Earning a Living in Europe during the 19th and 20th Centuries: a Question of Gender

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ABSTRACT

In the early twentieth century, the majority of women either worked in their homes, were farmers, or served as isolated and specialized seamstresses paid for piecework. In the twenty-first century, practically all women are salaried employees regardless of their family situation or their spouse's profession, and leave home to work, even if only for a few hours. With the spread of salaried employment, their labour has now become visible and disconnected from their family status. The divorce between professional and family status is now complete, with this situation no longer being seen as shameful and miserable for a number of decades. During the second half of the twentieth century, work served as a springboard towards economic independence for women, a major step towards freedom.

Women are far from being a minority in the working world. The contributions of their hard physical labour have always been immense and invaluable. Their work has never been incidental for society, just as their salary today is more than just extra income for the family.

Turret lathe operator machining parts (Lot-et-Garonne, March 13, 1913)

Rye harvest on Gotland (Sweden 1900-1910). Source: Wikimedia Commons
https://goo.gl/sZZDR1

Women working in a factory in Great Britain producing gas masks during the Great War. Source: Wellcome Library, London
https://wellcomeimages.org/indexplus/image/L0009248.html

Women have made decisive contributions to the overall economic and social transformations in Europe since the Industrial Revolution. That said, encompassing two centuries of activity by men and women from one end of Europe to the other is not a simple task. The broad outlines of economic transformations are familiar: the decline of agriculture in favour of industry and then an expansion of the service sector boosted by the development of trade and services. These changes were accompanied by urban concentration, technological and social advances, a transformation of working conditions and a gradual development of workforce qualifications. However, the expansion of salaried work, the transition from a fragmented peasantry to the workshops of “modern times,” along with the subsequent development of department stores and public services, did not undergo linear or comparable progress from one country to another. Poverty and misery existed in all areas and periods, although some were affected more often and deeply than others. Numbers are lacking to accurately study the decrease, maintenance and return of rurality, or the rise and decline of the textile industry, the contribution of metallurgy and later electronics and information technology and the development of transportation, hospitals, and schools. The histories of countries differ from Western to Eastern Europe, with leaps forwards and steps back, political choices and the impact of wars. Despite the standardization at work for a number of decades, Europe still presents

dissimilarities which are rooted in history: from Romania to Belgium, Sweden to Greece, Italy to Estonia, Spain to Luxembourg, Ireland to Germany… There is a lack of rigorous historical and quantitative comparisons.

While certain professions in the twenty-first century are to varying degrees masculine and feminine bastions, the gender of various trades has undergone numerous changes. There are indeed few women on construction sites and it is rare to find men who carry out household tasks or the education of young children on a professional basis. The rise of women's work in salaried employment was promoted by the expansion of the service sector in the economy, although the pace was not the same in Northern and Southern Europe. In agriculture and domestic workshops, for instance, the entire family worked. Advances—albeit uneven—in laws and children's education, brought with them the circulation of ideas, spread of exchanges, and an increasingly skilled workforce. This resulted in a more balanced distribution of jobs and a reduction in the gender pay gap, although crises and unemployment sometimes lastingly undid in one place what technological progress and financial assistance promoted in another.

Women's contributions to the pre-Industrial and industrial economy during the nineteenth century

The lack of objective data on women's work since the first Industrial Revolution has for a long time caused an underestimation of their contribution to the economy of pre-industrial and industrial European societies. In a context predominated by small family businesses, in which the family was the unit of production and the head of household the only one who might be identified as a craftsman, farmer, or shopkeeper, the work of women, children, and the elderly was neither recorded nor counted. Women's work was nevertheless considerable and indispensable. This was true in the rural world and agriculture, which was the largest economic sector until the late nineteenth century. It was also the case in the cotton industry, which developed in the British countryside from the late eighteenth century and until the 1820s operated within the framework of the domestic system (in which farmers completed the tasks contracted by factories at home), thereby initiating the cycle of Industrial Revolutions. Yet this work was unpaid, or rarely paid in individual form: agricultural activity was not always converted into cash, and for a long time was solely intended for family reproduction. Cotton processing was paid by the volume of processed material (delivered to the artisan by the agent contracting the work), without taking into consideration the time spent or the workers mobilized. The home as a place of production was placed under the authority of the father. The invaluable work contributed by women did not count, in the sense that it was seen as a self-sacrifice that was wholeheartedly offered during one's spare time, carrying out the infinite repetition of tasks associated with everyday upkeep and family reproduction.

