

Women's Work in Early Modern Europe

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Session 2

Women's work and the
household, life cycle and
marital status

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Unpacking domestic labour, housewifery (cultural meanings, training)

The title of this section requires some elaboration: In the first place, it points to the importance of positioning women within a complex social and economic unit, the household. I cannot discuss the debates over conceptualizing the household here; instead, I shall take as my point of departure the household as a co-resident group consisting of at least the married couple and their children, who had to be provided for. In the second place, the title refers to women's life cycle and marital status, which were connected with different allocations of women's work in the household as daughters, wives or widows. While daughters in their parents' household or as servants in other households performed dependent work, married women's work as mistresses of their own households was "self-employment" and, in addition to housework proper, included the work of bearing legitimate children, the labour of giving birth to them, and the task of raising and educating them as good Christians and householders. Among these tasks, only childbirth was exclusively the mother's work; all other tasks could be delegated to other women and in part to men as well. While servants were paid for their labour, the mistress was not; nevertheless, her contribution to the household's fortunes was calculated in terms of saving money, and was rewarded when the estate was divided between the widow and the inheriting children. Widows who did not remarry retained their social position as mistress and acquired the legal status of head of household, but their economic status was fragile, because widows' households were classified as "incomplete". I shall include neither widows' households nor single persons' households in my argument; widows in particular deserve a study of their own.

Departing from the household as the frame of reference for analysing women's work implies "unpacking domestic labour" and also taking into consideration that gender constructions are an integral part of the source material as well as of our scholarly approaches. Informed by older and more recent research, I shall tackle the "unpacking" of "domestic labour":

first by examining very briefly the semantic fields of "work"/"labour", and "household" in order to explore early modern notions of work and the household;

second by distinguishing "housework" in a narrow sense from "domestic labour" as it relates to the various resources of households such as land, the trades, commerce and office-holding, and to the division of labour between husband and wife, mistress and servants;

third by examining the training for housework, the art of housewifery and its cultural meaning.

My evidence comes from the Holy Roman Empire and the German-speaking countries within it, which shared a common language and legal system. Marital law (“Ehegüterrecht”) and laws of inheritance (“Erbrecht”) were decisive for the allocation of women’s work and property rights. In view of the legal, economic and social differences, I cannot treat enforced labour, although it was widespread in the German-speaking lands. My approach is based on a wide range of sources, such as Sheilagh Ogilvie has used for her study of early modern Württemberg. In addition, land registers demonstrate the importance of landed property in early modern Germany, which was still a predominantly agrarian society up to the beginning of the nineteenth century.

(1) Semantics

Nowadays, even the daily routine of early modern queens and their ladies-in-waiting is interpreted as “work” – the “hard work” of representation. I shall not use this modern, generalized notion of “work”, but rather focus on the ways in which the large majority of early modern women and men tried to make a living by using their labour power in different social, economic and cultural settings. Early modern terminology points to the unequal values attached to “work”: While peasants and artisans “worked” because they performed manual labour, merchants “traded” (“handeln”) or directed business, and the servants of church and state “held offices”. How do the “household” and work performed in households fit into this pattern of classification? In German, its field of activity was called “Hauswesen” (“oeconomia”), and the verb used to characterize its activities was “wirtschaften” (to economize), that is, to use the household’s resources properly for the benefit of its members. This responsibility was assigned to the married couple as heads of household, the paterfamilias and materfamilias. They not only wielded parental authority, but were also endowed with public authority by urban magistrates and the state to discipline their children, servants, apprentices, journeymen and even other people living in their household.

Yet, although husband and wife shared the task of household management (“Haushalten”), male heads of household were conceived of as “breadwinners”, while their wives merely “assisted” them, following the usual interpretation of the Creation in Genesis (2:18). This position was enhanced by marital law, which subordinated the wife to the husband’s authority and obliged her to assist her husband in his occupation. If she wanted to work elsewhere, she was required to gain her husband’s permission.

