Women in Early Modern Dutch Maritime and Colonial Worlds: Historiographical Currents and New Perspectives

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Abstract

In the past decades, historians have taken great strides in uncovering the central position of women in Dutch maritime and colonial contexts. Emphasis is shifting, however, from a focus on maritime women in the Dutch Republic and women who were part of the colonial elites towards marginalised African, Asian, and Indigenous women in Dutch colonies and the Dutch Republic itself. Large digitisation projects are increasing the possibilities of further extracting their underrepresented perspectives from written documents, although this leads to new methodological challenges. Great care needs to be taken to not amplify biases already existing in the sources, and an awareness newly created bias by selections made when digitising is crucial. Moreover, the limitations of the written documents emphasise the importance of employing other types of sources. The future of scholarship on women in Dutch maritime and colonial worlds needs to include more object-based approaches, and quantitative patterns must be more closely explored through qualitative, interdisciplinary analysis. Various topics can be further studied to centre women in early modern colonial and maritime scholarship, including (family) networks, cross-generational patterns in family histories, strategies of survival and resistance, emotions and sexuality in empire-building, and gendered divisions in global labour and production.

Keywords: maritime history, colonial history, maritime women, intersectionality, digitisation, material culture

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In 1683, a ship sailed from Middelburg to the river Suriname on the northern coast of South America, where the Dutch occupied a plantation colony.[1] The ship carried soldiers, some passengers, and a lot of supplies. The 166 travellers on board included 10 women and 8 children. When the ship approached the island of Santiago (Cape Verde) on the evening of 16 October, one of the passengers, Ms. Vollenhove, gave birth to a daughter. A member of the military, Lieutenant Johan Ferleman, kept a journal in which he noted for that particular night that this birth 'hindered our cabin not a little'.[2] One can imagine how, in such cramped quarters, many could hear the screams of this woman in labour.[3] Ferleman felt inconvenienced, and did not note how essential women and the children they bore were to the Dutch effort to further consolidate power in their occupied overseas territories. The Dutch government had been encouraging men to migrate from Europe to Suriname with their households, and by 1684, 28 percent of the 652 European inhabitants of the colony were women. Of the 3,226 enslaved Africans, 43 percent were women, and of the 106 enslaved Indigenous people fully 63 percent were women.[4] Historians in the past have, however, given little thought to the role of women in maritime and colonial societies. With (mostly male) historians and collectors focusing on battles, admirals, and those who

1 This publication is part of the project *Met vrouwen in zee. De representatie van vrouwen in maritieme schilderkunst* (NWO file no. 333.22.002) of the research programme Muzeumbeurzen, which is (partly) financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO). I would like to thank the editors of this special issue, the anonymous reviewers, the other authors, and Michiel van Groesen, Deborah Hamer, Erin Kramer, Nicole Maskiell, and Andrea Mosterman for their valuable comments on previous versions of this article.

2 Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BPL 1815, Johan Ferleman, Journaal van mijn Reyse gedaan naar Zurriname, 2 September 1683-14 April 1684, fol. 6r: 'onse cajuijt niet weijnig belemmerden'.

3 Sarah Lentz notes that, apart from their death, the presence of children on board is recorded most often when they are born, emphasising the public nature of deliveries on board: Lentz, 'Overlooked inhabitants', 37.

4 These numbers only include adults: Enthoven, 'Suriname and Zeeland', 255. For years, the government of Zeeland had been trying to attract settlers from Europe, encouraging men to come with their families: Middelburg, Zeeuws Archief, Staten van Zeeland 1580.1, Publications, *Vrydom voor de gene die met hare persoonen, huysgesinnen en gevolgh, naer Suriname gaen*, 6 July 1668; and *Waerschowinghe*, 9 July 1669. On women in seventeenth-century Suriname, see Zijlstra, 'Migratie, kolonisatie en genderverhoudingen'.

governed the companies, the Dutch colonial and maritime world long seemed to be one made up of elite European men.[5]

Since the 1980s, colonial and maritime scholars have shown how studying the roles of women of all backgrounds is crucial to understanding Dutch maritime and colonial contexts. A maritime city like Amsterdam had many more female than male inhabitants, as many men were off at sea or living overseas. This had implications for the limitations women faced, the opportunities they had, and the character of urban life.[6] The European colonial settler population consisted mostly of men, impacting relations far beyond the European population.[7] And although many Dutch ships had only few women on board (if any), which has contributed to the notion that these ships were masculine spaces, this understanding changes when one includes ships that transported enslaved people – among whom there were many female captives.

This article traces the main historiographical developments regarding women in the Dutch maritime and colonial world, and points towards potential future scholarly paths throughout this exploration. A central question in this historiography is the extent to which Dutch maritime and colonial contexts offered women freedom or limitations that they would otherwise not have experienced. Important challenges include the scarcity and biased perspective of most primary sources, the fact that relevant sources have been destroyed, and that those that have survived are held in archives across the world, with varying degrees of accessibility.[8] While life at sea and in the occupied territories outside of the Republic have long been seen as separate from the history of the Dutch Republic itself, this article builds on more recent insights regarding the interconnectedness of life in the Republic and the world outside of Europe.[9] Starting with research on maritime women in the Dutch Republic, it then turns to historiography of women at sea, before concluding with scholarship of women in Dutch colonial contexts.

