Women and Work in the Dutch Republic

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Abstract

Historiography on women and work focused for long on whether and how large-scale transformations – such as urbanisation, commercialisation, the rise of capitalism, the consumer revolution, industrialisation, and the ideal of domesticity – changed women's socio-economic position and work opportunities. More recent research also turns the question around and looks at the impact of women's socio-economic position and gender relations on economic change. This essay discusses what these approaches have contributed to our knowledge and understanding of women and work in the Low Countries (with a specific focus on the Dutch Republic), identifies gaps in historiography, and argues that further diversification is necessary in order to better understand women's economic contribution and the impact of gender relations on economic development.

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'Did women have a Renaissance?'[1] This question, which Joan Kelly put to her colleagues in her seminal 1977 article, asking them to examine history from a female perspective and thus to rethink and re-evaluate accepted schemes of periodisation, was simple and provocative.[2] The answer was equally simple: no. The question aptly reflects the broader framework that has long dominated research in women's history: historians examined how major historical developments influenced the position of women and whether there was continuity or change.

The same interpretative framework of continuity or change has dominated research on social and economic themes. Historians have studied the impact of urbanisation, commercialisation, the rise of capitalism, the consumer revolution, industrialisation, and the ideal of domesticity on the social and economic position of women. Outcomes were variable. Many historians concluded that the status of women's work deteriorated during the early modern period. Others challenged this so-called 'decline thesis' and emphasised the continuing persistence of patriarchal relations and the marginal status of women's work that had always been poorly paid, low-skilled, and taken place outside formal organisational structures.[3]

The initial focus on the gains or losses in the position of women throughout history had its drawbacks.[4] In current debates, the subjectivity of questions of gain or loss that previously coloured the interpretation of historical developments in women's work has been overcome. However, another implication of questions surrounding 'the position of women' is that women were represented as an undifferentiated group. Although

1 This essay is inspired by, and partly based upon publications grown out of the IISH/NWO research project 'Women and Work in the Early Modern Northern Netherlands', carried out by Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Danielle van den Heuvel, Marjolein van Dekken, and myself. It also draws on the discussions and activities of the international network 'Producing Change. Gender and Work in Early Modern Europe', which has resulted in the publication by MacLeod, Shepard, and Ågren (eds.), *The Whole Economy*. Parts of the current essay are based on my earlier publications; see also Schmidt, 'Differences at Work'.

2 Kelly-Gadol, 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?'

3 Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family*; Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*; Howell, *Women, Production and Patriarchy*; Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*; Wunder, *Er ist die Sonn, sie ist der Mond.* For an overview of the debate, see also Sharpe (ed.), *Women's Work*, esp. section 1, 'Debating Women's Work'.

4 See for an early critique Kloek, *Wie hij zij, man of wijf*, 24-43.

Kelly mentioned that the 'state, early capitalism, and the social relations formed by them impinged on the lives of Renaissance women in different ways according to their different positions in society', she did not elaborate on this differentiation in her essay, which focused on the nobility and the bourgeoisie.[5] Finally, a disadvantage of the dominant interpretative framework of 'continuity or change', with its focus on the impact of large-scale transformations on women's economic roles, is that women were studied as a distinct group. This complicated the integration of research findings into mainstream economic history. The wider implications of the research on women's economic history remained underexposed.

Over the years research has yielded an enormous amount of information about the work of women in the early modern period, which has enabled us to make more informed assessments on the economic roles of women. Moreover, approaches to such research have also changed. First, historians came to a more nuanced interpretation of women's economic position and work roles, by taking into account the differences between women. Even though the concept of intersectionality is not always systematically applied, historians have showed that social status, marital status, geographical background, civil status, and ethnicity were important determinants for women's economic activities.[6] Furthermore, the interpretation of the historical development of women's work has become more layered, as historians increasingly emphasise that changes were not linear and that overarching theories cannot adequately explain developments in women's work.[7]

Another important development in historiography is that historians turned the question around: they not only look at the impact of large-scale economic transformations on women and gender relations, but also at the impact of women's economic position and gender relations on larger historical developments. How did women contribute to the economy and how did this effect economic change? This approach, partly inspired by development economics, proved particularly fruitful. In doing so, women are now also studied as agents of change.[8] Moreover, by focusing on the explanatory power of gender in economic history, the study of the economic activities of women becomes urgent and results are more easily integrated into larger historical narratives.

