

## **Counting women in. Female labour market participation in the Dutch textile industry, c. 1600-1800**

*First draft, not to be cited without the author's permission*

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### **Introduction**

In the historiography, two contrasting views exist about the relationship between female labour market participation and pre-industrial economic development.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, historians such as Hans Medick, Jan de Vries and Jan Luiten van Zanden have argued that proto-industrialization, economic specialization and commercialization would have been favourable for women's participation in the labour market, and, the other way around, that risen female economic activity stimulated the economy even further.<sup>2</sup> Some authors even go as far as to argue that the widespread entrance of (young) women in the labour market would have enabled processes of economic modernization.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, there are historians such as Simon Schama and Hettie Pott-Buter, who have argued that pre-industrial economic growth led to rising incomes, which would have decreased the need for women to contribute to the family budget by being active in the labour market. Especially in the prosperous Dutch Republic, this 'bourgeois' ideal of domesticity would have already trickled down to the lower strata of society as early as in the seventeenth century. In their view, economic and cultural developments went hand in hand in lowering the labour participation of women, and this is even used to historically explain the relatively low percentages of women in the Dutch labour market in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

As appealing as the grand hypotheses of previous historians may have been, so far, nobody has attempted to test them empirically by establishing the numbers and percentages of working women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the Dutch Republic as a whole.<sup>5</sup> This lack of a firm quantitative basis is usually explained by the

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of using the term 'female labour force participation', I choose to refer here to 'female labour market participation', because 'labour force' implies the working population between age 15 and 65. In my view, this is an unworkable definition for the pre-industrial labour market, in which young and old participated just the same. I do wish to refer to the labour *market*, in order to exclude non-market work, which I certainly do not want to discard as being of little importance, but which is too complicated to study with the currently available data and methods. In the future, I hope some more work will be done on these particularly interesting and important issues, such as unpaid domestic housework and child care.

<sup>2</sup> Kriedte, Medick, and Schlumbohm, *Industrialisation before industrialisation*, 61-62; De Vries, 'The Industrial Revolution', 255-258; Noordegraaf and Van Zanden, 'Early modern economic growth', 426.

<sup>3</sup> De Moor and Van Zanden, *Vrouwen*, 10, 103.

<sup>4</sup> Schama, *The embarrassment of riches*, 407; Pott-Buter, *Facts and fairy tales*, 48, 282.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this is also the case for many other regions. See e.g. Ogilvie, 'Women and labour markets', 25-28.

difficulties to uncover women's economic activities in the historical records.<sup>6</sup> However, I think it is possible to make such an attempt by making a model of the pre-industrial Dutch labour market by taking several subsequent steps. First of all, it is of course important to establish minimal figures by using the available data on the work of women, usually heads of households. However, in order to try to come to terms with the labour market participation of women other than heads of households, it is necessary to apply methods that can give us some indication of the economic activity of married women and live-in single women as well. In my view, such steps involve the extrapolation of female workers in important economic sectors for women, such as the textile industry, and by aggregating local data to a more general level.

In this paper, I will make a first attempt to do so, by putting together information on female household heads and estimates of the participation of other women in several important economic sectors at various points in time. Firstly, I will look at women's labour market participation in the Dutch textile industry. I will not only look at numbers documented in historical sources such as population registers and censuses, but I will also estimate the participation share of non-household heads, such as married women and boarding single women.<sup>7</sup> The Dutch textile industry represents an excellent case study, not only due to its general importance for the pre-industrial economy of the Netherlands and, in fact, for the whole of Europe, but also because, as elsewhere, the share of women in this sector was traditionally high.<sup>8</sup>

Subsequently, a brief overview will be made of female economic activity in other sectors. The stress will be on two very important branches for women: commerce and domestic work. Furthermore, I will make some suggestions for aggregating my estimates, which are mainly based on local data, to a more general level of the Dutch Republic. Finally, I will make some, very preliminary, conclusions based on these first research results.

### **An excellent case study: female labour market participation in the Dutch Republic**

For several reasons, the Dutch Republic is a region *par excellence* to study the relationship between economic development and the participation of women in the labour market. First of all, in broad lines, the Republic's economy was booming for a large part of the seventeenth century, whereas stagnation and partial decline occurred for much of the eighteenth century. Although these are two interesting periods to study in their own right, they also offer the opportunity of a long-run analysis in order to establish possible effects of economic growth and decline on female labour market participation.

Secondly, the Netherlands, and the province of Holland especially, witnessed an early and widespread emergence of wage labour, not only in towns, but also on the countryside.<sup>9</sup> The traditional argument by women's historians has been that the emergence of capitalist relations and production for the market severely hampered women's involvement in the labour market.<sup>10</sup> However, more recently some historians

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. De Vries and Van der Woude, *First modern economy*, 596.

<sup>7</sup> See also: Van Nederveen Meerkerk, *De draad in eigen handen*, 89-98, 104-141.

<sup>8</sup> De Vries and Van der Woude, *First modern economy*, 270-272; Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Segmentation', most notably 194, 200, 208.

<sup>9</sup> Noordegraaf en Van Zanden, 'Early modern economic growth'; 'Van Bavel, 'Rural wage labour'.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance: Clark, *Working life of women*; Tilly and Scott, *Women, work and the family*; Howell, *Women, production and patriarchy*.

have argued that the emergence of wage labour instead contributed to a relatively high degree of autonomy among women in the Low Countries.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the early emerging capitalist relations may have been favourable for women's labour market participation and the Dutch Republic seems an important case for testing this.<sup>12</sup>

