

## *English summary*

# Holding the thread in her hands

## Women and wage labour in the Dutch textile industry, 1581-1810

The aim of this book is to explain (changes in) women's participation in the pre-industrial labour market and the gendered division of work by investigating developments in the textile industry of the Dutch Republic, most notably in spinning and weaving of wool and flax. In order to explore various possible explanations systematically, I have chosen to group them into four separate categories: technological/biological, economic, institutional, and socio-cultural explanations. With this categorisation I partly follow the division Sheilagh Ogilvie uses to analyse female labour market participation in pre-industrial Germany, although I have made some moderations to her scheme.

First of all, there are the 'technological and biological explanations' for the gendered division of labour. It is often believed that men's and women's different physical characteristics (with lesser body strength and greater dexterity for women, as well as women's reproductive function) automatically leads to differences in the sexual division of labour. Furthermore, technological change supposedly leads to separate applications of techniques for men and women. The mechanization of spinning, for instance, beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, would have led to a shift of spinning out of the hands of women into those of men.

The second category I define as 'economic explanations'. The most important of these are, in my view, economic trend, supply and demand in the labour market, and human capital formation. As for the effects of economic trend on women's work, opinions differ a great deal. Some economists and historians believe that a rising trend meant an increase in the share of women in the labour market and declining differences in the gendered division of labour, whereas others presume that it worked exactly the other way around. Furthermore, supply and demand in the specific local or regional labour market might also explain (changes in) female labour market participation and the sexual division of labour. For instance, alternative employment options may explain why in some periods or regions women (or men) perform certain kinds of work, whereas in other times or places they do not.

Third, there is a set of 'institutional explanations' that affected the developments in the labour market for men and women. The organization of production, for instance, is often regarded to have been decisive for men's and women's opportunities. The guild system would have hampered women's access to the labour

market, whereas the proto-industrial organization enlarged the share of female workers in the labour force as well as loosened the sexual division of labour. And finally, the rise of industrial capitalism in the long run supposedly restricted women's possibilities again.

Fourth and finally, I discern the category of socio-cultural explanations. Decisive factors for women might have been the life cycle and the way they functioned within the 'family economy'. The phase in a woman's life, her marital status, and her role within the household or family could have influenced if, and to what extent, she participated in the labour market. Another important socio-cultural explanation will have been the societal appreciation of work, both in the sense of the status and the payment attached to it. The question is whether the work women do is always esteemed and rewarded less simply because women perform it, or that there are more economic mechanisms behind the difference in status and remuneration.

Each of the chapters in this dissertation deals with one or more of these explanations. However, to make sure that the book is also accessible to readers who prefer a less constructed and more 'narrative' story, the order of the chapters follows a slightly different logic. In Chapter 2, the technological background of textile production is given, serving to provide the reader with the necessary technical information about the production process, but at the same time testing some of the technological explanations for the gendered division of labour.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the history of textile production in the Northern Netherlands in general, paying attention to geographical shifts and changes in the economic trend. First of all, this chapter serves to give broader contextual information about the (conjunctural changes in) textile industry in general, and in particular in the four case studies: Leiden, 's-Hertogenbosch, Tilburg, and Zwolle. In addition, the possible demand for spinners is calculated based on available production figures and the scarce trade statistics for this period. At the end of this chapter some first conclusions are drawn about the effects of economic changes on the labour force participation of women and the sexual division of labour.

However, to arrive at substantial conclusions, it is also necessary to examine the role and function of the local labour market. Therefore, Chapter 4 gives a detailed description and analysis of the participation of both men and women in the textile industry in the four areas under consideration. In doing this, I pay attention to the specific structure of the local economy, alternatives in the labour market, and structural changes in the work both men and women performed. It appears that there was a distinct gendered segmentation of the labour market, although this segmentation was never total and could well change over time. For one thing, not only women, but also men occur in the historical records as spinners, and on a large scale too, at least in wool spinning in all areas under investigation. The combined information of chapters 3 and 4 sheds more light on the set of economic explanations for this division and how and why it changed.

Subsequently, in Chapter 5, the role of the organization of production is explored. By investigating different ways of organizing textile production – guild-like, proto-industrial and more centralized forms of organization – I aim to assess the effect of institutions and institutional changes, but also the rise of capitalist relations of production on men's and women's work in this branch of industry.