Below, I discuss what these new approaches have contributed to our knowledge and understanding of women and work in the Low Countries. My focus will be on women and work in the early modern Northern Netherlands, as it is in this area that much progress has been made, thanks to a large research project on the history of women's work in the Dutch Republic.[9] During the early modern period, the Dutch Republic experienced extraordinary economic development, and it is therefore an interesting case to examine the relationship between economic performance and women's work. This contribution concludes with a discussion of issues still on the wish list. I will identify where further

5 Kelly-Gadol, 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?', 176.
6 Montenach and Simonton, 'Introduction', 5; Schmidt, 'Differences at Work'.
7 Sharpe, 'Continuity and Change', 33; Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living*, 13.
8 Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living*; De Moor and Van Zanden, 'Girl Power'; Hunt and Shepard, 'Introduction', 14-16.
9 The IISH/NWO research project 'Women and Work in the Early Modern Northern Netherlands', carried out by Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Danielle van den Heuvel, Marjolein van Dekken, and myself.

differentiation is required for a better understanding of developments in the history of women and work in the Low Countries.

Contrasting Hypotheses

Research on the history of women in the Dutch Republic was inspired by questions that were dominant in the international literature. In the 1980s and 1990s, the decline thesis in particular presented historians working on the socio-economic position of Dutch women with an interesting conundrum: how was this thesis to be reconciled with those accounts of foreign travellers and contemporaries that portrayed early modern Dutch women as economically active, entrepreneurial, independent, and dominant? Indeed, many publications on women's work begin by referencing the observations of early modern travellers. Yet visiting travellers and contemporaries in fact gave emphasis to different facets of Dutch women. They commented upon women's entrepreneurial capacities, knowledge of trade, independence, bossiness, and sometimes even outright dominance over men, but also, increasingly, portrayed Dutch women as hardworking housewives with an excessive concern for cleanliness. The use of such travellers' accounts as a historical source is subject to many caveats, which have been discussed extensively in literature.[10] Historians still use these accounts, but now by way of illustration rather than as empirical evidence. As a result, the question as to whether Dutch women in the early modern period were primarily 'active businesswomen' or 'industrious housewives' (to use travellers' phrasing) remained unanswered.

Interestingly, the contrast in representation was mirrored in Dutch historiography on women and work. Several economists and economic historians have suggested that the low labour force participation rates of Dutch women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could be traced back to the period of the Dutch Republic. They related women's work experiences with the pioneering role of the Netherlands in the development of the idea of sociability and domesticity, the lifestyle that was so typical of bourgeois urban culture in the early modern Netherlands. Here, it was argued, the early separation of industrial activities from agrarian work carried out around the homestead stimulated the practical realisation of the ideal in which women limited themselves to domestic work and men earned the income. This ideal of domesticity became the social paradigm, and excluded women from market-oriented work. The high standards of living enabled the early practical realisation of this dominant ideology and the withdrawal of women from the labour market much earlier than elsewhere, before the nineteenth century.[11]

According to a different theory, the relationship between female participation in the labour force and economic development was exactly the opposite. By this theory, the high demand for unskilled and low-skilled labour led to the wide employment of women in the early modern capitalist economy, which thus contributed to a significant increase in

10 Kloek, 'De geschiedenis van een stereotype'.

11 Pott-Buter, *Facts and Fairy Tales*, 66-67, 282-286; De Vries and Van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy*, 604-605.

family income.[12] This line was further developed in Jan de Vries's thesis on the Industrious Revolution that will be further discussed below.[13]

Was the participation of women in the Dutch labour market low because the standards of living were so high that women could afford not to work? Or were gender norms remarkably flexible, allowing women to be economically productive, participate in the labour market on a larger scale than elsewhere, and thus contribute to the rising standard of living and remarkable economic development of the Dutch Republic? The research project *Women and Work in the Early Modern Northern Netherlands* took up the question and examined the relationship between the position of women in the labour market and the remarkable economic development in the Dutch Republic.[14] The brief answer is that women did not withdraw from the labour market during the period of economic prosperity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but actually participated in large numbers, thus contributing to the economic success of the Dutch Republic. By now, the rich historiography on women and work in the Dutch Republic has yielded a number of important insights, as will be discussed below.

Ideas and Practices of Women's Work

A key insight from the research is that there was a discrepancy between the normative values regarding women's work as asserted by moralist writers, preachers, or painters, and those practices actually in place. The expectations surrounding the behaviour surrounding men and women were layered, however. Moralist writers advocated that women should stay at home. References to the notion of the 'male breadwinner' were no nineteenth-century invention, but could also be found in early modern daily practice. It is significant, for example, that the vulnerability of widows as women bereaved of their spouses and a family income was recognised, and they were thus considered legitimate recipients of urban poor relief. However, it is important to realise that writers of conduct literature did not make clear distinctions between paid and unpaid work, or between productive and reproductive labour, as economists nowadays tend to do. Rather, the dividing line was spatial, as it assigned work done within the home to women, and work done without to men. Work done inside the home included reproductive work and household chores, but also spinning, making and mending clothes, weaving, and lacemaking. Work undertaken for profit was not presented as problematic in literary or visual representations. If necessary, women could leave the house and work for pay.[15]