Thirdly, the Dutch Republic, together with England, is assumed to have been one of the first regions to have experienced pivotal changes in the productive and consumptive behaviour of their inhabitants. Among others, historian Jan de Vries has argued that developments such as the 'industrious revolution' and the 'consumer revolution' started in these regions, as early as in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Women, and especially married women, supposedly played a very important, may be even crucial, role in this development, because they were the ones that in particular would have enlarged their economic activity, and often determined (part of) their families' consumptive behaviour.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the early modern source material for investigating women's work is relatively largely available and of good quality in the Dutch archives.<sup>14</sup> I have mainly used material from local archives, because the Dutch Republic was a federal state, which left much of its census and population administration to individual provinces and towns. Apart from these local administrations, many other sources were used, such as poor relief records, criminal records, requests by citizens, et cetera. However, for investigating early modern female labour market participation, local data on registered heads of households and their occupations, form the first basis. There are all kinds of difficulties when using population registrations for studying labour in past societies, and probably far more for women's than for men's work.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, these sources give at least an indication of the minimum numbers of working male and female heads of households. I have brought together several of these datasets for four separate towns in the Dutch Republic: Leiden, Tilburg, Den Bosch and Zwolle, which are the principle case studies for this paper, but colleagues have provided other towns as well.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 1 shows the division of male and female household heads in several registrations for various towns in the Dutch Republic in the period 1581-1812. The graph immediately displays the difficulty that, when looking at women's occupational records, some registrations contain a much larger share of no or unknown occupations for women than others. Although this may reflect an actual shift in the labour market participation of female household heads over time, it may also be due to under registration of women's work or to inconsistency of the sources.<sup>17</sup> Still, it is clear from the graph that, varying

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<sup>11</sup> De Moor and Van Zanden, *Vrouwen*, e.g. 67-76.

<sup>12</sup> See also Van Nederveen Meerkerk, *De draad in eigen handen*, 320.

<sup>13</sup> McKendrick, 'Home demand and economic growth', 197-200; Berg, *The age of manufactures*, 169-172; De Vries, 'Between purchasing power'; De Vries, 'The Industrial Revolution'.

<sup>14</sup> In 2002, a comprehensive research project started at the International Institute of Social History, which aimed to collect, process and study a large number of sources, to make both qualitative and more quantitative analyses of women's work in the Dutch Republic. For more information about the project, see <http://www.iisg.nl/research/womenswork.php>.

<sup>15</sup> Hill, Van Nederveen Meerkerk.

<sup>16</sup> Acknowledgements to Danielle van den Heuvel for providing me with the dataset for Amsterdam 1742.

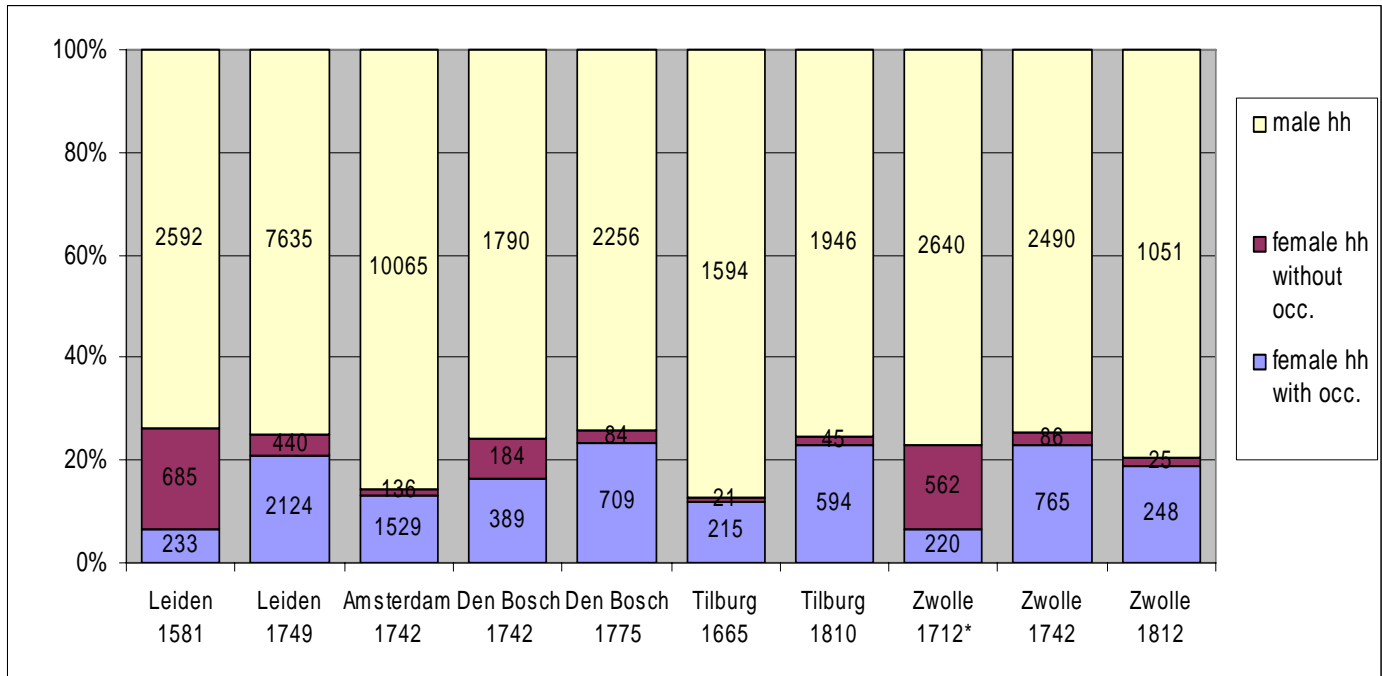
See for a more complete overview of our data collection:

<http://www.helsinki.fi/iehc2006/papers1/Heuvel.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> At least for the census of Zwolle in 1712, we know that a lot of information on women's work went unrecorded in the source. Van Wijngaarden, *Zorg voor de kost*, 154.

according to place and time, 15 to 30 percent of all heads of households were women, and that a considerable part of them had a registered occupation. This is important information, which enables us to draw some conclusions about absolute minimum numbers. Generally, these female household heads were widows or single women, who worked in various sectors of the pre-industrial urban economy, although there was a notable sexual division of labour.<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 1 – Male and female household heads in various urban registrations**



Apart from these female household heads, however, there were also many married and live-in single women who performed economic activity that generally goes unrecorded in the archival sources. In the rest of this paper, I will suggest some methods for making estimates of these other groups of working women, by focusing on some very important economic sectors for women, starting with their involvement in the textile industry.