(2) Housework and women's domestic labour

We need to distinguish between housework and domestic labour. There is no question that housework such as cooking, heating the home, cleaning, washing, spinning, weaving, making and mending clothes, caring for children and nursing the sick was generally organized and performed by women, whether as mistresses of the household or as servants. But when women's proto-industrial labour was better paid than their husbands' labour (J. Mooser), part of the housework could be transferred to male members of the household, and the rest could be reduced by buying food and other items or even by hiring female domestic servants or day labourers.

Housework took more or less time depending on the size of household and their standard of living. In most of the households under consideration here, housework in the strict sense required only part of the time budget. More time was needed to obtain the "raw materials" (grain, flax, legumes, salt) and the tools, such as a spinning-wheel or a loom, that were necessary to prepare them for consumption and production. Household appliances and furnishings (including linen and bedding) and a spinning-wheel might be part of the wife's dowry when the household was set up, but grain, flax, oil, fat, and meat had either to be produced in the household, as was the case with the peasantry, or purchased from outside. Yet this simple alternative suggested by a modern sectoral approach to the economy fails to understand early modern household economics.

Examining land registers, it turns out that not only the peasantry and smallholders possessed and cultivated land, but also a much larger segment of the population, including craftsmen, merchants, clerics and civil servants. In the majority of (small) towns, citizens owned houses with land attached to them, kept livestock on the commons, and made use of the town's woodlands. Even rural households without any land attempted to lease small plots of land to grow cabbage and gain access to the commons to raise a calf. In proto-industrial regions such as Hesse-Kassel, citizens of a great number of small towns grew flax in the summer on part of their fields, processed it during the autumn, and spun and weaved during the winter. They combined agricultural work and home industry in order to make a living. Women – mistresses, servants and day labourers alike – performed a great deal of the agricultural work. Whether the yields were consumed in their own households or sold in the market depended on the household's needs. Peasant women sold vegetables and fruit from their gardens or from cultivating fallow lands, as cash was always scarce in peasant households. Women's work related to making use of household resources may thus be defined as "domestic labour".

The significance of women's housework in the narrow sense and their domestic labour may be illustrated by looking at professors' households in the more than fifty German university towns. Early modern professors in Protestant Germany were married, usually owned a house and gardens freed from taxes, and partook of the university's privileges to brew beer and to keep their livestock in the town's commons. They were poorly paid, and their wives were expected to take in boarders, mostly students. Anna Maria Grosse (1610-1658), wife of the Helmstedt professor Heinrich Scheurl, was able to earn as much as her learned husband by diligently combining the household's resources in land with the assets from her dowry and her expertise in housekeeping. This is just one well-documented instance of such a household, which was an enterprise that generated cash income. The same was true of the households of citizens in university towns, which boarded students, and of citizens' households in Frankfurt or Leipzig, which accommodated thousands of foreigners during the trade fairs every year.

Another aspect of women's domestic labour is evident in the crafts. Although girls were not accepted as apprentices, the master's wife very often worked in her husband's workshop, or – depending on the trade – bought and transported raw materials and sold the products. They also went out to collect the debts. This seems contradictory, but it was not, for according to marital law it was the wife's duty to assist her husband in his occupation, and her relevant activities were therefore also ruled by guild ordinances. In this sense, labour in the workshop must be acknowledged as “domestic labour”, because it was related to using household resources. The same applies to merchants' wives, who took an active part in their husbands' business. It is difficult, though, to assess what proportion this type of domestic work assumed in the time budget. These mistresses of the house, however, could certainly afford a servant to take over part of their housework.

The situation was different where the household's resources were insufficient to guarantee a living, as was often the case. Smallholders, for instance, cultivated their own fields and looked after their livestock, but both husband and wife had to seize any opportunity to earn money by agricultural labour, working in the mines or in home industry. Thus their capacity to work became an important resource.

Married women's domestic work contributed to the household economy in multiple ways by using the household's own resources and exploiting their own labour power in their own households or as wage workers.

