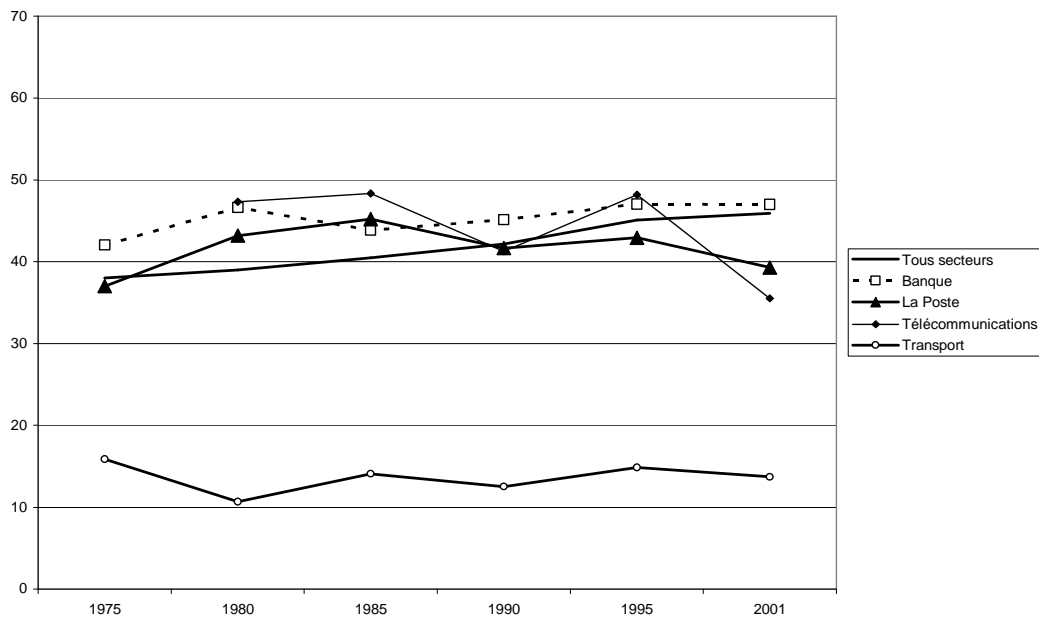
**Graph 2. Change in the number of women at La Poste
and in different sectors of economic activity, according to three age groups**
2 – A. Number of women under age 35



2. – A. Number of women in the 35-50 age group



2 – B. Number of women in the over 50 age group



Source : INSEE, Employment survey

The greatest transformations of work itself, such as the increase in active work done by women or the increase in the level of qualifications of the work force, have a specific effect on internal work markets. When the basic structure of the workforce changes, occupational modifications lead to generational differences. The increasingly prominent role of women employed by La Poste illustrates this point well. If the pool of new hires is predominantly young people (a characteristic of an internal market) whose gender is increasingly female (occupational modifications), the generational turnover is replicated as a gender split. After the overall increase in level of education (another occupational modification), the generational turnover is exceedingly based on a rupture of the employee's entry-level educational background.

In conclusion, internal markets present differences of age, gender, and educational level besides the usual differences between new and old hires in the area of salary and compensation or rank. The opposition between new and old corresponds to other dualities: younger/older, woman/man, more education/less education. This accretion of dualities has considerable implications for social relations and the management of human resources. More generally, the causes for the relationship between the decline of internal markets and the rise of inequalities are far from immediate. It is also possible that the decline of internal work markets may decrease the gap between generations as well as the gender gap.

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