**Women’s work in the early modern Dutch textile industry**

The Dutch Republic had many different types of textile production, ranging from luxury fabrics such as silk to the textiles for more basic use, such as hemp, wool and linen. However, wool and linen were by far the most important textile products in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>19</sup> In broad lines, the wool and linen industries in the Dutch Republic evolved as follows in the period under investigation. Between circa 1580

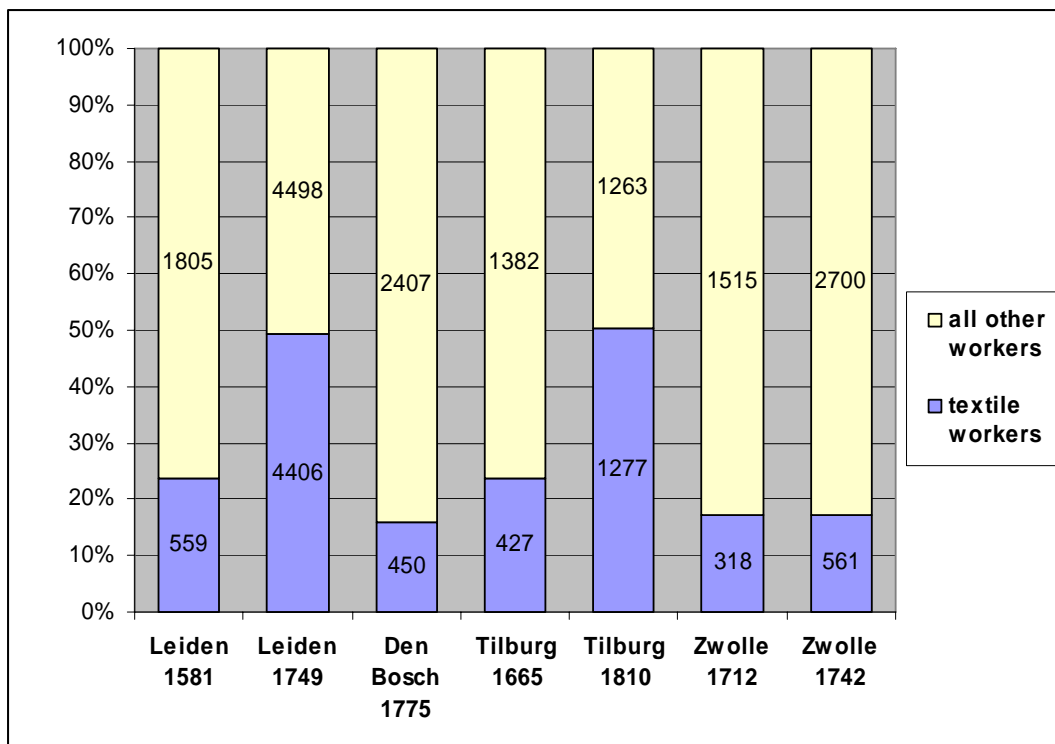
<sup>18</sup> See also: Van Nederveen Meerkerk, ‘Segmentation’.

<sup>19</sup> Before the Industrial Revolution, purely cotton fabrics were usually produced in Asia, and the use of cotton yarn in Europe was predominantly restricted to the making of mixed fabrics, such as fustian (mixture of linen and cotton). This was due to the low nominal wages of cotton spinners in Asia, but most prominently by the fact that they were highly productive. Parthasarathi, ‘Rethinking wages’, 79-109.

and 1650 Leiden and Haarlem, two cities in the coastal province of Holland, formed the undisputed production centres of woollen and linen fabrics respectively. In most other towns of the Dutch Republic, there was still some textile production left, but not on a similarly large-scale, export-oriented basis. After 1650, however, Leiden and Haarlem gradually but surely lost their pole position to the more peripheral and rural textile areas in the southern (wool and linen) and the eastern (linen) provinces of the Dutch Republic.<sup>20</sup>

The importance and spread of the textile industry can be derived from numerous sources, such as the archives of local guilds and the rich sources the Leiden cloth industry has left behind, but also from population registrations and censuses. These last two sources are particularly important when we want to investigate the number of workers in this branch (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2 – Heads of households in textiles as % of registered working population**



When we look at employment opportunities in the Dutch Republic, the textile industry was very important for men as well as for women throughout the entire research period. For instance, in Leiden in 1581 almost 24% of all heads of households worked in this industry, and this was clearly before the real take-off of the wool industry in the city. In 1749, in fact already 75 years after the real peak of the industry, still 49% of all registered heads of households worked in the textile industry.<sup>21</sup> And in Zwolle, which was a provincial industrial town in the east of the Dutch Republic with no notable economic

<sup>20</sup> Van Nederveen Meerkerk, *De draad in eigen handen*, 72-77, 98.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Volkstelling Leiden 1581 with Volkstelling Leiden 1749.

specialization, textiles were indeed the most important branch, employing around 18% of all registered household heads throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>22</sup> But also in less industrially oriented cities, such as 's-Hertogenbosch, which was a typically commercial town, the textile industry was the most important industry, comprising almost 16% of all working heads of households in 1775.<sup>23</sup> Also in certain rural areas, the textile industry was very important. In the village of Tilburg, for instance, which became a truly 'proto-industrialized' region in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the percentage of heads of households in textiles rose from 24 in 1665 to more than 50 in 1810!<sup>24</sup> On the countryside of Holland as well, some villages specialized in textiles, such as Graft.<sup>25</sup>

When the gender division of labour within these localities is taken into account, the statistics show us that for women, the textile industry was even more vital than for men. Both in specialized textile regions and in provincial towns without an explicit textile industry, most female heads of households with an occupation worked in the textile branch. As we can see in Table 1, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, at least 20 percent, and in some cases up to around 60 percent of all heads of households in textiles were women. Moreover, in most regions and periods the textile industry was the most important employer for female heads of households, not only in textile centres such as Leiden and Tilburg, but also elsewhere.