(3) Housewifery – Training

Since training will be treated in the next session, I shall focus on a single aspect here.

Housework was not unskilled, nor was agricultural labour, but these skills were acquired by experience, which took many years beginning at a very young age. To some extent this process is mirrored by the rise in wages from virtually nothing for a six-year-old girl looking after children to the payment of an experienced, adult servant. Of course, the degree of qualification depended on the type of economy, the size of the household and the division of labour between women, as well as and on the standard of living, and last but not least on the mistress of the house and her own expertise. In eighteenth-century Kassel, servants advertised their abilities in the regional newspaper and employers advertised vacant positions, attesting to a wide spectrum of requested abilities.

Housework was only one aspect of housewifery, as housewifery also required prudence in using the household's resources and delegating tasks, foresight in provisioning stocks, and the authority to manage servants. Since the sixteenth century it was part of learned concepts of "oeconomia", which conceptualized a household in possession of all the necessary resources, including the authority to direct and control children and servants. The part played by the materfamilias in this economy was illustrated in the dolls' houses that which wealthy patricians acquired for their children in order to teach them good housekeeping. Dolls' houses were not toys to play with, but represented a model household, with its economic and social order, which was fundamental to guarantee domestic peace between spouses, parents and children, and master, mistress and servants. Housewifery generated domestic virtues, thus attributing cultural meaning to housekeeping.

Jane Whittle, University of Exeter

English rural history, 1450-1650

Conundrum: amount of work (Tusser and Fitzherbert) – suggest women did more work than men (as time allocation studies for developing countries also reveal) BUT we find little evidence of women's work (e.g. when we look at particular occupations, or at farm or household accounts, the majority of evidence relates to men).

Suggest we have to rethink our understanding of the term 'work', and look for evidence of it in different places.

Work

- I have struggled for many years with the problem of identifying and classifying work in the rural economy – that is, with problems of identifying income generating work as well as paid (waged) work, and of separating income generating work from activities which did not generate income (for subsistence, care of the house and family) i.e. the production/social reproduction divide; and have come to two conclusions:
- The definitions of work habitually used by historians is both modernist and male. That is, it is modernist because it privileges waged work above other activities; and it is male – that is it is based on a model of work that is more common for men than for women (both in the past and now): we tend to look for occupational descriptions, work based on well defined skills and career paths.
- I have given up trying to separate income generating work from non-income generating work not because the task is difficult, but because in many cases it is impossible. When some-one in the early modern economy made cheese or grew vegetables, they often did not know whether it was for home consumption, or if they would need to sell their products for cash. Activities such as preparing a meal, could be simultaneously intended to feed one's own family, but also the household's hired employees (I could go on with examples).
- So I have settled on a definition of work as those activities that were not leisure ("doing the things that must indeed be done" to quote Robert Loder).

Servants and housewives

Servants

Life-cycle servants working before marriage

What proportion of young people went into service?

What proportion were female?

What were they paid?

What types of households employed them?

What type of work did they do?

Compulsion

Was service a good or a bad thing?

We know that life-cycle service was already a well-established institution in rural England by the early fourteenth century. The poll taxes 1377-1381 show that service was both widespread and common in rural England, and a significant proportion were women (e.g. 43% in north-east Norfolk). Using population listings, mostly from the 18th century, Kussmaul found that 60% of the population in the 15-24 age group were servants. The proportion of servants that were female varies according to the locality and type of evidence used (bequests in wills, probate accounts, household listings, household accounts, legal documents), varying between 25% and 80%.

Female servants normally received half the cash wage received by men, but cash wage was only a small proportion of what servants received from their employers, 77% of which was made up of food and lodging.

Servants are found in all types of households apart from the very poorest, however, servants employment was ubiquitous in the households of wealthy farmers and the gentry. Poorer households, when they did employ a servant, most commonly employed one female servant. Wealthy farmers rarely employed more than two female servants although they might employ

up to eight men. Gentry households varied in their practices but around 40% of their servants were female in the period 1550-1650.

