

Women's Work in Early Modern Europe

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Training and knowledge
transfer, high and low

Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen, University of Turku, Finland

Kirsi's paper looked at the major dichotomy between the work of men and women in handicrafts in early modern Scandinavia, extracted from as wide a range of sources as possible. Her categories were 'formal training' and 'self-learning', men falling largely into the first category and women the second. In the case of male guild handicrafts work was:

- strictly regulated by law
- had a tax liability
- was mainly open to men only
- required formal training
- was a life-long career
- this career gave social power and prestige

In the case of female handicrafts work was:

- unregulated
- often untaxed
- performed in a field with free access to new recruits
- did not require formal training
- did not mean a life-long career
- had no status

The consequences of this were more obvious when the nature of the work performed was considered. While men appear as tailors, shoemakers, leather glovers and bakers of wheat bread, for example, women were makers of shirts, linens and straw hats, knitters of socks and gloves; and bakers of rye bread. The latter were all considered lower status, lower paid trades. Women were formerly excluded from any official training, occupations and public life by guild regulations and legal codes.

The only occupation in which this did not occur was that of midwifery. In Sweden, the profession of a midwife had been regulated since 1686. Midwife apprentices took instruction from professors in surgery and obstetrics in Stockholm, practiced under the guidance of Madame (a parallel to a master), and took an oral examination at the Collegium Medicum. They also had to swear an occupational oath at the city court in Stockholm. Most were 30-40 years old, a few of them unmarried, most of them married or widows. Their husbands were guild masters, soldiers or surgeons., and their training paid for by their employer [city/town]. As midwives they were included in official training, occupations, and public life.

Judith Spicksley, University of York

Judith's paper was less empirical, presenting a framework within which to understand training and knowledge transfer – how abstract and material factors impacted on opportunities to gain occupational training:

- Ideological context: all women were understood as married or to be married
- Political context: self-sustaining household in which the man provided and the woman nurtured
- Presence of siblings: funds available to parents
- Sex ratio/possibility of marriage: shifting opportunities because of lack of places or cost to train
- Work opportunities: new occupations in urban areas

Training was likely to be formal [through the legal control of apprenticeship and normally outside the natal household] or informal [unregulated and normally within the natal home]. I.K. Ben Amos' work on the guilds of early modern Bristol indicated that women had never made up a large proportion of apprentices, and that from the seventeenth century women were clearly marked off into 'female' apprenticeships – there was a decline in the number of craft apprenticeships for women.

But the same work reveals widows participating in a range of occupations almost as wide as their male counterparts, suggesting that informal training was of considerable importance for women in the crafts and trades. Women would receive instruction from:

- Father
- Master [servants may have been asked to stand in for apprentice when absent/ill; maids assisted in shops; so intermittent training available for young girls outside of their service training]
- Husband
- Mother
- Other householders [upper status girls sent to high status households as companions to learn management]

The problem is that women were largely trained for a social role, not an occupation, although the nature of that social role would have been status-dependent. Occupations such as midwifery, teaching and wet-nursing required no specific formal training period. All these occupations either combined work with childrearing and household management, or drew on those skills, so blurred any social/occupational identity.

Occupational identities may well have been more widely available to women of middling ranks, who probably had more options – better education, more likely to be trained for an occupation, fathers in crafts or married crafts and tradesmen. Marital status differences were also important since widows and single women had additional trading rights.

Informal training brought a number of problems:

- Intermittent
- Unrecognized
- Skill levels cannot be measured
- Skill levels cannot be demonstrated
- No end point at which subject becomes 'trained' and hence no occupational identity achievable
- Social role and occupational role almost always blurred

The consequence is that remuneration could be low and women could be excluded. The paper concluded that women were not trained in a formal occupation for two reasons: their role was to produce people/reproduce the household; and that as 'dependents' they did not need to be self-supporting. Judith also argued that we need to consider 'domestic' and 'market' in women's work, as the purchase of services and shifting notions of dependency have implications for our understanding of women's role in economic growth.

Discussion

(thanks to Judith Spicksley)

Most of the comments were about problems with binary terminologies – dependent/independent; formal /informal – and how relevant these were to the actual experiences of women.

Training:

Informal training was not just for girls

In Scandinavia informal training was the norm for young people.

In Cologne the children of masters, boys and girls, could apply to become masters themselves after having been trained informally at home. However, girls could only achieve full occupational status once they were married, in conjunction with their husband.

Many jobs did not require formal training. A widow in Holland had the right to work after the death of her husband.

Informal trainers:

Fathers were at the top of Judith's list for informal trainers. Is it likely that they were the most important in providing training out of the others that were included? The list was not presented in order of relative importance, but it would be interesting to know who did most of the informal training.

The discussion did not include any reference to the value of schooling, and this was an oversight as girls were trained to read, write and do accounts.

How are women trained for new technologies for which they have no knowledge. Incremental knowledge was challenged as a concept in favour of larger scale top-down training, although the example given was a state –sponsored scheme on weaving.

Independence/dependence:

More complicated than female-dependent/male-independent. Men in Germany were not independent until they were married, so that journeymen, for example, were still dependent.

Domestic-market binary:

Separating women's activities into those for the market and those that were domestic is a false dichotomy, since domestic tasks are undertaken by servants and others who are paid for the task. Women's work is also about production, but production for the market is not always intentional.

A consideration of the involvement of women in market v. domestic production, while difficult, would help us to understand the role of women in economic change.

Regulated/unregulated binary:

Using the idea of regulated/unregulated training can hide more than it reveals. Some forms of training were effectively a hybrid, and the distinction misses out on such a lot in periods of swift change.

England as a comparator

It is important to remember when comparative work is being undertaken that England was ahead of Europe in the early modern period. Some of the difficulties arise because the discussion is partly framed by the large time scale – the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries were very different in England.

Also, we have to move beyond the household model. How did England expand from an economy producing a small number of semi-finished goods to one in which it became the workshop of the world? Some of this involved an extension of existing ability and creativity but later there must have been a need to train large numbers of people. Incremental knowledge does not seem enough to answer this enormous shift. Surely there must have been some other actor, possibly the state, but what about entrepreneurial activity?