**Table 1 - Male and female household heads in the textile industry**

	No. of men	% of textile	% of all registered men	No. of women	% of textile	% of all registered women
Leiden 1581	342	79.2%	20.7%	90	20.8%	38.6%
Leiden 1749	3,230	73.3%	47.6%	1,176	26.7%	55.4%
Den Bosch 1742	75	63.0%	4.9%	44	37.0%	11.3%
Den Bosch 1775	192	43.0%	9.2%	255	57.0%	36.0%
Tilburg 1665	285	67.2%	21.2%	139	32.8%	64.7%
Tilburg 1810	830	65.0%	44.6%	447	35.0%	75.3%
Zwolle 1712	234	73.6%	15.7%	84	26.4%	38.2%
Zwolle 1742	260	46.4%	11.1%	300	53.6%	39.2%
Zwolle 1812	64	39.0%	6.5%	100	61.0%	40.3%

Sources, see: Van Nederveen Meerkerk, *De draad in eigen handen*, 328-332.

Of course, these figures still only represent registered working *heads of households*; it is to be expected that the share of non-heads of households working in the textile branch was also considerable in most of the Dutch Republic. Wives, children and other women who lived in a household with relatives or non-relatives, were frequently involved in textile production, notably spinning and other relatively poorly valued textile jobs.

<sup>22</sup> Compare Van Wijngaarden, *Zorg voor de kost*, 265-275 with Volkstelling 1742.

<sup>23</sup> Blokboeken 's-Hertogenbosch 1775. It has to be noted that the third quarter of the eighteenth century was particularly favourable for textile production (especially lace making) in this area. In more regular years, the share of textile production was lower, about 6-10% of all working heads of households.

<sup>24</sup> Compare Kapitale schatting Tilburg 1665 and Volkstelling Tilburg 1810.

<sup>25</sup> Van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship*, 79.

Because processes like spinning, hackling and carding formed ‘bottlenecks’ in the production process of pre-industrial textiles, a lot of labour was needed in order to provide weavers with handspun yarn.<sup>26</sup> Especially in times of economic upswing, when the demand for (luxury) textile products rose, a lot of this ‘flexible’ labour potential was supposedly used. Although in the Dutch Republic both woollen and linen yarn was imported as well, there are many indications that this import could not meet with all of the demand. And in some textile regions, such as Tilburg, importing spun wool from elsewhere was even explicitly forbidden. In periods of economic growth high participation rates of married women and children could be reached, mounting to an estimated 25% of all non-household heads in textile-oriented areas.<sup>27</sup>

Based on available production figures of woollen and linen, it is possible to make estimates of the activity rates of women in the pre-industrial textile industry. I have to stress that, except for the very complete dataset of Tilburg in 1810, I have used minimal estimates of people working in the textile industry, in order to prevent overestimation. Thus, I have taken the minimum numbers of spinners needed for the total production of woven cloth according to my calculations in my dissertation, and subtracted a considerable 50% with regard to the import of yarns. The results of these calculations are represented in Table 2 below.<sup>28</sup>

**Table 2 – Estimates of female labour market participation in textiles**

	1581	1665	c. 1750	1775	c. 1810
<b>textile areas</b>					
no. of female household heads	90	139	1,176		447
no. of non-household heads*	1,136	1,000	6,500		1,471**
total female textile workers	1,226	1,139	7,676		1,918
% of all women	18.0%	29.6%	37.5%		37.4%
<b>urban non-textile areas</b>					
no. of female household heads			344	255	94
no. of non-household heads*			1,280	900	126
total female textile workers			1,624	1,155	220
% of all women			11.4%	15%	5.5%
Sources: 1581: Volkstelling Leiden; 1665: Kapitale Schatting Tilburg; c. 1750: Volkstelling Leiden 1749, Biljettering Den Bosch 1742, Volkstelling Zwolle 1742; 1775: Blokboeken & Poor Relief records Den Bosch 1775; 1810: Volkstelling Tilburg 1810, Volkstelling Zwolle 1812.					
* based on estimates for spinning, and on poor relief records (Den Bosch 1775). Of course, also children were spinning, and among them also male children, but their number will have been negligible compared to the number of women and girls spinning.					
** only women and girls					

In this table, I have left out the activities of women who were married to textile craftsmen, but we have to reckon with the fact that they often worked alongside with

<sup>26</sup> Van Nederveen Meerkerk, *De draad in eigen handen*, 20, 275.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, 99, 140-141. For the import restrictions in Tilburg, see: Van Gorp, *Brabantse stoffen*, 52.

<sup>28</sup> Except for woollen yarns in Tilburg, where the import of woollen yarns was not allowed, as stated above.

and/or assisted their husband in his craft.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the already considerable participation rates calculated in Table 2, may even have been higher, both in textile and non-textile areas, but since it is hard to separate and quantify the work of wives from their husbands, and because a lot of the women mentioned here may not have worked on a fulltime basis, I choose to hold on to these figures to be on the safe side. Below, I will shortly come back to the question of participation of craftsmen's and tradesmen's wives.

From these estimates, we can see that in textile areas, before the actual take-off of the textile industry – that is, Leiden 1581 and Tilburg 1665 – at least 18-30 percent of all women (including girls) worked in textiles. When the textile industry had reached (Tilburg 1810), or even passed its zenith (Leiden 1749), these percentages had risen to a strikingly equal 37.5. Unfortunately, only in Tilburg in 1810 it was possible to distinguish between male and female children, but we can safely say that spinners, representing most of the figures on non-heads of households in textiles in Table 2, were usually girls.<sup>30</sup>

Not surprisingly, in non-textile areas, female labour market participation rates in textiles were considerably lower, not more than 15% of all women in the period for which we have data. It is however conceivable that especially here alternative employment opportunities were found in other sectors such as trade or domestic service, and I will come back to this in the next section. Moreover, even in non-textile areas, the textile industry temporarily gained more importance, as was the case in Den Bosch in the second half of the eighteenth century, when lace-making became very prominent for some decades.<sup>31</sup> As the figures for 1775 show, this immediately led to an increase of female activity rates in textiles. However, when the lace industry declined again, as happened rather quickly at the end of the eighteenth century,<sup>32</sup> the opposite effect is visible in the figures of around 1810 (see Table 2).