What type of work did female servants do?

Only the gentry employed women as specialist domestic servants 'chamber maids', and these are a very small proportion of the total number of female servants employed. Other female servants could be expected to be involved in the general economy of the household, whatever that was.

Some women were placed in service under compulsion. The English labour laws made it illegal for young adults not to enter service if they were below a certain level of wealth, even if they were living with their parents and these laws were occasionally enforced, placing men and women in compulsory service. From the late sixteenth century onwards parish apprenticeships formed part of the poor relief system. This allowed even younger boys and girls (aged 8-10) to be placed in 'apprenticeships', which were in fact unpaid service.

Good or bad?

On the plus side: service gave women independence from their parental household, provided training in work skills (some employers also taught servants to read), as many servants worked in wealthier households than those they came from – it gave them better diets and living condition, and the terms of service allowed women to freely negotiate who they should work for. Evidence from bequests in will suggest many female servants had good relationships with their employers.

On the negative side: there is ample evidence that female servants were mistreated and sexually abused; once within a contract of service both male and female servants assumed the legal status of a child and were legally bound not to break their contract (which usually lasted a year); the work was hard and poorly paid.

Service is now comparatively well documented with published studies.

Housewifery.

The biggest black hole in our understanding of women's work is the work of married women. In early modern England this was referred to as 'housewifery', so I want to spend the time I've got left talking about housewifery.

What historical sources reveal the nature of housewifery?

- Descriptions of making a living: these are rare but extremely helpful where they survive. A selection from the Consistory Court of London deposition books was published by Patricia Crawford and Laura Gowing e.g. 'Emma Kene wife of John Kene ... bricklayer, ... aged 30 'She useth to spin, do her household business and to wash and starch sometime at home and sometime abroad if she be hired'. [1610]
- Household accounts (my current book is based on a detailed study of one set of early 17th century household accounts). Account keeping practices reveal women's role in managing the household. Wage payments recorded in the accounts document women's waged work e.g. wet nurses, midwives, agricultural labour, laundry, knitting and spinning. But female workers are outnumbered by men.
- Advice books: Marriage advice books and farming advice books offer an idealised version of what married women's roles were expected to be. This is very useful, but needs to be studied in conjunction with other documents that reveal what women actually did.
- Evidence from these first three types of sources can be used to build up a picture of the normal gender division of labour in a particular period. That is, what tasks were only done by women (dairying, spinning, laundry), what were only done by men (ploughing, hedging and ditching, skilled building trades), what were done by men and women jointly (harvest work with sickle), and what were done by men or women separately but in different circumstances (cooking, tailoring, brewing).
- Material culture: Thousands of probate inventories survive for early modern England detailing the material culture of the home and farm, and thus providing evidence of the production activities (with some limitations) – if we put these together with an understanding of the gender division of labour, we can see the types of work normally done by men and women in rural households (as in my book with Mark Overton & TRHS article).
- Incidental evidence from court records. However, to my mind, the best approach for revealing women's work is one that has not yet been done for early modern England: using incidental references to work from court records (mostly depositions): as done by Sheilagh Ogilvie for early modern Germany, by Barbara Hanawalt for medieval England, and now being done for early modern Sweden by Maria Agren and team. Good church

court records and quarter sessions records, as well as coroners' rolls would make this particularly fruitful for the period 1558-1642.

Some points

Lack of a complementary household economy.

What we know so far about men's and women's work in early modern England suggests that the idea first put forward by Alice Clark of a unified household economy in which men's and women's work complimented each other is misleading. Men and women typically pursued quite different means of earning a living. Much of what has been assumed to be male bi-employment is actually a household economy in which men and women did different things.

Shifting nature of gender division of labour.

