

Women's Work in Early Modern Europe

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Proceedings

Session 1

Defining work: unpaid work,
self-employment and paid work

Discussion

(with thanks to Jacob Field)

Caroline Bowden (History, Queen Mary London) asked how women in religious orders fit into the structure of what was 'work'. Nuns considered praying to be work and they did do it in return for money but it does not quite fit into the occupational structure set out by Ågren. She also mentioned that when they entered the convent, the women frequently had the status 'Mrs', even though they were single (based on a sample of 4,000 English nuns from 1500-1800).

Amy Erickson suggested they might be put into the same category as clergy.

Caroline Bowden suggested that this may not be accurate as the nuns were not directly serving the community, as praying was an indirect action. The exception was when they worked in schools and hospitals.

Ariadne Schmidt has devised an occupational structure for women's work in the Dutch Republic based on the taxonomy of labour relations. This can be used alongside occupational classifications, asking if time was allocated for the market or not. This can be used to define the work of nuns.

Maria Ågren suggested that the work of the nuns was essentially for the benefit and well-being of the community – the fact that it was unpaid was not important. For example, the fire warden of the town of Örebro was not paid for his work in this office but it still had a major benefit for the community.

Heide Wunder used the example of the shift in the perception of nuns from the medieval era to the early modern. For example, in Austria in the second half of the eighteenth century, their work was generally perceived as 'useless'. However, they could make themselves 'useful' by engaging in teaching, which changed their occupation.

Jane Whittle talked about the definition of work. Before 1650 the only definition was 'anything not leisure'. So much activity was in a mixture of contexts, it was impossible to separate commercial and non-commercial work. Also, occupational descriptors changed over time. They were less common in rural areas, which can give a distorted picture. For

example, a general description such as 'husbandman' can hide a very broad range of activities.

Goran Rydèn noted that Erickson had made an important point with her example of the fullers, namely, that sometimes we know work is going on but we have no proof for it. Perhaps case studies can highlight these areas?

Amy Erickson stated what she ideally sought was a formula to estimate the numbers of women needed by each fuller, along the lines of Craig Muldrew's work on calculating the number of spinners needed from the national textile output.

Sheilagh Ogilvie asked Ågren if, in her 'verb' approach to work, if she had also included nouns when collecting data. Ogilvie said she had done a similar process for Germany, where she had counted 2,828 activities, but excluded nouns, and regretted this. Collecting both the noun and the verb would allow comparison between the structures described by both systems, and therefore could make it comparable to other noun-based studies, as results could be extrapolated.

Maria Ågren confirmed that they were also collected the noun data where it occurred.

Sheilagh Ogilvie said that another important noun might be the one referring to the objects an individual owned, which can illuminate work. Personal inventories can give an important indication of this – not just for crafts but also for household activities – and open up an important 'third dimension'.

Maria Ågren said that Jan Lindegren had done some work along these lines, and her project was considering how to include this type of data.

Dag Lindström argued that the distinction between work and leisure was very complicated. Leisure was as complex to identify as work. What is leisure in what context may be work in another. It is not possible to reach perfect definitions, just useful ones for research.

Anna Bellavitis asked Ågren if her court records also included other evidence, such as autobiographies of witnesses. Ågren confirmed they did.

Bellavitis said that in French, 'maitress' had a multiplicity of meanings, as 'Mrs' did in English.

Anne Laurence said that the appeal of the verb approach was that it deals very well with agricultural societies. In urban societies where occupational listings are more common, the noun approach is very useful but in places like Scotland and Ireland the verb approach may be more appropriate because large areas of these countries were pastoral, and women's work was often seasonal and unpaid. The verb approach could uncover complex aspects of agriculture.

Leigh Shaw-Taylor said that the fact the Occupational Structure of Britain used a noun based approach was not a conceptual difference, but a pragmatic difference. How people spent their time is important but it is possible to make the most progress most rapidly using the noun-based approach for England and Wales after the eighteenth century. The noun and verb systems should not be mutually exclusive, as they were not conceptually opposite. The definition used should be linked to the question you are asking, and in the case of his project they were looking at the broad development of the economy, so it was appropriate. Shaw-Taylor went onto open up the issue of how exactly to conceptualise child-care as work.

Ariadne Schmidt asked if it was possible to compare noun and verb-based findings, but would this make definitions too broad – beyond the market economy.

Maria Ågren agreed with Shaw-Taylor, and said the question of comparability of noun and verb would be returned to later in the conference.

Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen said that a time-use approach would include housework as well as paid work, and went onto raise the question of charitable work. How does this fit in?

Jane Humphries followed on from Schmidt's point, stating that it would be very valuable to compare outcomes from different definitions. She and Sara Horrell had looked at female contribution to family subsistence in terms of money and commodities. When they included this, it gave much higher female participation rates than just occupational descriptors. This kind of female work did not have an occupational descriptor but it did contribute to family survival in generating income and resources.

Tony Wrigley said that where the sources allowed it, time-use was the most illuminating approach, mentioning the work of Frederique le Play. He went onto say that Hans-Joachim Voth's work showed that time in work per day had changed a lot over the eighteenth century.

In the days before electric light, time in work was limited by hours of daylight. Anything about time and how it was spent could only improve the noun-based approach.

Heide Wunder asked Ågren why she included peasants harvesting hay to pay the bailiff as part of payment of tax, as she would classify it as rent, as wasn't it a payment to the king in his function as a landlord? In Germany, much coerced work was for the landlord, rather than the state.

Maria Ågren said that it was correct to classify it as tax.

Amy Erickson returned to the point on how to include charitable work, as it was important, bringing up the example of charity schools, which often employed women, and were founded by women.

Jan Lindegren argued that you cannot provide definitions without asking a specific question. He used the example of a church in Gotland, which was built by seventeen men and fourteen horses. This was not forced labour, but was a massive undertaking, involving carting over 100,000 wagon-loads of stone. This showed people had time for work outside of subsistence. He went on to argue that problematising work in the long term must take into account the fact that people in the past did not have to work that long to earn their livelihood. In the present day we have free time, and in the past they just had time.

Rosemarie Fiebranz said that, connected to Humphries' point, a wide verb-definition was very important. In dealing with the question of household subsistence, most agrarian work was non-market, non-waged and complex. Women participated in both agriculture and craft. She argued it was necessary to trace different kinds of household work and much time was spent on them, and how the male-female distribution of time changed. A time budget approach would be ideal for this approach but the data was just not sufficient.

Janine Maegraith argued that the definition of work was complex. For example, in looking at nuns' occupations, a lot of them ran big rural estates, and libraries. Nuns had a high complexity of occupations, but much of this was hidden. This changed in the eighteenth century, when they were pushed out of this managerial role.

Xuesheng You it was very difficult to define what exactly 'making a living' meant. Was it just satisfying basic needs? If this was so then female unpaid domestic labour would be more

meaningful in a low-status household where it was needed to make the household operational than in a prosperous household where the same work would have less of an impact.

Amy Erickson said that *Ågren*'s idea of 'making a living' was not just in terms of subsistence but in terms of social reproduction. Therefore both types of work were the same.

Maria Ågren said that building a bridge between nouns and verbs was very important, and combining the two can mean national comparisons could be made. However, it is important to go to the micro-level to understand the noun before moving up to the macro-level.