This article discusses how, after innovative research has been done on white women's socio-economic position in the Dutch Republic, scholars are increasingly turning their attention to women of colour in the Dutch colonies, many of whom lived in slavery. While highlighting developments in digital analytical tools that can be employed to further uncover their underrepresented perspectives, it emphasises the importance of combining digitally generated quantitative assessments with a rigorous and critical qualitative approach. It advocates employing lenses of analysis that help to push women to the centre of scholarship, including family network approaches. The limitations of written sources

5 Davids, 'Van loser tot wonderkind', 17-19, points out that in the 1970s historians turned from political and diplomatic history ('with their excessive attention to great men and big events') to more systematic, quantitative research, which led to growing attention for the lives of soldiers and sailors.

6 Van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams hoerdom*, 106-111.

7 Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia*.

8 On the destruction of a large part of the WIC archive, see: Enthoven and Den Heijer, 'Nederland en de Atlantische wereld', 160.

9 Allen et al. (eds.), *Staat en slavernij*; Brandon et al (eds.), *De slavernij in Oost en West*; Hondius et al., *Gids slavernijverleden Nederland*; Hondius et al., *Gids slavernijverleden Amsterdam*.

furthermore demand a more interdisciplinary point of view, in which objects play a crucial role in uncovering new perspectives on women in Dutch maritime and colonial worlds.

Women Ashore in the Dutch Republic

The most visible Dutch maritime women are those of relatively high standing, as depicted in (pendant) portraits.[10] These women acquired prominence in maritime businesses through their husbands' position, most famously Anna van Gelder, who as wife of Admiral Michiel de Ruyter led the provisioning of his ships and managed the finances.[11] While such elite women are relatively well known, the variety of roles occupied by women in Dutch maritime communities has only become much clearer in the past decades. Scholars have gained understanding of their prominence in a wide range of maritime businesses, the economic hardships faced by women married to sailors or soldiers while their husbands were at sea, and the emotional lives of those with families abroad.

Historians used to think that most sailors did not earn enough to keep a family, but in fact many women in cities like Amsterdam were married to sailors and earned a living themselves in maritime-related business, including sex work, inn-keeping, and money-lending to sailors and soldiers about to embark.[12] These moneylenders used to have a negative reputation of tricking sailors into high debts and charging enormous interest rates. More recently, Christiaan van Bochove and Ton van Velzen have demonstrated that these women and men generally charged reasonable interest rates and only made 'modest returns', since the chances of repayment were relatively low, given the high number of deaths at sea and in Asia.[13] Manon van der Heijden and Danielle van den Heuvel have further delved into the position of the women whose husbands were away for years while employed by the Dutch East India Company (VOC). While these women could receive part of their husbands' annual wages, they had to earn income themselves to survive. Even then, they often had to rely on support from charities as well.[14] It is not surprising that women were involved in public protests for payment of sailors' wages.[15]

For smaller maritime communities, Annette de Wit has shown that women's importance to maritime economies was not limited to the large port cities. In practice, at least half of the fishing community households of Ter Heijde and Maassluis were managed by women, as their husbands either spent most of their time at sea or had fallen victim to it.

10 See examples in Kloek, 'Women of a Seafaring Nation'. For women in the Dutch Asia context, see Taylor, 'Painted Ladies'.

11 Van Kranendonk, 'Anna van Gelder'. See for other examples: Bruijn and Van Eijck van Heslinga, 'Aan "wijffje lief"'; Bleeker, 'Constantia Bloemaert'; De Wit, 'Kapiteinsvrouwen'; Ruiter, 'The Wind in his Sails'.

12 Van Alphen, 'The Female Side of Dutch Shipping', 128; Van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams hoerdom*, 145; Ketting, *Leven, werk en rebellie*, 52-54.

13 Van Bochove and Van Velzen, 'Loans to Salaried Employees', 30-31.

14 Van der Heijden, 'Achterblijvers'; Van den Heuvel, *'Bij uijtlandigheijt van haar man'*; Van der Heijden and Van den Heuvel, 'Sailors' Families'; Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, 'Invloed van de VOC', 100-101. On the legal status of widows and of women whose husbands were away for a long time, see Schmidt, *Overleven na de dood*, 61-74.

15 Dekker, 'Labour Conflicts', 406-407. Thanks to Joris van den Tol for this reference.

By getting power of attorney over their husbands, women could trade independently. The social economic circles they could enter were related to their husbands' position. Women worked in various businesses, including the mending of nets, inspecting fishing gear (the so-called *keurvrouwen*), and trading in fish, while some even owned (parts of) a ship, often through inheritance. In both these smaller towns as well as in cities like Amsterdam, women ran inns and supplied ships. Men and women in maritime households depended upon one another, not only economically but also socially and culturally.[16]

Whereas this scholarship has emphasised the social and economic positions of these Dutch women, in the past twenty years we have learned a great deal more about their personal lives, thanks to the renewed attention paid to the Prize Papers in the National Archive in Kew. In the 1980s, maritime historian S.W.P.C. Braunius first published on the Dutch letters in this collection, which include some 40,000 letters written to and from the Dutch Republic taken from ships captured by English privateers during wars with the Dutch.[17] Through these letters, scholars have gained new insight in the personal lives of friends and family members of European men at sea, of Europeans who moved overseas to live in colonial territories, and of men and (much more rarely) women writing while they were at sea.[18] Women and men exchanged information about their loved ones, including their children, about daily events, news, but also their frustrations and sadness about being apart for so long. While the correspondents followed certain letter-writing conventions, sometimes using a professional scrivener, they still offer us a personal view on the ways Dutch women were an integral part of the maritime world, and their perspectives on the hardships they faced when taking care of their family on their own.[19]