### **Female labour market participation in the Dutch Republic: a first effort**

Assessing approximate participation rates in the pre-industrial textile industry is of course important, because it was such a vital industry for women, but it is by no means the whole story. For one thing, in most rural areas, except perhaps from a few early proto-industrialized regions,<sup>33</sup> agricultural labour will have been by far the most common activity for married, unmarried or widowed women. Unfortunately, hardly anything is known about their activities, and probably less about their numbers, but it is clear that both as wives of farmers and as wage labourers, they were heavily involved in all sorts of agricultural work.<sup>34</sup> The involvement of women and girls also becomes clear when we look at the scarce data on agricultural child labour in the pre-industrial Netherlands.

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<sup>29</sup> See for the work of husbands and wives in industry and the degree to which they may have cooperated: Erickson, 'Married women's occupations', and Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Couples cooperating?'.  
<sup>30</sup> For instance in Leiden in the first half of the 17th century, only 7 percent of all boys in textiles spun. See Van Nederveen Meerkerk and Schmidt, 'Tussen arbeid en beroep', 34.

<sup>31</sup> See also Prak, 'Arme und reiche Handwerker', and Panhuysen, *Maatwerk*.

<sup>32</sup> Panhuysen, *Maatwerk*, 202.

<sup>33</sup> Jan Luiten van Zanden has shown that at the beginning of the sixteenth century, already 33% of all people in the Holland countryside worked outside the primary sector. Van Zanden, 'Taking the measure', 138. However, Holland was still the exception – albeit an important exception – rather than the rule in the Northern Netherlands.

<sup>34</sup> Van Cruyningen, 'Vrouwenarbeid in de Zeeuwse landbouw'.



Either helping their parents or as servants in other households, both boys and girls were omnipresent in agricultural work.<sup>35</sup> Although the Dutch Republic was a comparatively highly urbanized region, still a large part of the population lived in the countryside (see Table 3), implying that, especially outside of the province of Holland, the agrarian sector must have been the most important employer for both men and women.

**Table 3 – Population (x 1,000) and urbanization rates of the Dutch Republic and the province of Holland, 1600-1815**

	1600	1675	1750	1815
Dutch Republic urban		815	755	817
Dutch Republic rural		1,035	1,145	1,361
Dutch Republic total	1,500	1,850	1,900	2,178
<b>urbanization rate</b>		<b>42%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>35%</b>
Holland urban		540	475	440
Holland rural		343	308	309
Holland total	500	883	783	749
<b>urbanization rate</b>		<b>61%</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>57%</b>
Sources: De Vries and Van der Woude, <i>First modern economy</i> , 50-61; Van Lottum, <i>Across the North Sea</i> , 59.				

Although there will have been a large variation according to region and predominant type of agricultural system (arable farming, dairy farming, horticulture, animal husbandry), in almost all cases, the agricultural sector will have been the number one employer for women. This is important to keep in mind when the regional estimates on female labour participation will be extrapolated to the level of the Dutch Republic.

With regard to the industrial activity of women other than in the textile industry, it has been shown that this was mainly concentrated in garment and food production.<sup>36</sup> In the past, it has been argued that the division of labour between men and women is to be contributed to their physical characteristics, but this argument has been revised by several historians.<sup>37</sup> To a larger extent, this segmentation is nowadays explained by the exclusive character of most guild-regulated crafts, although some guilds seem to have been more open to women than others.<sup>38</sup> The formal exclusion of (especially single and married) women from guilds does of course not mean that they did not work at all in guild-regulated crafts and industries. Women married to a craftsman may very well have participated in the making and selling of their husbands' produce.<sup>39</sup> Although it is very

<sup>35</sup> Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Child labor in the Netherlands'.

<sup>36</sup> Panhuysen, *Maatwerk*; Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Segmentation', 200 (Table 2), 208 (Table 4).

<sup>37</sup> E.g. Ogilvie, *A bitter living*, 7-8. There definitely is proof of women in heavy physical labour, also in the Dutch Republic, although it has to be admitted that their numbers were usually not large. Everard, 'Verandering en continuïteit'.

<sup>38</sup> Prak, 'Ambachtsgilden', 28-30; Panhuysen, *Maatwerk*; Schmidt, 'Gilden en de toegang van vrouwen'.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g.: Tilly and Scott, *Women, work and the family*; Howell, 'Women's work', 205-206; Van Nederveen Meerkerk, *De draad in eigen handen*, 211-2, 254, 301-3; Simonton, *A history of European women's work*, 66; Schmidt, *Overleven na de dood*, 158-159.

hard to estimate the actual participation of these women, both in numbers and in actual time spent on their assisting duties, we definitely need to find out more about them in order to make more reliable statements on female labour market participation. A suitable method might be to establish different rates of participation of husbands and wives for several crafts.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, recent research on female entrepreneurship has shown that in many locations, especially urban environments, trade or commerce was very important for women registered in population and census records. Depending on the economic structure of towns, commercial involvement was often the second most important after textiles (e.g. in Leiden) or even the most important (e.g. in Amsterdam and Den Bosch) economic activity of the registered female population.<sup>41</sup> It is also interesting to note that, in the few cases where we have data on married women's involvement in commercial activities, this seems to have been frequent, and sometimes independently from their husbands.<sup>42</sup> As research by Marjolein van Dekken has shown, this was for instance the case with the publicans in Leiden in the eighteenth century. Especially in the first half of this century, the number of married females in this branch appears to have been very high.<sup>43</sup> And among female tea, coffee and chocolate dealers in Leiden, the percentage of married women was particularly high in the *second* half of the eighteenth century, as Danielle van den Heuvel has recently shown.<sup>44</sup> In general, retail guilds seem to have been less exclusive to women than craft guilds, and occasionally even married women could become members, as in the case of Haarlem. Nevertheless, this does not tell us much about the actual importance of the sector to women, and Van den Heuvel even admonishes us not too easily regard commercial activities as the 'easy alternative' for women, because it involved a certain amount of risk and capital.<sup>45</sup>

About women active in services in the Dutch Republic, not much is known. Recently, Manon van der Heijden and Ariadne Schmidt have looked into this matter more closely, and concluded that Dutch women were indeed surprisingly present in early modern public services when compared to the standard literature and general expectations regarding this 'public' working sphere.<sup>46</sup> Remarkable as these conclusions may be, their actual numbers are of course quite small compared to the presence of women in other sectors, and, most notably, compared to another, in my view very important (albeit very obscured in the sources) service: domestic work.