However, with the transition from the domestic system to the factory system (in which labourers worked in factories), the mobilization of women's (and children's) labour clearly appeared in the surveys conducted, for instance by the British authorities. Resisting the transformation of their way of life, households in Great Britain and elsewhere kept wives and mothers at home for "piecework," and sent children and the young of both sexes to factories. The First Industrial Revolution, which primarily involved textiles (cotton, ribbon, silk, knitting), was feminine in both the home and the factory, sometimes exclusively so. For all that, not all of these new female recruits received a real salary. For instance, the prestige of Lyon's silk industry was partly based on "silk convents." Young peasant girls joined these convents around the age of twelve and withered away, locked up and educated in exchange for a pittance, which was paid directly to the family, and supposed to contribute to their dowry.

This new world of female workers in factories was accompanied by the earlier world of employed domestic servants. Domestic work was a considerable employment sector until the outbreak of war in 1914. The low-ranking maid or cook did not receive a salary either, but instead the guarantee of advantages such as on-site room and board. It is important to note the alarming scope of home work in European cities in 1900 (known as the sweating

system, a term that emphasizes the exploitation of piecework). This came at a time when the industrialization and urbanization movement was largely advanced, and the concentration of manpower in factories had reached unprecedented levels in the male industries of bicycles, mechanics, and later metallurgy. There was a very high degree of unprotected piecework completed by women at home in connection with the sewing machine, or in the essentially manual industry of artificial flowers, for instance.

The labour of female farmers

During the first decades of the twentieth century, men, women, and children worked in both the fields and factories: in 1901 16% of those under 18 years of age in metropolitan France were listed on the census as workers (20% of boys and 13% of girls). Overall, the percentage of working men (68%) was nearly double that of women (35%). Nevertheless, the difficulty of defining what counted as—and was identified as—work for women is a recurring theme in censuses from these years: early twentieth-century census books for the French population include phrases such as "the classification of women is often a matter of interpretation," or "we do not have precise criteria for classifying women."

Agriculture remained the primary sector of the economy in most European countries until the 1940s, although it had begun to decline in favour of industrialization, which was more or less accelerated depending on the country. In this respect, the transformation was much more advanced in Great Britain than elsewhere.

However, as the statistician Jean Daric has noted, there were "highly different conceptions that governed how the female population in agriculture was counted." In France, from 1906 to 1954 farmers' wives who did not declare another economic activity were automatically counted as agricultural managers. This was also the case in certain countries such as Germany and Czechoslovakia, although it was far from being a general rule. For instance, around 1930, the proportion of women tallied in the active agricultural population varied in the raw data between 6% in Great Britain and 50% in Germany (41% in France). Of course, these differences were not plausible, as they depended on the different contours of statistical definitions that affected the boundaries between economic activity and inactivity.