Most women in Amsterdam were European, but people from Asia, Africa, and the Americas travelled to the Dutch Republic, some of whom remained, spending their lives there. They were not always there by choice. The few elite European women who travelled from the colonies to the Dutch Republic brought female (enslaved) servants with them. Susanah van Bengalen, for instance, sailed to Amsterdam in the eighteenth century, having been taken on board to wait on governor Swellengrebel's daughters during their voyage. Susanah later travelled back to the Cape, possibly because the Swellengrebels could not officially hold people enslaved in the Republic itself.[20] Others who travelled to the Dutch Republic formed more permanent communities, such as the close-knit community of Black men and women in Amsterdam, as Mark Ponte has shown. A large majority of the Black men who married were free sailors, and the women they married were often employed as servants, some of them while being kept in slavery (although this was against Dutch law). Ponte demonstrates how a number of women played a particularly central role in the communities of African and Afro-Brazilian descent.[21] We are only beginning to

16 De Wit, 'Zeemansvrouwen aan het werk'; De Wit, *Leven, werken en geloven*.

17 Braunius, 'Het leven van de zeventiende-eeuwse zeeman'.

18 On such a rare example: Schwartz, *Annetje Wittebol*.

19 Moree (ed.), *Kikkertje lief*; Van Vliet, *Een 'vriendelijcke groetenisse'*; Van Gelder, *Zeepost*; Van der Wal et al., *De voortvarende zeemansvrouw*; Rutten and Van der Wal, *Letters as Loot*; Zijlstra, 'Corresponderen om te overleven'; Brouwer, *Levenstekens*.

20 Barend-van Haeften, *Op reis met de VOC*, 15.

21 Ponte, '"Al de swarten die hier ter stede comen"'.

understand more about the lives of those women and men of colour who, either by choice or by coercion, found themselves living in the Dutch Republic; further research into these people will be crucial to uncover new perspectives on power relations – including those on the intersection of race and gender – in a maritime and colonial context.[22]

Following the progressive digitisation of Amsterdam's vast notarial archive from 2016 onwards, a wealth of information about these diverse maritime communities, and the role of women within them, has become more readily accessible.[23] Civil registers and notarial archives hold more than individual stories, and make it possible to reconstruct social networks and interactions of underrepresented groups.[24] A large indexing project of the digitised Amsterdam notarial archive, to which many volunteers contribute, and rapidly improving Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR), offer further opportunities for individual case studies, quantitative comparisons, network reconstruction, and geospatial analyses, as gender historians and maritime historians have begun to demonstrate.[25]

Digitisation projects hold enormous potential for the gaining of new insights into the roles of women in maritime colonial networks. Carrie Anderson and Marsely Kehoe, project leaders of the Dutch Textile Trade Project, have shown how large amounts of data from colonial archives can reveal previously invisible patterns, including the role of women in the colonial economy. For instance, using digital records between 1703 and 1724, they investigated the fate of the six hundred thousand or so bedsheets that were sold to the Dutch West India Company (WIC) for trade along the West African Coast. With data from WIC *facturen* (receipts) in which the merchant's name is recorded, they show that 60 percent of these bedsheets were sold by women. This high number does not even include the women who worked in the textile business together with their husband, or the unnamed suppliers.[26] Crucially, Anderson and Kehoe note how computational methods threaten to 'reinscribe the violent history of the documents themselves', emphasising the importance of careful interpretation and continued attention to the human agency behind the data. Moreover, Deborah Hamer has pointed out how colonial digitisation projects are government-funded and focused on company documents as 'precursors to modern states', posing the risk that these easily accessible online documents will become much more important in our understanding of colonial history than other, more local and undigitised, collections.[27] With important limitations such as these in mind, taking a 'distant view' on large amounts of data to uncover broader patterns can help formulate further quantitative and qualitative lines of inquiry into the role of women in the colonial economy.[28]

In addition to further unlocking the potential of written sources, future research on Dutch maritime women would, moreover, benefit from a more object-based approach.

22 See also Hondius, 'Black Africans'; Archangel et al., *Zwart in Rembrandts tijd*.
23 Reinders, 'De ontsluiting'. See also Den Oudsten, 'Waar ben jij nu thuis?'.
24 Ponte, '"Al de swarten die hier ter stede comen"', 38, 60.
25 Reinders, 'De ontsluiting', 198-199; Reinders, 'Een goudmijn'; De Boer en Den Oudsten, 'Zeeziek!'; De Boer, Negrón, and Den Oudsten, '"Good Evening, You Hag"'; Pierik, *Urban Life on the Move*.
26 Anderson and Kehoe, 'Textile Circulation', 14.
27 Hamer, 'New Netherland Documents', 12.
28 Anderson and Kehoe, 'Textile Circulation', 18.