Although a lot of work needs to be done in this field, I think it is worthwhile to try to give a few estimates of the importance of female domestic servants in the Dutch

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<sup>40</sup> For a more qualitative assessment of married women's work, see the forthcoming special issue of *Continuity and Change* [August 2008]. It would require more in-depth research to make reliable estimates on the actual numbers of married women involved in their husbands work. For early modern London, Amy Erickson presumes the percentage of wives that were inactive to have been between 15 and 65 per cent, but in my view this range is too broad to result in reliable calculations. Erickson, 'Married women's occupations'. Moreover, Peter Earle comes to a very different conclusion about the cooperation of spouses in London. Earle, *The female labour market*, 338.

<sup>41</sup> Van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship*, most notably 69-83.

<sup>42</sup> This has for instance been clearly shown for food markets, Van den Heuvel, 'Partners in marriage'; Schmidt, *Overleven*, 129-131.

<sup>43</sup> Van Dekken, 'A profitable brew', 10.

<sup>44</sup> Van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship*, 195.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, 175-176.

<sup>46</sup> Van der Heijden and Schmidt, 'For the Benefit of All?'

Republic based on some available data and a master's thesis from Julie Mosmuller.<sup>47</sup> In the population register of Leiden in 1581, 569 women were listed as 'jongwifff' or 'dienstmaecht', meaning domestic servant. Two of them headed a household, and two of them were married women, but the rest were live-in servants with another household.<sup>48</sup> This number constituted 4.7% of all inhabitants of Leiden, or 8.4% of all women and girls in town. If we add this up with the participation rate in textiles, suddenly more than a quarter (26.4% to be precise) of all women had an occupation, which means that already at the end of the sixteenth century, apart from textile production, domestic service was very important for women's labour market participation as well.

The importance of servants may have varied according to place and time, but it is very likely that with the general economic rise in the first half of the seventeenth century, this phenomenon will have become more widespread. This is for instance indicated by the fact that domestic servants were attracted from all over Europe, as various studies on migration have pointed out.<sup>49</sup> In the eighteenth century, it was even more customary, even for the middle classes, to hire servants.<sup>50</sup> Even after economic stagnation and decline had occurred in the eighteenth century, many cities housed a couple of hundreds to even thousands of servants, as Julie Mosmuller has shown for towns such as Gouda, Haarlem and Utrecht in 1742 and 1793.<sup>51</sup> And the textile village of Tilburg counted 332 female domestic servants in 1810, being 6.5% of all women in the village.<sup>52</sup> It may even have been that in non-textile areas – or in areas where the textile industry had waned – domestic service was an alternative for young unmarried women to earn a living. In Den Bosch in 1808, for instance, after the collapse of the lace-making industry, 675 women worked in domestic service, which constituted almost 5% of the entire population and more than 10% of all women in the town.<sup>53</sup>

All in all, we can conclude that labour market participation of women in the Dutch Republic as a share of women from all ages was generally high in both the seventeenth and the eighteenth century. Although an important part of the participation rates consisted of textile workers, it is important to note that agriculture, domestic service and commerce were all very important for specific groups of women as well. It is too early to estimate their exact numbers, and to extrapolate them in a reliable way to the level of the entire Republic, but we can safely say that labour market participation was at least as high as 25% of all women, and could almost reach 50% of the entire female population, as the very complete population census for Tilburg in 1810 points out!<sup>54</sup> We obviously need more information about the rural areas, but it is important to say here that female labour market participation was high, especially in regions with an important regional textile industry. However, many women, with the decline of textile production, or in non-textile areas, could find alternative opportunities in the labour market, albeit depending on their social and marital status.

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<sup>47</sup> Mosmuller, 'Aproned Maids'.

<sup>48</sup> Volkstelling Leiden 1581.

<sup>49</sup> Van Lottum, *Across the North Sea*, 70-72, 80. Norway was a very common recruitment area for domestic servants going to the Dutch Republic, Sogner, 'Young in Europe', 521.

<sup>50</sup> Wijzenbeek-Olthuis, 'Vreemd en eigen', 86.

<sup>51</sup> Mosmuller, 'Aproned Maids', 58, 60, 69.

<sup>52</sup> Volkstelling Tilburg 1810.

<sup>53</sup> Volkstelling Den Bosch 1808.

<sup>54</sup> Volkstelling Tilburg 1810.

**Table 4 – Minimum estimates of female labour market participation in several Dutch towns (as a % of all women)**

	1581	1665	c. 1750	1775	c. 1810
<b>textile areas</b>	<b>Leiden</b>	<b>Tilburg</b>	<b>Leiden</b>		<b>Tilburg</b>
total female textile workers (see table 2)	1,226	1,139	7,676		1,918
female hh in other sectors	134	76	948		147
female servants (non-hh)	567	?	2,030		332
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,927</b>	<b>1,215</b>	<b>10,654</b>		<b>2,397</b>
<b>% of all women (girls included)</b>	<b>28.3</b>	<b>&gt; 31.6</b>	<b>52.0</b>		<b>46.7</b>
<b>non-textile areas</b>			Den Bosch + Zwolle	Den Bosch	Den Bosch + Zwolle
total female textile workers (see table 2)			1,624	1,155	184
female hh in other sectors			265	454	425
female servants (non-hh)			929	501	873
<b>total</b>			<b>2,818</b>	<b>2,110</b>	<b>1,482</b>
<b>% of all women (girls included)</b>			<b>19.7</b>	<b>27.4</b>	<b>24.0</b>