In practice, though, most women not only worked but were expected to do so if they could not live off income from capital or on a husband's income. Gender norms embedded in, and reproduced by, institutions such as charity boards, criminal courts, and local governments expected able-bodied women to provide for their own maintenance by

12 Noordegraaf and Van Zanden, 'Early modern economic growth', 426.
13 De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*.
14 Schmidt, 'Vrouwenarbeid in de Vroegmoderne Tijd'.
15 De Vries, 'Toonbeelden van huiselijkheid of arbeidzaamheid?'; Schmidt, 'Labour Ideologies', 55.

working.[16] Significantly, both male and female thieves were reprimanded in criminal court with the standard formulation of having committed a dishonest act 'even though they were able to support themselves with their manual labour'.[17] Recipients of poor relief usually could not live on the support they received. Men and women combined income from charity with mutual assistance and income from labour.[18] Sometimes poor relief chambers provided work, and in several cities men, women, and children were put to work in workhouses.[19] Research on divorce agreements has shown that both partners were held responsible for the material upbringing of their children, implying that usually fathers paid alimony to mothers because they kept the children, but incidentally also that mothers were ordered to pay alimony to fathers, from earned income. Divorced women usually had to provide their own income as they usually did not receive alimony.[20]

Invisible Women?

Past rates of female participation within the labour force are notoriously difficult to calculate.[21] This is due to a combination of methodological and conceptual problems: the invisibility or underrepresentation of women in sources, the limitations of a quantitative approach to work, and, finally, the focus on 'occupations', which is not the most adequate way to approach women's work (see below). However, the combination of methodologies has allowed an estimation of employment rates. The labour force participation of Dutch women in the seventeenth and eighteenth century turned out to be high, possibly even higher than in surrounding countries. Minimum estimates of women's and children's participation rates in several Dutch towns varied around 38.2 percent around 1600, 50 percent in 1665, and 50 percent in 1750. There figures were higher compared to similar calculations for the Netherlands as a whole in 1849 and 1899, which come in at 33.5 and 24.1 percent respectively.[22]

The invisibility of women in the sources does not mean they were invisible in the public sphere. Women worked more often than men at home and indoors. However, workplaces were diversified, as women took to the streets to make a living while household work also brought women outside their homes, as Bob Pierik has recently shown.[23] Combined with the numerical overrepresentation of women in the urban population, this must have contributed to the ubiquity of women on the streets.

16 Schmidt, 'Labour Ideologies', 67.
17 Schmidt, 'Labour Ideologies', 61.
18 Van Wijngaarden, *Zorg voor de kost*; Van der Vlis, *Leven in armoede.*
19 Van Wijngaarden, *Zorg voor de kost*, 65; Otgaar, '"Wie niet werkt…"', 27-58.
20 Helmers, *Gescheurde bedden*, 302, 376, 408. Such 'divorces' concerned a 'separation from bed and board' and were distinguished from formal divorces.
21 Higgs, 'Women, Occupations and Work'; Hill, 'Women, Work and the Census'; Humphries and Sarasúa, 'Off the Record'; Higgs and Wilkinson, 'Women, Occupations and Work'.
22 These minimums are percentages of all women and thus concern crude participation rates: Schmidt and Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Reconsidering the "First Male-Breadwinner Economy"', 77.
23 Pierik, *Urban Life on the Move*, 136, 176; Pierik, 'Where was women's work?'.

The high employment rate of women in the commercialised Dutch economy was linked to demographic factors. Not only was the income of many men too low to support a family, many women also had no husband to support them. Celibacy rates were high and historians have calculated that women outnumbered men with often only eighty to ninety men for every hundred women, and sometimes even less.[24] These unbalanced sex ratios, which affected urban labour markets, were most likely caused by gender-specific migration patterns, with women immigrating and men emigrating. The seafaring nature of the economy not only caused the departure of thousands of men of marriageable age, but also resulted in a large number of married women with no husbands ashore. An initial lack of historiographical focus on wives of East India Company seamen was based on the assumption that most sailors were not married because their income was too low to support a family. This was to ignore the fact that women and children also performed paid work. When historians began to pay attention to those left behind, the picture tilted: they found that many more seafarers were married than previously assumed. More generally, the broadening focus of maritime historians to include life ashore has raised awareness of women's place within maritime communities, and also their work, which was often closely linked to the maritime economy.[25]

Patterns of Women's Work

Initially, research on women's work focused on typical female occupations, providing valuable information on, amongst others, midwives, fishwives, domestic servants, sellers of second-hand clothes and goods, and prostitutes.[26] Historians also examined the effects of changing organisational structures to test, confirm, nuance, or refute the decline thesis according to which work options for women deteriorated.[27] Studies on poor relief demonstrated that charity was not enough to live on, and stimulated research into the work of women in the poorest strata of urban society.[28] Later, research extended to women and gendered work patterns in different sectors of the urban economies.[29] All in all, this

24 On sex ratios, see Van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams hoerdom*; Van der Woude, 'Sex Ratio and Female Labour Participation'.