The gender division of labour in England, although it was perceived as fixed in any one period or locality, was actually quite fluid over time (and possibly across regions). So for instance weaving was a mixed occupation in the late medieval period, male only in the 16th and 17th century, before becoming mixed again in the 18th century. Women lost their monopoly of brewing in the 15th and 16th century, and their monopoly of dairying in the 18th century, however, other occupations opened up to women. Professional hatmaking and tailoring was a male monopoly in the 16th and early 17th century but female milliners and mantua-makers became common from the late 17th century onwards, professional cooks and household stewards were always male in the earlier period but were often women by the eighteenth century. These changes took place without any strong official controls by guilds or other institutions.

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Discussion

(thanks to Sofia Ling)

In this session *Heide Wunder* talked about work and household in German-speaking areas. Among other things she emphasised that the household should be understood as an enterprise, and that it is important to make a distinction between housework and housewifery. Housewifery gave married women authority within the household, and gave a cultural meaning to the social and economic order in line with the contemporary discourse on women's work and to uphold domestic peace in early modern times.

Jane Whittle also highlighted the issue of life-cycle and marital status within work and the household with reference to research on servants and housewives in rural England around 1650. She emphasised the complexity of gender division of labour within the household; that female servants seldom performed domestic service, is one interesting example of this that was mentioned. When studying early modern England it would be futile to distinguish between production and reproduction and to focus only on paid work would be anachronistic as well as biased towards men's work. Eventually Jane Whittle emphasised that much more research ought to be done concerning England, and in particular about work performed by married women.

Concerning the discussion that followed, I have tried to outline some of the arguments and sum up the main topics.

For one thing, it was strongly emphasized that the contemporary view on work was radically different in an early modern societal context and that this is important to bear in mind when doing research about women and work in this period of time. Several examples of this were highlighted. It was underlined that work within different sectors or between a public and a private sphere was not at all separated as it became later on and moreover, that the attitude towards work differed. For instance in early modern times wage labour was much less valued compared to the work of a housewife. On the whole, it was questioned whether it is useful to make distinctions between paid and unpaid work or formal and informal work etc when talking about work in the early modern period.

Another thing stressed in the discussion was the importance of analyzing who it was that did the concrete work – in terms of gender and age – as well as what they did and when they did it; and, further as Jane Whittle put it by raising the question, “who managed work and who did the actual work”? There are assumptions, for instance in the case of Sweden, that women participated in their husbands' handicrafts that might be contested. At least this is something that needs to be further examined, as well as comparisons made between different regions and

countries. Another question discussed in this connection was what determined whether women could qualify to work within a skilled handicraft (although never becoming a guild member or a master)? For instance, was it enough to marry a master, or did women need any special skills beforehand, etc. In line with this it was also pointed out that we need not to forget to examine men's work, and that we often know much less about this than we might think. In particular it was said that we shouldn't forget widowers or unmarried men who might never have had the possibility to provide for a wife. By examining for instance what services single men had to buy from women and what work they could perform themselves, we could learn more about the gender division of labour in early modern times.

A third topic concerned changes over time as well as social differences. A general change that ought to be considered is the change that involved the expansion of more specialized (male) skilled professionals – perhaps at the expense of work previously performed by women within the frame of the household. So, in what way did women's work change over time, and how can this be explained? That there were social differences between women and that this ought to be considered was also emphasized. The work of a housewife was not the same irrespective of which societal level she came from – expressions as housewives and goodwives made in contemporary sources are only one sign of this.

Eventually, a fourth topic circled around which different kind of sources we can use in order to examine women and work in early modern times. One opinion strongly emphasized that court records have proved to be fruitful sources. In several countries this ought to be used to a much wider extent. At the same time the importance of using and combining many different sources was also brought forward – among those mentioned were advice literature and church records.

The following persons contributed to the discussion: Anna Bellavitis, Amy Erickson, Jane Humphries, Sebastiaan Keibek, Anne Laurence, Dag Lindström, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Sheilagh Ogilvie, Hilde Sandvik, Pamela Sharpe, Leonard Schwarz, John Styles, Christine Werkstetter, Jane Whittle, Samantha Williams, Heide Wunder, Maria Ågren.