Whereas the preceding chapters focus mainly on general, 'macro' developments, chapters 6 through 8 give more room for the experiences and coping strategies of male and female textile workers themselves. In Chapter 6 spinning is explored on the level of the household. The position of female spinners and the importance of their paid work within three different household types are discussed: single women, women living within the 'nuclear family' as wives or daughters, and widowed spinners.

The next chapter, Chapter 7, explores the importance of training and education, or, in other words, of 'human capital formation' for textile workers. It appears that the experiences of boys and girls in this respect were quite different. The segmentation of the labour market, as described and analysed in Chapter 4, was clearly shaped in the early years of adolescence, between 12 and 14 years of age, when children started to receive occupational training. Girls generally could not enter the 'skilled' trades, notably within the guild apprenticeship system, but neither outside corporate structures, whereas boys could. Nevertheless, it must also be stressed that not all boys had access to what were in general considered 'skilled professions'. Therefore, apart from gender, social background (in this book perhaps a little anachronistically referred to as 'class') also constituted an element in the segmentation of the pre-industrial labour market.

Chapter 8 examines the wages of textile workers, in particular those of spinners, and discusses whether gender discrimination occurred or that wage differentials between men and women were brought about by differences in productivity or other 'market-related' factors. Spinning provides an excellent case study here, for one thing because not much is known about spinning wages in the Dutch Republic yet, and for another because both men and women appear to have been spinning here, at least in the wool industry. Although at first sight it seems that men and women were paid equal piece rates, there was implicit gender discrimination. Male spinners were usually present in the better branches of the wool industry and, although women were also found in these segments, in general they were crowded into the less remunerating branches. Thus, even in the lower strata of the labour market, a certain degree of segmentation existed, favouring men more than women.

In the final chapter, the various explanations for the gendered segmentation of the labour market are brought together and their effects and possible interactions are weighed. The first category of technological and biological explanations appears to be greatly entangled with socio-cultural norms and constructions of what is supposed to be men's and what is supposed to be women's work in a cer-

tain period and region. Nevertheless, present-day historians often use them as an explanation, and I would argue that they shouldn't. First of all, not all men have great body strength, at least not always more than women, and not all kinds of work considered 'masculine' require a lot of strength. Furthermore, the argument that women are supposed to have greater dexterity than men, and would therefore be ultimately suitable for spinning, is not supported by my research. On the contrary, there were many male spinners in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch Republic.

Women's reproductive function or their household duties are in my view no adequate explanation either. Ten to fifteen percent of all women never married, and even married women not necessarily had children. Moreover, my research has shown that having children or doing household chores not necessarily restricted women in performing economic duties. And, last but not least, many 'male' professions were practised at home as well, so the argument that work such as spinning would be easy to combine with running a household could just as well apply to many other occupations that were hardly ever performed by women.

Finally the argument of technological development is mostly a gender construction as well. In practice, new machinery or techniques often involved a shift in gender work roles. However, these changes were often related to a redefinition of which work was highly skilled or had more status, and not to the actual (in)appropriateness of women for certain tasks. Therefore, technological change was never a necessary condition for changes in the sexual division of labour. Not for nothing these changes often occurred without any change in technology taking place.

Regarding the economic explanations, my research has pointed out that in general work opportunities for women expanded when the economic trend went up. First, this was expressed in a larger share of female heads of households among the registered population with an occupational record. Probably this increased labour participation also applied to women who were not household heads, as my calculations of required spinners point out. The favourable economic situation led to a rise in demand for labour, and especially within export industries such as the textile branch, which was an extremely conjuncture-sensitive sector. Also in a qualitative respect some groups of women profited from a good economic climate, leading to a larger share of women in relatively higher status jobs. This leads to the conclusion that in boom periods, the sexual division of labour became a little less strict, although it never entirely disappeared.

In this respect, the dynamics between supply and demand in the early modern labour market were also of importance. When new niches occurred in the textile industry, due to product innovations and changes in fashion, women seem to have been the first to enter them. Examples are the knitting and lace-making industries in the second half of the eighteenth century. Because of the large

demand for the new products, these branches paid higher wages than spinning and therefore formed an attractive alternative for women.