25 Van der Heijden, 'Achterblijvers'; Van den Heuvel, *'Bij uijtlandigheijt van haar man'*; Van der Heijden and Van den Heuvel, 'Sailors' families'; De Wit, *Leven, werken en geloven*, 137-177; Erickson and Schmidt, 'Migration', 171-181.

26 Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, 'Van priseersters tot prostituées'; Harmsen and Hubers, 'En zij verkocht de vis…'; Van der Borg, *Vroedvrouwen*; Carlson, *Domestic Service*; Van Wijngaarden, 'Barber Jacobs en andere uitdraagsters'; Van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams hoerdom*.

27 Howell, *Women, Production and Patriarchy*; Quast, 'Vrouwen in gilden'; Kloek, *Wie hij zij, man of wijf*, 48-77.

28 Van Wijngaarden, *Zorg voor de kost*; Van der Vlis, *Leven in armoede*.

29 The research carried out by Van Nederveen Meerkerk, Van den Heuvel, Van Dekken, and Schmidt has focussed on women, gender, and work in the textile sector, on female traders, women's work in the drink industry, and on women in social services: Van Nederveen Meerkerk, *De draad in eigen handen*; Van den Heuvel, *Women and Entrepreneurship*; Van Dekken, *Brouwen, branden en bedienen*; Schmidt, 'Managing a large household'; Van der Heijden and Schmidt, 'Public Services and Women's Work'; Schmidt, 'Women and Guilds'.

provided a mass of data from which determinants and patterns pertaining to women, gender, and work could be discerned.

The commercialised Dutch cities with their differentiated occupational structures provided ample work for women, but the urban labour market was characterised by strong social and gender segregation. Women's work was often poorly paid and low- or unskilled. Women were more likely to be found in less capital-intensive businesses and on the margins of formal structures than men. However, these characteristics of women's work were relative to those of men in similar positions or in the same economic branches: women could in fact run large businesses or hold positions of authority. Employment patterns varied widely for different groups of women, with marital, social, and economic status – the latter pairing in terms of wealth and geographical origin – being important determinants.

It has been shown that the textile industry and clothing trades, retail trade, and domestic services in general were, and remained, the economic branches employing the largest number of women in the early modern urban economies. The rapidly developing export industries such as textiles, pipe making, and cotton printing, but also brick making, salt refining, or peat distribution also relied heavily on women's labour.[30] The effects of professionalisation and the ongoing bureaucratisation of the public service sector were not found to be unambiguous. According to some historians, these developments narrowed work options for women.[31] However, in Dutch cities, this bureaucratisation also led to the growth and further differentiation in the variety of services that cities offered its inhabitants, which broadened work options for women as well as men. Women found work in health or care provisions, education, and charitable institutions, as overseers of markets, or in construction and the maintenance of public works.[32] Women's work in retail positions also expanded over time. Changes in consumer demand and the introduction of new luxury goods and consumables broadened employment opportunities for women. Colonial wares such as coffee, tea, and chocolate opened new retail opportunities for women, while new fashion trends provided work for growing numbers of seamstresses, knitters, and lacemakers, as well as retailers in fashionable items.[33]

Explaining Patterns of Women's Work

There has been much debate about why women did the work they did. Economic trends, changes in the organisation of production, capital and human capital requirements, technological and biological factors, institutions like guilds, and local governments as well as cultural (and specifically gender) norms were among the factors of influence. And, as shown above, developments related to the process of urbanisation like commercialisation

30 Van der Heijden, Van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Schmidt, 'De terugkeer van het patriarchaat?', 43-45.
31 Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 79, 189-190; Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work*, 63; Vanja, 'Auf Geheiß der Vögtin'.
32 Van der Heijden and Schmidt, 'Public Services and Women's Work', 368-385.
33 Van den Heuvel, *Women and Entrepreneurship*, 177-222; Van Aert and Van den Heuvel, 'Sekse als sleutel tot succes?'; Van den Heuvel and Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Huishoudens, werk en consumptieveranderingen'.

and bureaucratisation could cause changes in the work options for women. Some factors outweighed others while some intertwined, but none were exclusive and exceptions can always be found. The suggestion, for example, that physical characteristics made women more suitable for spinning work seems to be primarily ideologically motivated and cannot be separated from socio-cultural norms.[34] The female spinner with 'nimble fingers' can be contrasted with women who did physically demanding work as barge hunters, or as diamond mill turners in the period before this work was taken over by horses in the nineteenth century.[35]