Various museums have taken up the challenge to research the place of women in their own collections, including the ways in which they are represented in art and material culture, their roles in producing objects, and the ways in which women contributed to forming museum collections.[29] In general, women who are present in objects are often hard to find in collection databases, because of the limitations of many extant object descriptions made in the past. Irene Jacobs at the Maritime Museum in Rotterdam and myself at the National Maritime Museum in Amsterdam have moved beyond admiral's wives on pendant portraits by studying women in the collections of these museums.[30] Our aim is both to research the presence of women in museum's objects, and to make those maritime women already present in the museum's collections more visible through research output and exhibitions, and by making them better searchable in the digital collections. Research into museum and heritage collections is helping to uncover underrepresented perspectives, and making objects more accessible for scholarly research from a gender perspective.[31] This can further fuel research into the representation of women in maritime and colonial contexts, and encourage questions about their role in the production, commissioning, and the collection of maritime and colonial objects, moving scholarship to a more cultural point of view.

Women at Sea

While life for European maritime women in the Dutch Republic brought liberties alongside the challenge of being separated from their husbands, life at sea was likely much more restricting for those who did not disguise their gender. The famous song *Daar was laatst een meisje loos* relates the story of a young woman who dressed as a man to work at sea. Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van der Pol have identified almost one hundred cases in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of sailors and soldiers who were discovered to be women. More must have gone undetected. Some chose this life to follow a man at sea, others enlisted from a sense for adventure and freedom, and many saw it as a better option to escape poverty and earn a living. Yet others may have been transgender men looking to live a life truer to themselves.[32]

But as extraordinary as the lives of such sailors were, we can find more cases of European women travelling on board as passengers. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch colonial governments tried to attract women to the colonies to strengthen 'Dutch' society there.

29 The Rijksmuseum runs a large 'Vrouwen van het Rijksmuseum' project, https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/onderzoek/ons-onderzoek/overkoepelend/vrouwen (Accessed on 4 December 2024). At the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD), Evelien de Visser has executed a project on women in the Dutch art world, 'Vrouwen in de kunst. Handelaars en verzamelaars in Nederland, 1870-1914': 'Vrouwelijke handelaars en verzamelaars in Nederland in kaart gebracht'. Outside of the Netherlands, other museums are also applying a gender perspective on their collections, see for instance Daybell et al., 'Gendering Objects'.

30 Irene Jacobs at Maritiem Museum Rotterdam with the project 'Maritieme vrouwen' and Suze Zijlstra with the project 'Met vrouwen in zee' at Het Scheepvaartmuseum.

31 For investigations of diversity in museum collections, see also the 'Unlocking Collections' project led by Aaron Jaffer and executed at the Royal Museums Greenwich: 'Who is represented in our collections?'.

32 Dekker and Van de Pol, *Daar was laatst een meisje loos*, 59-87.

Initially the Dutch attempted to develop settler colonies, including colonisation of the Manhattan area (New Netherland) and parts of Brazil, plans to attract women and families to resettle in Suriname, and a programme designed to relocate women to Batavia in the early seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, while not abandoning colonisation altogether, governments made fewer efforts to stimulate migration from Europe. In Asia, after failed attempts to get women to migrate from Europe, in 1652 the VOC even officially forbade women from travelling between Europe and Asia. These restrictions on migration were loosened in 1669, but in practice only high-ranking men brought their wives and families from Europe.[33] The Dutch policies on European migration had an impact on the number of European women on ships sailing between the Dutch Republic and the colonies, but many still carried at least a few women on board.

Only some travel accounts, such as the journals of the sisters Lammens and Swellengrebel, give us insight into the experiences of elite women on board. From combatting sea sickness to day-to-day activities such as knitting, reading, talking, eating, and checking progress on the map each day at noon in the captain's cabin, the months at sea must have often felt uneventful. While they were privileged, with separate sleeping quarters at the back of the ship and a place at the captain's table where superior food was served, their journals give rare insights into the ways that women could experience life at sea.[34] Less privileged women – and men – would spend their time in other quarters on board, with much less privacy in a space that had little privacy to offer in the first place. Few sources tell of the way they spent their time at sea, but spatial analyses can help us gain further insight into women's lives on board.[35]

One of the more eventful voyages was that undertaken by Elisabeth van der Woude, who, having joined her father on a colonising expedition to the river Oyapock in South America, lost both him and two siblings, after which she decided to return to Europe. Unfortunately for her, the ship she chose for this next voyage was taken by privateers, though she remained unharmed. While her journal is short, its publication uncovers the rare perspective of a woman at sea who encountered yet more challenges along the way.[36] Marijke Barend-van Haeften shows that just like male authors, Elisabeth paid particular attention to dramatic events, but in doing so focused on those that concerned her and her family personally rather than the expedition in general. Her writing fits colonial discourse in other ways, such as her attention to her natural surroundings and her 'fearless and active' stance.[37] Such comparisons between writings of women and men, though rare given the available source materials, help us to discern how women experienced colonising endeavours and how their experiences fit into broader colonial narratives.

33 Hamer, 'Marriage and the Construction of Colonial Order', 629; Baay, *De njai*, 19.

34 Barend-van Haeften, *Op reis met de VOC*.

35 Hamer, *Women at Sea*.

36 Van der Woude, *Memorije*. See also Van den Broek and Jacobs (eds.), *Christenslaven*, in which Maria ter Meetelen's account is published of the time she travelled near Portugal and the ship she was on was taken by privateers. The passengers were enslaved and taken to Morocco, where Ter Meetelen lived in slavery for twelve years.