The problem of taking a census of women's work in agriculture was raised throughout Europe until at least the early 1960s: was a peasant woman in a field working, or simply gazing at the landscape? In France for instance, a change in the definition for the active agricultural population helped to significantly diminish the number of women farmers—and consequently the number of working women. Twentieth century labour history asserts that the professional employment of women declined between 1901 and 1962. This, however, is what one may call a statistical optical illusion, which resulted from a change in the definition of what constituted agricultural activity. At the beginning of the century, all adults living with a farmer who did not have another declared occupation were considered as farmers themselves. These adults were primarily farmers' wives. In 1954, experts decided to count within agriculture only those people who explicitly declared that they practiced the profession. As a result, they reconsidered female activity in accordance with a powerful but unexplained assumption: female farmers who did not declare themselves as such were considered to be inactive, whereas up to that point the opposite assumption had been self-evident. This change of definition abruptly removed 1.2 million people—including nearly 1 million women—from the active French population. It is not surprising given these conditions that women's work appeared to decline.

The non-agricultural active population during the 1930s

To limit this bias in his international comparisons, Jean Daric focused his study of the feminization of employment during the 1930s on the active non-agricultural population, focusing on countries where it is possible to make this distinction. He then affirmed that the women's employment rate in France in non-agricultural professions "was among the highest in the world" (23% excluding the agricultural population, 34% if including female farmers). This

rate was surpassed only by Great Britain (with quicker industrial development than France) and Switzerland (27%). France was followed by Belgium and Sweden (21%), Germany and Denmark (20%), and Norway (19%).

Around 1930, the proportion of women in the active non-agricultural French population (34% in 1931) was comparable to Switzerland (37%) as well as Sweden and Denmark (35%), and ahead of Norway (33%), Poland (32%), Great Britain (31%), and Germany (30%).

Proportion of women in the active non-agricultural population during the 1930s, international comparisons

Jean Daric, “L’activité professionnelle des femmes en France,” *Travaux et documents*, Ined and PUF, notebook no. 5, 1947.

In all countries where it was possible to make the observation, young women worked more frequently than those above 35 years of age. The trends for activity by age decrease around 25 years of age, often doing so rapidly: one can suppose that during the 1930s, many women left their economic activity when they married (or changed activity to devote themselves to agriculture).

The trend for the employment rate of French women is particular in that it was much more regular, because it was relatively higher for more advanced ages in comparison to other countries. In Czechoslovakia, Holland, and Italy, the share of women in non-agricultural activity was lower for all ages as compared to France (for Holland as little as half the figure for more advanced ages). On the contrary, in other countries the proportion of young women working was higher than in France (in Switzerland, Great Britain, and notably Denmark), but decreased very quickly with age, with employment rates for older women being lower than in France (except in Switzerland).

Marriage often represented a more or less pronounced obstacle to women’s economic activity during the 1930s. France had the highest proportion of wives (39%) among active women (not including agriculture). This proportion was also fairly high in Belgium (37%) and Czechoslovakia (30%), but lower in Holland (9%), Sweden (13%), and Great Britain (15%). Italy, Switzerland (19%), and Hungary (18%) occupied intermediary positions. These proportions were of course dependent on the country’s marriage pattern: the age of marriage varied between 24 years of age in France and 27 in Switzerland and Sweden, with the share of married women therefore being different. However, in France one married woman out of five worked in a non-agricultural sector (19%), a figure that was slightly lower in Belgium (17%) and Switzerland (14%), as opposed to one in ten in Great Britain and Czechoslovakia, and one in twenty in Hungary, Italy, and Holland.

Furthermore, in Switzerland, Great Britain, and Sweden, where women’s employment rate in non-agricultural activities was very high, the employment rate for married women was considerably lower than in France.

The arrival of salaried staff and the feminization of the working world

The first half of the twentieth century was marked by the rise of administrative and service sector jobs, as well as the gradual feminization of employment. In France, the proportion of jobs in business rose from 10 to 14% between 1901 and 1936, while the proportion of women in these jobs rose from 37 to 42%. Administrative public services remained limited during this period (3-4% of jobs), although the proportion of women in this sector increased from 16 to 29%. From 1936 and 1962, the fall in agriculture was offset by the development of industry. The service sector developed markedly beginning in the 1960s, rising in France from 45% to 72% of jobs from 1968 to 1999, with the proportion of women increasing from 46% to 53%.