Moreover, research has shown that the impact of different factors varied for different groups of women, depending on social status, marital status, and wealth. For instance, the emergence of capitalist labour relations led to a decline in traditional craft production and the increase of wage labour. While many widows thus lost the opportunity to run the family business, opportunities for women to enter the labour market independently (i.e., not through family relations) increased, as they became wage labourers, providing unmarried women easier access to paid work.[36] Another example is that for the impact of work location, a woman's social status was more important than her marital status. The public character of work in food markets was not restrictive for women stallholders, even if they cared for small children.[37] Things were different for wealthy female merchants, as Danielle van den Heuvel has demonstrated. The rise of the proportion of women involved in high-profile commercial enterprise coincided with organisational changes in the structure of international commerce, and probably not by accident. The change towards commission trade facilitated work in the background, from an office at home, instead of places where the women from these social classes were not supposed to go.[38]

Women's vulnerable position in the labour market was reflected in their low wages. Was this the result of gender discrimination, or was it caused by differences in productivity due to women's lower upper body strength, responsibilities for reproductive tasks, or lower investment in education? So far, there is little evidence to support the neoclassical explanation that women's wages were determined by supply and demand in a free labour market. Rather, the gendered segregation of the labour market limited women's access to better-paid occupations.[39] This can also be observed in the differentiation and growing hierarchy of jobs in orphanages, which resulted in the growth of the wage gap, with administrative tasks and crafts being better paid than domestic work. The *binnenmoeder* who ran the orphanage and the orphanage seamstress were always paid less than their male counterparts, the *binnenvader* and the tailor.[40] Even in the case of the seemingly equal payment of piece rates, it was eventually the sexual division in the labour market that resulted in a wage gap between women and men, as Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk has shown. Research on spinners' wages showed that while women and men received equal

34 Van Nederveen Meerkerk, *De draad in eigen handen*, 313-314.
35 Everard, 'Verandering en continuïteit in de arbeid van vrouwen', 82, 96-97.
36 Schmidt, 'The profits of unpaid work', 303-306.
37 Van den Heuvel, *Women and Entrepreneurship*, 123-131, 273-274.
38 Van den Heuvel, *Women and Entrepreneurship*, 263.
39 For a discussion, see Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Market wage or discrimination?'.
40 Schmidt, 'Managing a large household', 50-51.

piecework rates, women's limited access to the better-paid textile branches inhibited their earning capacity.[41]

Women's engagement in self-employed work was also more precarious. They were more often active in trades that required lower capital investments than men.[42] The register of the Leiden liquor sellers, for example, shows that unmarried women were more likely to work as liquor-sellers than as wealthier publicans or innkeepers.[43] This is surprising, as Dutch inheritance law was rather egalitarian and parents usually bequeathed sons and daughters portions of equal value. Thus, sons and daughters had equal access to capital, which was required to start a business. Sons, however, were the privileged heirs of their father's workshops, and poverty among single women was high. However, lack of capital among women is just part of the explanation for the underrepresentation of women among the wealthier entrepreneurs. Some capital-intensive trades were conducted in the name of a man, but owned by a married couple that could pool their capital.[44] The underrepresentation of women among the publicans was not only because women did not have the money for an expensive taproom, but because all unmarried people had less capital. Both gender and marital status made the difference here.

Institutions played an important role in the organisation of the labour market and contributed to its segmentation. To what extent and how guilds restricted women's work is subject to debate. In line with the revisionist interpretation of guilds, the relationship of women to corporations has also been reassessed.[45] Some historians emphasise that guilds tried to restrict women's work in all respects.[46] Others point at regional differences and at variations in the incorporation of women by guilds.[47] A categorisation of different types of guilds can be made: next to guilds that excluded women completely (mainly in the transport sector), there were guilds that only allowed widows of guild members by granting them the right to continue the workshop, most typically in craft guilds. This so-called 'widows' right' explains why widows can be found in a much wider array of occupations in crafts and trades than not-yet married or married women. In many cases the widows had also worked in the business before, cooperating with their husbands, but it was only after the death of their spouses that they acquired the position of authority associated with head-of-family status in the early modern era. Mixed gender guilds organised occupations accessible to men with occupations accessible to both sexes, such as the book printers' guild that included male printers (and their widows) and male and female booksellers. Finally, there were mixed-sex guilds, to be found mainly in the sector of retail trade.[48]

41 Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Market wage or discrimination?'.
42 Van Dekken, *Brouwen, branden en bedienen*, 193-194; Van Aert, *Tot leven of overleven?*, 83-186.
43 Van Dekken, *Brouwen, branden en bedienen*, 183-184.
44 Van Dekken, *Brouwen, branden en bedienen*, 193-194.
45 Crowston, 'Women, Gender and Guilds'.
46 Ogilvie, *The European Guilds*, 232-306.
47 Crowston, 'Women, Gender and Guilds', 44; Panhuysen, *Maatwerk*, 229-238; Deceulaer and Panhuysen, 'Dressed to Work'.
48 Schmidt, 'Women and Guilds'. The only example of an all-women's guild is that of the female hacklers in Gouda, which occasionally also admitted men.