37 Barend-van Haeften, 'Een mislukte kolonisatie', 97.

Maritime archaeology also promises to provide new insights into gender relations on board ship. Within the Dutch geographic context, this has been possible mostly for ships with predominantly European crew and passengers. The discovery of a shipwreck near the island of Texel, from which divers have been able to take objects since 2014, yielded spectacular seventeenth-century objects including a well-preserved silk dress, knitted silk stockings, and toiletries. These objects pointed towards a wealthy household travelling on this ship. Studying the objects themselves, how they were transported or used on board, but also by recreating them – as has been done by volunteers who spent hundreds of hours knitting the silk stockings – can give new perspectives on women's lives.[38] Maritime finds do not have to be of such exceptional quality to reveal details of lives of women on board, however, as more ordinary objects can also be used to determine the presence of women on board, investigate the way they spent their time at sea, and explore the role of women in the production of these objects.[39]

Most women who spent time on Dutch ships, either in the Atlantic or the Indian Oceans, were there entirely against their will. Of the approximately 600,000 Africans who were captured and transported by force to the Americas on Dutch ships, an estimated 30 to 40 percent were women. In the late seventeenth century, the WIC strove for a two to one male-female gender ratio in purchasing enslaved people, though company agents did not always succeed in adhering to this ratio. Later on in the eighteenth century, the percentage of women on board increased.[40] Moreover, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, between 600,000 and over a million people from Asia and Africa were transported to VOC territories, among whom were also many women.[41] It has been a challenge for historians to uncover the perspectives of enslaved people on ships in general, as the power of the enslavers determined the creation of written records. Even when historians have tried to uncover enslaved perspectives, notably little qualitative research has been conducted on slavery and gender relations in Dutch maritime and colonial worlds, particularly when compared to scholarship in other national contexts.[42]

Gender played a significant role in captives' assigned position on board, including on Dutch ships. Women were often kept in separate quarters from men, without chains and on the upper deck, where they were likely expected to prepare meals.[43] They lived under continuous threat of sexual abuse by the European sailors: that this was forbidden in

38 'Zes reconstructies kousen Palmhoutwrak af'.

39 Seaborn, 'Searching for Signs'; Daybell et al., 'Gendering Objects'.

40 Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 229-230. The Slave Voyages database offers an estimate of ships sailing under Dutch flag: 61.7 percent of the enslaved people embarking were men, with a standard deviation of 12 percent: https://www.slavevoyages.org/ (Accessed on 24 February 2024). Andrea Mosterman notes how on some ships, women were even the majority: Mosterman, *'I was their Midwife'*.

41 The Exploring Slave Trade in Asia (ESTA) database project makes data on this trade widely accessible. The database demonstrates that women were regularly among the enslaved people on board: https://exploringslavetradeinasia.com/index.php (Accessed on 4 December 2024). See also Konings et al., 'Exploring Slave Trade in Asia'.

42 See for instance Moitt, *Women and Slavery*; Morgan, *Laboring Women*; Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*; Berry and Harris (eds.), *Sexuality and Slavery*; Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*; Webster, *Materializing the Middle Passage*.

43 Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 233.

official instructions suggests that women were regularly subjected to this violence.[44] On average, a smaller percentage of enslaved women died on these voyages than did those of their male counterparts. There is no explanation for this difference yet, though Johannes Postma suggests this may be in part because women (and children) were 'housed better and had more freedom'.[45] Their involvement in food preparation might, moreover, have given them access to better rations.[46] The fact that women were not always chained and could access parts of the ship more freely also gave them a crucial advantage when preparing and executing rebellions on board.[47]

While journals do not always give much insight into the differential treatment of women compared to men, reports of voyages found in, for instance, the digitised Amsterdam notarial archives include incidents on board that can give new insights into the lives of enslaved women.[48] Comparing materials from a wide variety of voyages from a gender perspective is crucial to further the study of power dynamics on board ship and help us delve deeper into enslaved people's lives at sea.[49] The inclusion of the transportation of enslaved people on Dutch ships in Asia in an analysis of slavery at sea can further extend the range of archival materials, and enable comparisons between different types of voyages. And although in the Dutch context no ships that transported enslaved people have yet been found by maritime archaeologists, maritime archaeology holds the potential to expand our understanding of gendered dynamics on board those ships used to transport enslaved people.[50] Overall, more thorough qualitative analyses are necessary to more closely understand the position of women in the global trade in people.

Women in Dutch Colonial Contexts

In colonial contexts, the position of women, including women of colour, has been an important focus of study for more than forty years. Jean Gelman Taylor's seminal study of the social world of Batavia analysed the development of the elite networks in the main VOC city in Asia, with an emphasis on gender relations and the role Eurasian women played in forging networks and reproducing wealth. With migration from Europe being limited, European men (often unmarried) fathered children with (often enslaved) Asian

44 Balai, *Het slavenschip Leusden*, 71. Frank Dragtenstein also considers it very likely that women were subjected to sexual abuse on board: Dragtenstein, *Van Elmina naar Paramaribo*, 132.

45 Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 258.

46 Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 258; Balai, *Het slavenschip Leusden*, 77; Dragtenstein, *Van Elmina naar Paramaribo*, 121.