Despite the effects of the economic trend and subtle or sometimes larger changes in the sexual division of labour, the pre-industrial labour market remained highly segmented. Although there was a remarkable rise in the share of male spinners in the period under investigation, this did not mean that in typically 'male' occupations an influx of female workers occurred. And even within spinning, there were clear gendered patterns. Men usually spun in the better paying segments, such as wool spinning instead of flax spinning in Den Bosch and Zwolle, or the cloth industry against other woollen and worsted industries in Leiden. As was noted above, both sexes received the same piece rates for the same spinning work they performed, but since men spun in the best-paid segments, women obviously were underrepresented in these branches. Thus, 'occupational crowding' occurred both on the level of the labour market and within the textile branch and even within spinning. This led to seemingly supply-demand driven mechanisms in the labour market, with the large supply of female workers in a restricted number of occupations depressing the wages they received.

The segmentation in the labour market was strengthened by the lack of investment in the education and training of girls and young women. Since they were in most cases unlikely to enter so-called highly skilled professions that were often organized within guilds, parents invested less in their human capital formation. Where at first sight the lack of human capital building seems to be an economic explanation, it appears at the same time to be influenced by all kinds of institutional and socio-cultural factors.

This leads us to the third set of explanations: the institutional ones. My research has pointed out that, in contrast to what much of the historical literature suggests, the various ways of organizing textile production (through guilds, proto-industry or centralized production) did not have a unidirectional effect on female labour participation or the sexual division of labour. In practice, the various organizational forms often co-existed and even supplemented each other. It is remarkable that the often 'unwritten' restrictions for women that existed within the guild system, continued in 'early capitalist' forms of textile organization. In general, the segmentation of the labour market persisted despite changes in the organization of production, even though shifts in the sexual division of labour did occur, as the appearance of the male spinner shows. In this respect, it is striking that male spinners, as opposed to female spinners, managed to institutionalise their work, for instance within a guild, or by creating a certain hierarchy in which men referred to themselves with guild-like titles as 'master spinners'.

All of this suggests that the sexual division of labour was influenced by a combination of factors, which seems to have been greatly underpinned by socio-cultural gender norms. Therefore, the status and reward of female work in general remained low relative to male work. Despite the large demand for spinners in the

booming textile industry of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, their wages could remain comparatively low due to the effect of occupational crowding. When the economy declined, it was proletarianization that caused men to continue spinning, as the case of Tilburg clearly shows. Nevertheless, men spun in the better-paid segments, and could therefore, in spite of their unfavourable circumstances, attain a higher professional status than their female counterparts.

This rather pessimistic conclusion about the persistence of segmentation in the labour market cannot, however, be sufficiently explained by the existence of an unchanging patriarchy. There were too many fluctuations within the given power relations between men and women to come to such a rigid, ahistorical analysis. Perhaps even more important, the opportunities and restrictions in the labour market also varied a great deal for different members of the same sex. We should therefore not automatically position *all* women against *all* men. Many men from the lower strata of society were confronted with severe limitations as well, for instance within the guild system. Furthermore, not all women had the same experiences in their working lives: as my research shows, they differed according to class, age, and marital status.

All in all, there is no simple explanation for (fluctuations in) the participation of women in the pre-industrial labour market or the sexual division of labour. Some explanations I find more valid than others, but various factors interplayed and influenced each other. Technological and biological explanations are often based on the construction of what is male and what is female, and thus closely connected to the prevailing socio-cultural norms and ideas in a certain time and place. This combination had rather an invigorating than a weakening effect on existing patriarchal relations. Institutional factors seem to have worked both ways: they partly restricted and partly enlarged opportunities for women to work in the pre-industrial economy. Economic explanations, in their turn, cannot be separated from other factors. Seemingly supply-demand related factors such as the formation of human capital and occupational crowding are very much intertwined with the existing socio-cultural norms of what kind of work men and women should perform. Nevertheless, it seems that fluctuations in the economic trend, and their related developments in the (local) labour market, exerted a particularly large influence on changes in female labour market participation and the sexual division of labour. Furthermore, the process of proletarianization from the seventeenth century onwards, may have played a decisive role. In order to see whether these conclusions hold outside of the context of the Dutch Republic, comparative research is required.