This categorisation shows that the guild status of men and women was unequal. Guilds were patriarchal organisations which excluded most women, as well as many men. Moreover, there is evidence that guild regulation had gendered implications and disadvantaged women indirectly. High entry fees and citizenship requirements, for instance, hit women particularly hard.[49] At the same time, the gender division of labour in guilds resembled the division in non-guilded sectors. Guilds were patriarchal institutions, excluding women from boards, often from membership, but not always from work.[50] Guilds were not monolithic institutions, however, and their regulations changed over time, and not always involving an unequivocal decrease in opportunities. Sometimes regulation was applied with flexibility and adapted to changing economic circumstances. Geographical differences existed, even between different cities in the Low Countries.[51]

The flexible application of gender norms by institutions had important consequences. Both guilds and local governments, for that matter, allowed individual and occasional exceptions to strict gender norms, adjusted regulations, and in some cases allowed increased leeway for women. These sometimes remarkably pragmatic policies enabled women to earn a living but also encouraged commercial continuity, which was important for the local economy. The greater flexibility thus applied to women's work also had important, and wide, economic implications.

Wider Implications of Women's Work

Over the last decades, scholars have shifted their focus to the impact of gender relations on economic development. This approach provides promising avenues for future research. In 2003, Sheilagh Ogilvie suggested it was no coincidence that in those areas in which women's economic activities were less restricted by institutional obstacles and where they could participate in the market economy on a larger scale than elsewhere – the Netherlands and England, for example – women achieved exceptionally high living standards. This, she continued, appears 'to have been an important factor to the "industrious revolution" beginning in north-west Europe in the later seventeenth century'.[52] This concept attributed much significance to the economic role of women. According to De Vries, during this Industrious Revolution that preceded the Industrial Revolution, household members, and especially women and children, reallocated their time from leisure and non-market work to market work to expand their purchasing power. Driven by consumer preferences, the increase of labour market participation led to the increase of supply and demand of market commodities, thereby laying the foundation for economic growth in the period before industrialisation.[53]

49 Van den Heuvel, 'Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women', 129.
50 With the exception of seamstresses in some guilds: Panhuysen, *Maatwerk*.
51 Schmidt, 'Women and Guilds'; Wyffels, *Women and Work*, 230-233; Vandeweerdt, '"Van den vleeschouweren oft pensvrouwen"'; Vandeweerdt, 'Women, Town Councils, and the Organisation of Work'.
52 Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living*, 347-352, esp. 352.
53 De Vries, 'The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution'; De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*.

In addition, the 'girl power' thesis developed by Tine de Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden, and more recently further elaborated in their publication *Capital women* co-authored by Sarah Carmichael, linked gender relations to economic performance.[54] They relate the emergence of the European Marriage Pattern (EMP) in the late Middle Ages to the economic success of the North Sea region, which eventually led to the Industrial Revolution. The marriage system was based on consensus, neo-locality, and family structures distinct from those in Southern Europe, and enhanced the bargaining power of women and stimulated labour market participation and human capital formation, in particular in England and the Netherlands. Thus, the authors attribute women a fundamental role in the development of Western Europe and the Little Divergence.

Both the Industrious Revolution and the girl power thesis provoked lively debates.[55] In both cases, there was critique of the positive depiction of the position of women (and their families) and on the presentation of various phenomena as typically or even exclusively West-European. Some historians suggested that the increased labour market participation of women and children was influenced by economic hardship rather than by consumer preferences. As for the girl power thesis, evidence demonstrated that family structures in Europe were significantly more diverse than suggested by Hajnal's European Marriage Pattern (EMP). The criticism that no statistical link could be established between the EMP and economic growth was refuted by the authors and led to a more fundamental discussion on how the EMP should be perceived.[56] Additionally, historians focusing on England questioned the assumed agency of women and the degree to which they benefited from the expanding high-wage economy, whereas historians studying Southern Europe demonstrated that work opportunities for women in that region were not significantly different from those in Northwestern Europe.[57] It seems that the debate has not yet reached its conclusion. Nevertheless, theories linking gender relations and economic development have influenced the research agenda regarding women's economic activities in the Dutch Republic, the North Sea region, and beyond.

The focus on how gender relations influence large-scale economic transformations – rather than the other way around – has made women's work in the past more visible and meaningful, while also encouraging research on female agency. The definition of the concept as well as its operationalisation in the early modern period has been the subject of much debate. It is important 'to be attentive to all the complexities that surround this concept', as Martha Howell has emphasised.[58] To understand economic developments in the past, it is fruitful to look at the ways in which and under what circumstances 'women

54 De Moor and Van Zanden, 'Girlpower'; Van Zanden, De Moor, and Carmichael, *Capital Women*.

55 For a concise overview of the debate and critiques on the theories of the Industious Revolution and girl power, see also Hunt and Shepard, 'Introduction', 14-16.