47 Balai, *Het slavenschip Leusden*, 83.

48 Dragtenstein, *Van Elmina naar Paramaribo*, 132. See for example Negrón and Den Oudsten, *De grootste slavenhandelaren van Amsterdam*, 94-96; De Koning, 'The Middle Passages'.

49 Andrea Mosterman shows the potential of such an approach: Mosterman, *'I was their Midwife'*.

50 While the 2021 expedition to find the slave ship *Leusden* did not produce 'substantial proof of remains', this was only a short expedition that does not rule out the potential of finding the wreck at another location, if more time was available: Gawronski and L'Hour, *Search of the* Leusden *2021*, 27. Land-based archaeology is already employed to gain insights into slavery, the slave trade, and the position of enslaved women: Kootker et al., 'Dynamics of Indian Ocean Slavery'; Fricke et al., 'Delayed Physical Development'.

women, and as the men recognised their children through adoption, a new Eurasian group emerged.[51] Eurasian women were part of Batavian family networks, often had family wealth, and were raised Christian. These women were 'at the heart of the Indies clan' that held society together through the Batavian patronage networks to which they could give new male European arrivals access.[52] Sailors and soldiers in the lower ranks had fewer chances to access these networks. They more often married free(d) Asian women, if they married at all.[53] The elite Eurasian women of Batavia continued to be an important point of attention in publications on the Dutch Asian colonies.[54]

Scholars of Dutch empire have long focused on the Asian context, but the history of the Dutch in the Atlantic has received increased attention in the past decades.[55] Scholarship on gender in the Atlantic context has been a prominent part of that development. Importantly, Susanah Shaw Romney explored the role of women in developing 'intimate networks' between Indigenous peoples, Africans, and Europeans, demonstrating how women played a crucial part in shaping the personal networks that formed the basis of imperial structures.[56] This scholarship is part of a clear shift towards including the perspectives of racialised people in the Dutch colonial context, in which a gender analysis can further elucidate power relations. Approaching topics such as resistance from a gender perspective, for instance, uncovers the different ways in which enslaved and escaped people survived a period of uprising, as, for example, Marjoleine Kars demonstrates in her research on the ways women and men navigated the Berbice uprising in 1763.[57]

New lenses of analyses, such as spatial or (family) network approaches, are crucial to allow us to gain further insight into the role of women in colonial contexts. Andrea Mosterman has shown how spatial perspectives can uncover the nature of power relations in societies that were built on slavery.[58] Focusing on family relations, rather than just the company and the state, Nicole Maskiell sheds further light on the pervasiveness of slavery in North American colonial societies, and the role of gender in those relationships.[59] Family bonds were highly significant in other colonial contexts as well. Karwan Fatah-Black has demonstrated how, in eighteenth-century Suriname, freed women and men used their wills to further the material interests of their kin, many of whom were still enslaved.[60]

51 Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia*. See similarly for the Cape Colony: Groenewald, '"A Mother Makes no Bastard"'.

52 Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia*, 71.

53 Hamer, 'Marriage and the Construction of Colonial Order'.

54 Blussé, *Strange Company*; Blussé, *Bitters bruid*; Van Wamelen, *Family Life onder de VOC*.

55 Enthoven and Den Heijer, 'Nederland en de Atlantische wereld'. To name only a few publications that are part of the Atlantic turn: Postma and Enthoven (eds.), *Riches from Atlantic Commerce*; Rupert, *Creolization and Contraband*; Oostindie and Roitman (eds.), *Dutch Atlantic Connections*; Klooster, *The Dutch Moment*; Klooster and Oostindie, *Realm between Empires*.

56 Romney, *New Netherland Connections*. See also Todt and Shattuck, 'Capable Entrepreneurs'; Waterman and Noel, 'Not Confined to the Village Clearings'.

57 Kars, 'Dodging Rebellion'.

58 Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement*.

59 Maskiell, *Bound by Bondage*. See also her essay in this special issue.

60 Fatah-Black, 'The Use of Wills'. See also Brana-Shute, 'Approaching Freedom'; Neslo, 'Een ongekende elite'; Ekama, 'Bound to be Free?'; and the recent special issue 'Life after Slavery'.

While in these studies gender is not the main lens of analysis, studying slavery from the perspective of enslaved people and their networks can push women towards the centre of scholarship. When scholars give equal weight in their analysis to the position of enslaved women as to the position of enslaved men, such studies show how prominent women were in developing and protecting social ties.

As we delve further into the archive, bringing genealogical research closer to academic research holds great potential to anchor women in our study of the Dutch global empire. Several studies on British colonial histories have shown how research into family networks gives us a better understanding of the role of women of various backgrounds within colonial and maritime societies, and how this research can benefit from genealogical knowledge.[61] A long-term view, moving beyond the early modern period, yields insights into the ways in which colonial structures impact family histories, and, vice versa, how central families – and the women in them – were to the global Dutch empire, and how this resonates in the present day, as I have shown through tracing the Asian and Eurasian women in my own family history.[62] Current digitisation projects, in which academics work with volunteers to make civil records and registers of enslaved people and manumissions in Suriname and Curaçao digitally accessible, will be fundamental to the development of new insights into the intergenerational workings of family ties, and the way slavery has continued to influence those generations that came after the abolition of slavery.[63]

With historical attention shifting more broadly to include the perspectives of less affluent women, scholars have paid increasing amounts of attention to the position of enslaved people under Dutch East India Company rule in Asia. Gelman Taylor has emphasised that enslaved people formed an important part of Batavian society by raising the children of Europeans, and how the lives of 'free and enslaved were closely intertwined'.[64] Yet it is only more recently that slavery in Asia has gained more sustained scholarly attention.[65] Uncovering the perspectives of enslaved women and men has required scholars to delve into a wider variety of sources, such as court records and testaments, and look at visual depictions of colonial life in new ways.[66]

61 Anderson, *Subaltern Lives*, 16, 187; Pearsall, *Atlantic Families*; Finn and Smith (eds.), *The East India Company at Home*.