But what do these first results tell us about the economic activity rate of women? In order to say more about this, I will make a brief comparison with international literature, most notably by Peter Earle and Sheilagh Ogilvie, on female labour market participation in London and Germany respectively. In his still much quoted article from 1989, Peter Earle concludes that only 54% of the 851 women in his sample of the London Church court records over the period 1695-1725 were fully employed, whereas another 18% had a partly paid employment. In other words, 72% of all women had some sort of paid employment. On average, participation rates (taken fulltime and parttime work together) were lowest, but still considerable among married women: 60%.<sup>55</sup> These rates seem extraordinarily high compared to the Dutch figures, but there are some reasons to assume that Earle's figures contain a source bias. First of all, women from the middling sort, the artisan and working class strata seem to be very much over-represented in the sources. As Earle acknowledges himself, women from these social classes will have been the most active in the labour market. Secondly, Earle's data represent the occupations of *witnesses* in *church* courts, and it is likely that reliable witnesses were selected from those with an honourable occupation.<sup>56</sup> And, finally, the vast majority of the women (over 54%) were between 25 and 45 years of age, which, on the one hand, may rightly lead to striking conclusions about the fairly small effect of reproduction on women's economic activity. On the other hand, however, this also shows us that the sample is far from representative for the entire female population of London: only 7.1% of all female witnesses were younger than 20 and only 10.4% older than 55.<sup>57</sup>

Recently, Sheilagh Ogilvie has made estimates of female labour market participation in the German region of Wildberg in the eighteenth century. Although Wildberg was an economically varied region, which knew quite some proto-industry, agriculture and traditional crafts were also (and perhaps even more) important to this

<sup>55</sup> Earle, 'The female labour market', 337-338.

<sup>56</sup> Earle, 'The female labour market', 332-333.

<sup>57</sup> Earle, 'The female labour market', 331.

area.<sup>58</sup> While Wildberg had a clearly well-developed economic structure, it did not have the experience of sweeping economic growth and decline the Dutch Republic had in the early modern period. This makes it an interesting case to compare with the figures calculated in this paper, in order to measure the effect of economic boom and decline on women's participation in the labour market. Ogilvie has tried to uncover the work of women along various household positions and in several economic branches, ranging from widows in agriculture and single women in domestic service and proto-industry, to assistance in the crafts of husbands. In her safest estimates, Ogilvie concludes that female labour participation will have been at least 27% of all women over 15 years of age. Nevertheless, she also paints a picture of overall high estimates, leading to a figure of no less than 68.5% of all women over 15 working.

Since in most cases I do not have the data to distinguish according to age, my estimates were a percentage of all girls and women and they are therefore automatically lower than Ogilvie's in the first place.<sup>59</sup> However, for Tilburg in 1810, I can make this distinction. From that calculation, it appears that there were 3,340 women older than 14 present in Tilburg, of whom 2,118 (63.4%) had an occupation.<sup>60</sup> Since in this case, it is no estimate, but hard data, it is clear that my Tilburg data are not far off from Ogilvie's absolute maximum estimates, nor from Earle's – probably highly biased – figures. And even if Tilburg is not representative for the rest of the Dutch Republic, my estimates for the Dutch textile industry Table 2 (which are cautious estimates, as I have explained above) indicate that, when we would have more precise figures for the involvement in domestic service and commerce, female labour market participation in textile as well as non-textile regions will mostly have been well above Ogilvie's minimum figure of 27% of all women over 14.

Of course, in order to really make a relevant international comparison, more work needs to be done. I will go into some desired future research strategies in the next section. But I think it is safe to conclude here that my efforts at least show that there are ways to get a grip on female labour market participation in the most important sectors for women, and also that it is possible, though not unproblematic, to draw some sketchy comparative conclusions.

### **Unfinished business**

The results shown above are of course still very preliminary, as a first attempt to reconstruct figures of female labour market participation in the Dutch Republic. A lot of work needs to be done, first of all complementing and refining these estimates, secondly aggregating them to a more general level and, finally, putting the figures in an international perspective in order to make meaningful comparisons and more general statements about the relationship between women's work and economic development.

In order to make my estimates more complete, it would be advisable to do more research on the participation of women in early modern agrarian settings. If we consider that outside of the province of Holland, for instance in Friesland, or at the Veluwe, almost

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<sup>58</sup> Ogilvie, 'Women and labour markets', 29-30.

<sup>59</sup> Although I also include children's spinning labour in my estimates, which may diminish the distortion between our percentages.

<sup>60</sup> Volkstelling Tilburg 1810.

70% of the population lived in the countryside,<sup>61</sup> we must conclude that employment in the agrarian sector is an important factor to be reckoned with when we want to make statements about female labour market participation in the entire Dutch Republic. It would be very interesting to take some representative agrarian case studies, for studying women's work in various agricultural systems. Secondly, we need to make more reliable estimates of the participation of married women in agriculture, crafts and trade. The first step in doing this, is probably a qualitative analysis of the kinds of work married women did and the degree to which they cooperated closely with their husbands.<sup>62</sup> The next step will be to estimate the percentages of 'economically inactive', 'supplementary' and 'independent' economic involvement of wives, even though it can be questioned to what extent it is possible to separate these very clearly. And finally, we need more research on the work of children in the pre-industrial Dutch economy.<sup>63</sup>

An equally important, but perhaps even more difficult undertaking is aggregating the local data and estimates to a more general level. In an inspiring article, Sheilagh Ogilvie has displayed one method to estimate women's labour market participation rates from local data, and how to extrapolate these regional figures to a more general level. Particularly clarifying are the article's appendices, in which Ogilvie uses the method of distinguishing between different types of livelihoods of females, for instance married, widowed, single, et cetera. For all these types of women, she estimates the lowest and highest possible share of labour market participation, both measured within the category and as a percentage of the entire female working force.<sup>64</sup>

Although I do not want to strictly apply her method to my own data, I am indeed inspired by the approach to distinguish between various groups of women and to give minimum and maximum participation rates for these groups. However, in extrapolating my estimates of both female heads and non-heads of households on the local level to the more general level of the Dutch Republic, some other steps have to be undertaken. I think it is useful on the one hand to distinguish between textile and non-textile areas, and, on the other hand, to put the local data in the perspective of urbanization rates as well as population figures. In the end, when we have enough comparable data, we ought to use these available local data on textile areas, non-textile urban areas and rural areas as proxies to estimate female labour market participation in some benchmark years for the whole Dutch Republic.