56 Dennison and Ogilvie, 'Does the European Marriage Pattern Explain Economic Growth?'; Carmichael, De Pleijt, Van Zanden, and De Moor, 'The European Marriage Pattern and Its Measurement'.

57 Humphries and Weisdorf, 'The Wages of Women in England'; Bennett,' Wretched Girls'; Zucca Micheletto, 'Reconsidering the Southern Europe Model'.

58 Howell, 'The Problem of Women's Agency', 31.

were able to rise above their restrictive situations'.[59] This requires a differentiated view, as the extent to which women were able to 'make meaningful decisions about their life course' varied for different groups.[60] To fully understand the relation between gender and economic performance, this differentiation should be pushed further, as agency is about more than a male/female binary.

Both in the debate on the impact of gender relations on economic development and growth and in the discussion of women's agency, consideration of the role of imperialism and slavery is crucial. We require a more systematic integration of recent research findings on this topic. The increased attention for the various forms of forced labour and slavery in the Dutch global economy has put the development and functioning of free markets in relation to the success of the economy of the Dutch Republic in a different perspective.[61] Historians have assessed the slave trade, plantation production, and slave-based activities as being of significant importance to the economy of the Dutch Republic.[62]

Women's economic activities in colonial contexts and in relation to slavery have not escaped attention. The historiography on this subject is broad and diverse, exploring the productive and reproductive labour of women from various backgrounds.[63] It encompasses the work of enslaved women in the colonies, of women as owners of or investors in slave plantations or other colonial enterprises, and women's roles in the formation of colonial communities and networks that built the early modern Dutch empire. More recently, historians have also begun to examine the experiences of unfree women in Dutch cities. Mark Ponte's research on the black Afro-Atlantic community in seventeenth-century Amsterdam revealed that women, often with a background in slavery, engaged in typical migrant occupations such as servant or charwoman. Many of these women were probably held in slavery, despite it being prohibited by local law.[64] These findings underline the need for differentiation between various groups of women in the discussions about female agency and its implications for the early modern Dutch economy. Slavery deprived people of agency. The critical role of forced labour in the Dutch empire contrasts with a positive evaluation of the agency of women. Only by recognising the intricate web of identities is it possible to understand the wider implications of the economic roles of women in the early modern Dutch economy.

Conclusion

What do we need to push women to the centre of the field, and to develop a more differentiated, layered perspective of women as agents in economic history? As this

59 Montenach and Simonton, 'Introduction', 4.

60 Van Zanden, De Moor, and Carmichael, *Capital women*, 3.

61 Fatah-Black and Van Rossum, 'Slavery in a "Slave Free Enclave"?'.

62 Brandon and Bosma, 'De betekenis van de Atlantische slavernij'; Van Rossum and Fatah-Black, 'Wat is winst?'.

63 For an extensive discussion of the literature of women in Dutch colonial contexts, see the contribution by Zijlstra to this special issue.

64 Ponte, '"Al de swarten die hier ter stede comen"', 47; Haarnack, Hondius, and Kolfin, '"Swart" in Nederland' 92.

essay has shown, the focus on the impact of gender relations on large-scale economic transformations – rather than vice versa – has made knowledge of women's work even more relevant. A better understanding of women's contribution to and impact of gender relations on economic development, however, requires further diversification in several respects – thematically, conceptually, and methodologically.

Thematically, this understanding requires a broadening of the geographical scope. More systematic comparative research with other regions in the Low Countries, Europe, and the world can place the relation between the success of the Dutch Republic and women's economic roles in perspective, deepening our knowledge about the effect of gender relations and economic performance in different phases of economic development.

Second, part of this geographical expansion is the need for a stronger focus on women's work in colonial contexts. Building on the valuable research that has been conducted, knowledge about the work of women overseas, in the Dutch Republic, and in the connections between the two should be given a place in the larger narrative concerning the economic importance of colonialism and slave-based activities. Recent studies published on the impact of the slave trade and other colonialist activities on the history of various Dutch cities provide helpful leads to further analyse the entanglements and dependencies of local and colonial activities of women of different social strata, in different parts of the world.[65]