62 Zijlstra, *De voormoeders*. See on the ways in which colonial family histories can bring women to the centre of analysis also Redmond, *De Doorsons*; Boon, *What the Oceans Remember*.

63 The 'Historische database van Suriname & de Cariben' project of the Surinamese and Dutch archives, Radboud University Nijmegen and Anton de Kom University of Suriname, building on their earlier digitisation of the 'slave registers' of Suriname and Curaçao: https://hdsc.ning.com/ (Accessed on 4 December 2024).

64 Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia*, 71.

65 Niemeijer, 'Slavery, Ethnicity'; Vink, '"The World's Oldest Trade"'; Jones, *Wives, Slaves, and Concubines*; Baay, *Daar werd wat gruwelijks verricht*; Van Rossum, '"Vervloekte goudzugt"'; Van Rossum, *Kleurrijke tragiek*.

66 On using court records, see particularly the Batavia Schepenbank: Jones, *Wives, Slaves, and Concubines*, 24-28. Crucially, scholars are increasingly making use of Dutch company records in Asia, such as those kept by the Indonesian National Archive (ANRI): Niemeijer, 'Slavery, Ethnicity'; Niemeijer, *Batavia*; Baay, *Daar werd wat gruwelijks verricht*. On using the wills of East India Company employees, see Zijlstra, 'Free and Enslaved Asian Women'. On incorporating visual sources: Jouwe et al. (eds.), *Slavernij herbezien*; Tosun, 'Women at Home and Men Outdoors?'.

In their search for the histories of these marginalised people, scholars can also benefit from digital developments. The creation of new infrastructures as represented in projects such as GLOBALISE and the development of the Exploring Slave Trade in Asia (ESTA) database, will give further impetus to the analysis of data thus obtained in new ways.[67] People who were previously hard to find, as they did not appear in any indexes, can, with new digital methods, be more easily traced and placed in their broader context. While making records more globally accessible, it remains important to reflect on the limitations of digitisation projects, especially those of colonial records, and the ways in which these limitations influence scholarship.[68] Choices made by the digitisation of certain materials, while leaving others in analogue form, only create new selection biases. While obtaining a more robust, quantitative view of matters is extremely valuable, numbers can convey but a part of the history of slavery. A qualitative approach, analysing the experiences of individuals, remains crucial in bringing scholars closer to understanding the lived reality of marginalised and enslaved people in colonial empires.

Traditionally, in Dutch historiography the Atlantic was studied separately from Asia, a separation also reflected in scholarship on gender relations in colonial contexts. As the connections traders and Dutch trading companies made between the Americas, Africa, and Asia have become ever clearer, scholars are now starting to make more global comparisons in which they apply diverse perspectives.[69] A gendered lens can provide new insights into power relations within different colonial contexts. By comparing the policing of non-marital sex, for example, it becomes possible to investigate in which regions the Dutch were powerful enough to enforce their own customs, and where they were forced to adapt to local customs.[70] A global comparison can also reveal differences in social and cultural attitudes towards sexuality, and how this influenced the extent and nature of cross-cultural sexual contact and marriages, thus emphasising the importance of local circumstances to Dutch colonial life.[71] Several volumes demonstrate there still is much to gain from looking beyond imperial borders, comparing gender relations in various empires.[72]

It remains difficult to base colonial scholarship on sources written by women themselves, especially women of colour, if only because those few preserved sources authored by women in the colonies were mostly written by European women. Research into the letters sent by women and men from the colonies has brought us closer to the emotional aspects of colonisers' lives, but they also reveal how limited our view of women in the Dutch colonial context is – even if the letters help us look beyond the elite perspective.[73]

67 'GLOBALISE', https://globalise.huygens.knaw.nl/ (Accessed on 4 December 2024); 'ESTA', https://exploring-slavetradeinasia.com/ (Accessed on 4 December 2024).

68 See for recent discussions of the limitations and possibilities of digitising colonial archives Luthra et al., 'Unsilencing Colonial Archives'; Jeurgens and Karabinos, 'Paradoxes of Curating Colonial Memory'.

69 Van Groesen, 'Global Trade'; Rose, *Regulating Relations*; Heijmans and Rose (eds.), *Diversity and Empires*.

70 Rose and Heijmans, 'From Impropriety to Betrayal'.

71 Hamer, '"Our Dutchmen Run after Them"'.

72 Catterall and Campbell (eds.), *Women in Port*; Prieto and Berry (eds.), *Crossings and Encounters*; and the special issue 'Portuguese-Speaking Sephardic Women'.

73 See for example the correspondence by colonisers who were part of the European elite published in Schutte, *Seer teder beminde*. For correspondence that includes letters from the lower, mostly European, classes, see the publications on the Prize Papers referenced in footnote 19.