What then about the alternative approach, which involves making estimates of the percentages of women that were *not* working in several periods in the early modern Dutch Republic?<sup>65</sup> In my view, this may be a good first attempt to estimate how many

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<sup>61</sup> Faber, 'Noordelijke Nederlanden', 205.

<sup>62</sup> An important effort in doing so will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Continuity and Change*. For married women's work and the degree of participation between spouses in the Dutch Republic, see the papers by Van den Heuvel, 'Partners in marriage' and Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Couples cooperating?' in this issue.

<sup>63</sup> See for a first attempt: Van Nederveen Meerkerk and Schmidt, 'Tussen arbeid en beroep'; also appearing in English June 2008 (Van Nederveen Meerkerk and Schmidt, 'Between wage labor and vocation').

<sup>64</sup> Ogilvie, 'Women and labour markets', 57-59.

<sup>65</sup> This method was suggested on two separate international workshops I recently attended, by Anne Laurence at the workshop 'Gender and work in the early modern European world', (Uppsala 11-13 December 2007), and by Carmen Sarasua García, at the COST-Workshop 'Methodologies for reconstructing the female activity rate in historical Europe' (Barcelona 11 January 2008).

women were actually active in the labour market. However, this method does not tell us much about the kind of work women did and if and how their participation structurally shifted between sectors over time. Therefore, I would prefer only to use it as a 'control mechanism' for the estimates made the other way around.

### **Some preliminary conclusions**

This paper has shown that it is indeed possible to count working women in the pre-industrial society, and that this is important in order to analyze female labour market participation, both in terms of changes over time, and in an international perspective. But it is only a first step in the understanding of women's experiences in the early modern labour market. The next step is to figure out what this first quantitative exercise can tell us about shifts in women's work, and the relationship with socio-economic developments, taking into account sectoral shifts, but also class and marital status.

Among the lower echelons of society, participation of women in the labour market – be it single, unmarried or widowed – was traditionally high in order to reach subsistence level. However, with the advent of the 'Dutch Golden Age' in the seventeenth century, more opportunities for women arose in many sectors, but most notably in labour-intensive export industries, and textile production in particular. This explains the rising female labour participation rates in textile areas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the boom of the textile industry inevitably will have led to an increased labour market participation for *married* women in the lower strata, who probably not only worked for subsistence, but in some cases also for the further enlargement of the consumptive possibilities of working-class families.<sup>66</sup> In other words: women did not necessarily stop working once a certain level of subsistence was safeguarded, as proponents of the 'cult of domesticity' thesis may expect.

For middle class women, experiences were rather different. Of course, the wives of craftsmen and retail traders most of the time will have played an important role in the family business. They certainly will have profited from the economic upswing in the seventeenth century, but it is also conceivable that exactly these social groups could afford to hire shop assistants in order to alleviate some (or all) work previously done by the housewife.<sup>67</sup> In their case, there may have been incentives to confirm to the ideal of domesticity somewhat more than among those in the wage labouring strata of society. This may explain the opinion of some historians such as Pott-Buter and Schama that female labour market participation declined in the seventeenth century due to these mechanisms. However, it is remarkable to see what happened in the eighteenth century, when married women increasingly appear in the trade sector, as both Van Dekken and Van den Heuvel have shown. Although it was usually in the lower social strata of the trade sector, these women did increasingly set up commercial enterprises apart from their husbands. This suggests that when economic circumstances deteriorated, as happened in the eighteenth century, married couples in the middle classes tried to spread their risks by

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<sup>66</sup> Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Couples cooperating?'.  
<sup>67</sup> Van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship*, 147, argues that shop assistants indeed appeared on the scene in the seventeenth century, but she also states that their importance must not be overestimated, and only the most wealthy shopkeepers could afford one.

starting off separate enterprises. As opposed to most working-class families and many single women, these couples had – albeit limited – financial opportunities to do so.

The consequences of these larger economic developments for *single* women will have varied according to economic structure of the region and social background of the women. In the sector of trade, they may have experienced increasing competition from married women, but on the other hand, single women, especially when they were young, will have been more flexible than married working-class women to enter into new niches in the production sphere (lace making, knitting), which arose in the late eighteenth century. However, as easily as these textile branches emerged, they could also disappear within a short time span, affecting single women in particular. But there were more alternatives for single women. For instance, it has been demonstrated that the opportunities to enter into domestic service need not necessarily have declined with economic stagnation in the eighteenth century. Although in general it will not have paid very well, and power imbalances between masters and mistresses and their servants will not always have been favourable to them, for many young girls domestic service was a way to get away from their homes and earn a living themselves. In this sense, the ‘industrious’ and ‘consumer’ revolutions and changing household behaviour in these respects were not all bad news for single women in the Dutch Republic.

To conclude, I think it has become evident that the cult of domesticity did not affect the lives of the majority of working women significantly in the pre-industrial Dutch Republic. In this paper I have tried to show that their experiences varied according to region, social position and household position, but that participation rates can be estimated to have been generally high, just as they were, for instance, in London and Southern Germany in the eighteenth century. This is not to say that cultural values will not have played a role, because I believe that some of the differences between regions and periods can indeed not only be attributed to socio-economic factors, but also have to be explained by institutional and cultural dynamics. The role of guilds, for instance, has not been particularly highlighted in this paper, but it is certain that they influenced women’s involvement in crafts as well as trades.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, what is more important with regard to the focus of this paper is that, both in economic upswing and decline, different groups of women had different working opportunities (or, if you will, obligations), but that female activity in the Dutch labour market was considerable, throughout better and worse times.

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<sup>68</sup> See: Ogilvie, ‘How does social capital?’; Panhuysen, *Maatwerk*; Van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship*.



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