There were other signs of transformations that would come later: the interwar period marked the beginning of

women's access to professions, which was dependent on the civil and political rights they enjoyed. These long-term victories, which were initially on an individual basis and limited to a few pioneers, paved the way for the inevitable and spectacular advances in women's education in Europe during the second half of the twentieth century.

During the wars, women had to replace the men who had gone to the front in certain traditionally male-dominated sectors such as metallurgy. They were recruited at much lower salaries, even when they held the same positions, notably in France and England. After the conflict they remained in their positions for a certain time, as the demographics of the period were still unbalanced due to the human loss of males. Yet the effect of the wars, which has often been cited as one of the primary drivers of women's employment, appears transient upon closer examination of French statistics. Once reconstruction ended, its impact disappeared fairly quickly, as immigrants and later new generations of men replaced women. The employment rate of women almost returned to its initial level. In the words of Patricia Bouillaguet-Bernard, Annie Gauvin-Ayel, and Jean-Luc Outin, "it was as though women's preparation for productive employment during the war had no lasting consequence and was perfectly temporary."

In most European countries there was a groundswell beginning in the 1960s, with continued and robust growth in the number of active women. Over the last five decades in Europe, the labour force was essentially renewed by growth in women's employment. During the 1960s, women represented 30% of the European Union's active population, as opposed to 45% in the early twenty-first century. This growth was underpinned by two major transformations: the expansion of service sector jobs, and the surge in salaried employment. Women's employment rates grew everywhere but did so at different paces depending on the country, as highlighted by the tables and trends.

For men, changes in employment rate during the century were simple. Other than the highly specific moments of wars or their aftermaths, men had a very high rate of employment during the middle of the life cycle. The expansion of schooling and the right to a retirement during the twentieth century eliminated more and more youth and senior citizens from the labour market, leading to a concentration of male economic activity within the intermediate ages (between 35 and 55 years old), and within a single generation. The extent of this concentration depended on the country, as the youngest and oldest experienced particularly low employment rates in France during the 1990s. This was less true in Great Britain and Germany, where the educational system led more quickly to cooperative training courses or company-based management of youth, as well as in Northern countries, where the retirement age was appreciably higher.

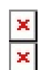
The tendency is reversing in Europe at the turn of the twenty-first century, with employment rates for youth and older groups increasing as a result of public policies. However, due to economic crises, short- or part-time work and unemployment are having a massive effect on both youngsters entering the job market and senior citizens, to varying degrees depending on the country.

Women's labour force participation rate in European countries

1970-2013 ranking according to the participation rate of women in 2013

Source: OECD. Field: women aged 15 to 64 (and men aged 15 to 64 in the last column)

Women's employment rate by age in certain European countries, 1970-2011



Source: OECD and calculations by the authors.

Occupations of yesteryear, professions of today: still far from gender parity

From the decline of agriculture to industrialization and the explosion of the service sector, the transformation of the economy has spread across Europe. Yet just as was true earlier, numerous trades and sectors remain highly gendered today. Women are still present in agriculture, domestic services, and certain industrial sectors such as textiles and the clothing industry, which have been in decline over the last two centuries. Yet they are very rare in construction and metallurgy, which remain male bastions throughout Europe. Some branches in electronics use women's labour, sometimes under the pretext of its dexterity, although the advancement of women in the highly skilled professions of information technology is strikingly slow in Europe (which appears not to be the case in certain Asian countries).

With the expansion of salaried work and the service sector, women play an important role in offices everywhere. Some skilled trades which were previously reserved for men have become broadly mixed in the early twenty-first century thanks to breakthroughs in women's education: professors, doctors, judges, lawyers, and administrative managers are increasingly women. However, on average they are not present within the same specializations or at the same level of responsibility as men and are paid less for equal qualifications. After domestic work, the preferred sectors for European women are now education, health, and administration.

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