There are a few notable exceptions, such as a letter sent by Wilhelmina, a woman formerly enslaved by Engelbert Kelderman, in which she asked him to help her in hard financial times.[74] Another such exception is a letter written by the Eurasian woman Maria van Oordt, daughter of the freed woman Johanna van Manado. Maria wrote a note, predominantly in Malay, that accompanied her husband's Dutch letter – most Eurasian children grew up with Malay as they were raised by enslaved Asian people.[75] Such letters can help us uncover a bit more of life of women of colour in the colonies, while at the same time their rarity demonstrates how colonial inequalities are reflected in the sources.

With the limits of written sources in mind, object-based approaches with a global scope can help us understand the nature of colonial connections and the role women played in an emerging consumer market. The 2009 exhibition 'Dutch New York Between East and West. The World of Margrieta van Varick' at the Bard Graduate Center explored the life of a Dutch woman who had lived in Malacca (in present-day Malaysia) and had settled in Flatbush (in present-day New York City), where she set up a store from which she sold an extraordinary range of Asian goods. The exhibition and the catalogue show how such trade ranged far beyond one ocean, how a Dutch woman could play a significant role in this trade, and thus how material history can help us get closer to the lived realities of women in a colonial context, in this case with an emphasis on wealthy and free women.[76]

Such exhibitions also show how much scholarship on maritime and colonial contexts has gained from collaborations between universities and museums, especially when pursuing an interdisciplinary approach where paintings, drawings, objects, and oral histories form an inherent part of the sources studied. In the Netherlands, museums have begun to push for new and more diverse perspectives, for instance in the 2021 Rijksmuseum exhibit *Slavery. Ten true stories*, which highlighted individual men and women in a Dutch colonial context across the world.[77] The choice to include women of various backgrounds prominently within the exhibition highlighted their centrality to this global context. While the Rijksmuseum's curators were once convinced that the museum's collection included too few objects to curate an exhibition on slavery, the team working on this exhibition successfully transformed this view. They highlighted what objects in the collection could reveal about this history, but they also included objects from other collections, and used oral histories to tell the stories that objects could not communicate.[78] The production of knowledge using objects and oral histories pushes the boundaries of historical research, including research on women that has traditionally been based on written sources.[79]

74 Van der Doe, Moree, and Tang (eds.), *De smeekbede*; Tang and Vrij, '"Mijn meester"'.

75 Barend-van Haeften, 'Een unieke brief'.

76 Krohn, Miller, and De Filippis (eds.), *Dutch New York*.

77 'Slavery. Ten true stories', https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/past/slavery (Accessed on 8 December 2024).

78 Jaeger, 'Valika Smeulders'; Keijer, 'Tien personages'; Sint Nicolaas et. al., *Slavernij*. Other recent exhibits focusing on colonialism and the Dutch context include *Bewogen beeld – op zoek naar Johan Maurits* at the Mauritshuis in 2019; HIER. *Zwart in Rembrandts tijd* at the Rembrandthuis in 2020; *Onze koloniale erfenis* at the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam in 2022; and *Schaduwen op de Atlantische Oceaan* at Het Scheepvaartmuseum which opened in 2024.

79 Van Andel et al., 'Maroon Women'. See for some examples beyond the Dutch context: Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun*; Anishanslin, *Portrait of a Woman in Silk*; Miles, *All That She Carried*.

Conclusion

Maritime history is no longer merely a history of men. Likewise, the time that colonial societies were only understood from a male, white, coloniser's perspective is long behind us. Nevertheless, when uncovering female perspectives in a Dutch context, scholars have first and foremost focused on the stories of Dutch women, and those women who were part of the colonial elite, to boot – including those of both European and Asian descent. More recently, historians have been shifting from the female elite to subaltern perspectives. This scholarship emphasises the importance of an intersectional approach.

Limitations in the written sources require historians to develop creative, interdisciplinary approaches using a wider variety of sources than is traditional, in order that they might uncover the perspectives of marginalised people in maritime and colonial contexts. New technical methods are increasingly employed to 'unsilence' colonial archives.[80] Digital developments, resulting from the labour of project teams that include archivists, scholars, IT professionals, and volunteers, show how the production of scholarship is changing and becoming more reliant on larger consortia. While raising new methodological challenges, digitisation projects are helping to make maritime and colonial archives – and the underrepresented people found within them – increasingly accessible. Furthermore, scholarship that seeks to centre women within the maritime and colonial world has much to gain from applying more object-based, interdisciplinary approaches in which material histories are explored from a gender perspective.

In general, it would benefit scholarship on gender relations in the Low Countries if Dutch colonial history is no longer seen as separate from the history of the Dutch Republic itself. Maritime history shows how many connections exist, and how women played an important role in the maritime and colonial world. Recent research has emphasised how the colonial world was also part of society in the Dutch Republic itself, both socially, economically, and culturally. If we consider women within the Dutch Republic, this consideration should include maritime and colonial perspectives from a global point of view. Investigating the role of women in international (family) networks, cross-generational patterns in family histories, strategies of survival and resistance, emotions and sexuality in empire-building, and gendered divisions in global labour and production will help us to better understand the ways in which women have, voluntarily or through coercion, shaped early modern Dutch history.

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80 Luthra et al., 'Unsilencing Colonial Archives'.

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