A third theme related to geographical scope that also requires further differentiation is labour migration. Commercialised and differentiated urban labour markets attracted newcomers, both men and women. Migration had a significant economic impact on both host societies and home countries, and brought about shifts in economic and occupational structures. Research on labour migration has focused mainly on men, however, whose strong occupational identity made them relatively easy to identify and quantify. This focus on occupations means that female migrants and the impact of their mobility are easily overlooked. It also explains why the young domestic servant is typically represented as a female migrant, as domestic servants are easy to identify in the sources. However, this representation does not do justice to the diversity among female migrants or to their work, as has been argued recently.[66] A focus on labour migration from a gender perspective can also deepen our knowledge of the role women played in the integration of rural and urban economies. Variations in employment opportunities had an impact on the (dis)incentives to migrate to nearby cities, as well as the age at which female migrants decided to move.[67]

These observations also imply the need to differentiate and diversify the concept of 'work'. Occupations are not the most suitable approach to early modern women's work. Many people depended on multiple sources of income in the early modern period. Olwen

65 Brandon, Jones, Jouwe, and Van Rossum (eds.), *De slavernij in Oost en West*; Oostindie (ed.), *Het koloniale verleden van Rotterdam*; Jouwe, Kuipers, and Raben (eds.), *Slavernij en de stad Utrecht*; Captain, Oostindie, and Smeulders (eds.), *Het koloniale en slavernijverleden van Hofstad Den Haag*; Jouwe, Verhoeven, and Van der Vlis, *Rapport slavernijverleden van Delft*; Hoefte et al., *Koloniaal Haarlem*; Ramackers et al., *Vooronderzoek*.

66 Erickson and Schmidt, 'Migration', 167-169.

67 De Langhe, 'Rural Single Female Migrants'; De Langhe, *Oude vrijsters*.

Hufton's concept of an 'economy of makeshifts' has been applied successfully in research in relation to the precarious work of poor women, who combined different strategies to survive.[68] The concept of 'pluriactivity' is most commonly used to describe the combination of different economic activities in rural areas, and perhaps for that reason has hitherto been used less often in research in the Low Countries, which has focused largely on urban economies.[69] Nevertheless, the concept can also be illuminating in an urban context. References to dual occupations in the sources may indicate deliberate economic strategies. In-depth research into book printers' companies, for example, has demonstrated that wives of high-end craftsmen like printers also combined different economic activities. They worked both inside and outside of the family firm, depending on the economic needs of the business, thereby contributing to the spreading of risk and the increase in resilience.[70]

Yet the focus on remunerated work is too narrow if we aim to understand the functioning of the early modern economy. 'Any definition of work that ignores the blood, sweat and toil of the workers and focuses only on limited evidence of paid work, is an impoverished intellectual tool for economies in the past', as Hunt and Shepard aptly concluded in the introduction of the recently published volume on the early modern history of gender and work, *The Whole Economy*.[71] In addition to the above-mentioned limitations of the sources and problems with quantifying women's work, there is also a broader problem relating to its conceptualisation. Economists and economic historians alike tend to prioritise work that was paid and occupation-based. For example, the unpaid care that women provided to children, the elderly, and the sick is usually not considered work or counted as production, unlike the care provided by women on a 'professional basis', as an occupation, or in specialised and commercialised economies, even though their actual tasks were more or less the same.[72] A similar situation applies to the difference in the work of wives who worked unpaid for the market from within the family business and women wage workers who performed the same tasks for pay. Here, it was not the actual activity, but rather the labour relation that made a difference. To accurately assess the significance of women's economic activities we should look at different labour relations and how these evolved over time. A broader conceptualisation of work implies more attention for reproductive labour, multiple sources of income, and changes in labour relations. Revealing information about different categories of work requires new methodologies. Here, the time-use approach, which looks at how people allocate their time during the day, and the verb-oriented method, which documents the descriptions of people at work, can both be useful.[73]

68 Van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams hoerdom*, 343; Van Wijngaanden, *Zorg voor de kost*; Helmers, *Gescheurde bedden*, 376; De Groot, Devos, and Schmidt (eds.), *Single Life and the City*.

69 Ågren, 'Households', 26, and 34-35, also advocates paying attention to the combination of multiple sources of income in urban contexts.

70 Wyffels, *Women and Work*.

71 Hunt and Shepard, 'Introduction', 24; See also Sarti, Bellavitis, and Martini, 'Introduction'.

72 Shepard, 'Care'.

73 Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living*; Fiebranz et al., 'Making Verbs Count'; Ågren (ed.), *Making a Living*; Whittle and Hailwood, 'The Gender Division of Labour'.

Work experiences varied for different for groups of women, but the way in which these differences took shape changed over time. Historicising categories such as gender (both male and female), social status, ethnicity, citizenship, marital status, and age should thus provide a better understanding of whether and in what ways the significance of these categories changed as factors influencing the work of early modern women. To push women to the centre of the field, however, it is, paradoxically, important to pay attention not only to women, but to consider their activities in the broader context of economic history. The question of the explanatory power of gender in economic history makes research on the work and agency of different groups of women urgent for understanding broader economic developments.

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