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# From the edge to the heart: female employment in 19th-century Italy

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# From the edge to the heart: female employment in 19th-century Italy[1]

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This work has been written for the forthcoming book *Women at work in Italy (1750-1950) and their economic thought*, edited by Manuela Mosca for the Springer Studies in the History of Economic Thought.

Women have long been at the edge of economic history. According to Humphries (1991) and Sharpe (1995), shifting them from there "to the heart" goes into stages. The first stage involves recognising the extent to which the role of women has been neglected. The second stage aims to integrate women in the mainstream of economic history, with potentially revolutionary results. As stated in the introduction of the present book, the methodological challenge lies in proving that it is possible to uncover the economic culture not only in women's writings, as many did not leave behind written records, but also in their actions. Therefore, this book goes beyond the scope of Humphries and Sharpe by placing women not only at the core of economic history but also at the centre of the economic culture of their times.

The initial part of the book focuses on women who have left traces of their economic thought, not through their writings, but through their extraordinary experiences. It explores the stories of women in business, female entrepreneurs, and their untold or forgotten narratives. The follwing sections of the book will delve into the role of women in education, politics, and economics. These sections rely on sources that have not been traditionally used to study women's work, such as correspondence or unprinted material, to reconstruct the intellectual history of women who contributed to the history of economics and the economy. This portion of the book delves into debates and patterns regarding women in the labour market, utilising often overlooked sources.

The present chapter reflects on the significance of re-evaluating the role of ordinary, "everyday" women's work in the economic development of countries (Bateman 2019). It contributes to the ongoing discussion on female labour force participation in the past and concludes that when work was available, women worked. In the applications for poor relief in the city of Florence between 1810 and 1812, families had to describe the occupational status of all their members. Hence, the applications represent a valuable source to explore female work. For instance, Maddalena and Elisabetta worked with silk when they "had it" or when they "could". The 26-year-old daughter of one of the households requesting the poor relief, bleached "when she found it", while her younger sister was engaged in a "little job" (*il lavorino*).[2]

Thus, it aligns with a strand of the debate that emphasises the importance of demand factors, rather than supply factors, in determining women's employment in historical perspective.[3] However, providing new estimates of female employment in the past is outside the scope of this chapter. The main contribution is that, alongside with demand factors, also cultural ideology had a pivotal role. Thus, I focus on the tendency of women to *report* their occupation, and how the reporting patterns varied over time, across locations, and social classes.

[1] I thank all the participants of the two AISPE workshops "Le donne e l'economia in Italia (1750-1950)", for their comments which helped me shaping this work. Earlier drafts, or rather research ideas, have been presented at the Oxford Labour and Precariety Workshop, CAMPOP Occupations Workshop, Sant'Anna Gender and Labour Seminar Series. I am indebted to Eloisa Betti, Giacomo Gabbuti, Manuela Mosca, Alessandro Nuvolari, Leigh Shaw-Taylor, Claudia Sunna, Maria Enrica Virgillito, and Giulia Zacchia for their feedback. In particular, the present chapter is based on a joint work with Marco Martinez (Freschi and Martinez 2023) and would not have been possible without his invaluable and constant help. The usual disclaimer applies.
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[2] Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), Congregazione di San Giovanni.
[3] Humphries and Sarasúa (2012, 43-44) argue that "supply-side factors, such as marital status and number and age of children, which are conventional determinants of women's decision to enter the labor force, appear to have been less prominent in historical contexts. Instead, women responded to opportunities; the demand for labor was decisive".

In line with the book's objectives, this chapter conceptualises, on the one hand, the importance of using new, previously not used, sources to study women's work (Humphries and Sarasúa 2012) and, on the other hand, the drawbacks of conventional measures, such as labour force participation (Burnette 2021). It attempts to combine insights from women's history and feminist economics, which advocates for a comprehensive social reproduction framework to study female employment. The chapter proceeds as follows: Section 1 provides a concise description of the concept of work and underscores the importance of including "invisible women" in the mainstream of economic history. It sheds light on the long-standing historiographical debates within Italian economic history literature. Section 2 addresses measurement issues, including sources, methods, and theoretical methodologies, and proposes alternative approaches. Section 3 presents an empirical application that investigates the determinants of non-reporting of female labour and its relationship with social class. Was women's invisibility influenced by social class? And has it remained consistent over time? Section 4 concludes.

## 1. Invisible women, visible sources

### 1.1 What is work?

When examining female employment in the past, several questions arise. Have women always worked outside the home? How do we measure women's employment in the past, and are the available measures suitable? Do historical sources provide an accurate depiction of female employment in the past, and if so, which sources should be relied upon?

However, before addressing these questions, there is a fundamental query that serves as a foundation for these investigations: What was work, particularly female work, in the past, and how did it evolve over time? The latter question has recently been extensively explored in the book *What is Work?* edited by Sarti et al. (2018). In modern times, when we refer to work, we generally mean activities that can be accounted for and contribute to GDP calculations. The development of modern statistical measures, pioneered by the work of Simon Kuznets and the establishment of the System of National Accounts after World War II, conceptualises work as a market-oriented measure (Folbre 2018). These methodological advancements coincided with the "invention" of the standard employment model, which portrays a stable and continuous work relationship as the universal employment model in the Western world (Betti 2018b). However, as highlighted by Sarti et al. (2018) in their introduction, since the 1970s, activists, female and feminist scholars have emphasised the need for a broader concept of labour. The work of Boris (Boris 2018; Boris et al. 2018) investigating the International Labour Organisation's engagement with female employment and the progressive feminisation of the concept of work exemplifies this shift. Current gender statistics recognise the statistical bias inherent in the traditional concept of labour and advocate for a more inclusive and less stereotyped data collection mechanism (Corsi and Zacchia 2021). Recent research on precariousness has also aimed to broaden the conceptualisation of work beyond stability and full-time employment. Consequently, the standard model of employment has been questioned and deconstructed both in the present and in the past (Betti 2016).

Historical research has provided essential tools to understand the evolution of female and male work over time, considering that its definition is fluid, shaped by historical and cultural contexts. In ancient times and in the Ancien Régime, the ability to live without working was a requirement for the aristocracy and elites to belong to their social class. Artisans in medieval and early modern times held a positive perception of work, considering it a crucial element of collective identity (Bellavitis 2002). In the 19th century, male work gradually became associated with rights and dignity, but tensions persisted between work as alienation and self-realisation (Sarti et al. 2018). These definitions of work are inherently gender-biased, as highlighted by the authors. Pescarolo (2019) examines the historical evolution of women's work through the lens of social class. In higher strata of society, female work outside the home was viewed as deplorable and only acceptable in cases of economic necessity. In lower social strata, traditional work ethics prevailed, as exemplified by the availability of women working in the fields, whose labour contradicted the maternalistic policies of the elite aimed at demeaning working women. Whereas (male) urban identity was rooted in the "complementarity

between the citizens' body and trades" (Bellavitis 2002)[4], women in the cities juggle disparate jobs on the margins of society, making it challenging to develop a strong sense of work identity.

Pescarolo (2019) demonstrates that the distinction between different spheres to emphasise women's domestic role has existed since antiquity. However, the differentiation between productive and unproductive work by Adam Smith further confined female work to the realm of the household, rendering women more invisible in the economy.[5] Humphries and Sarasúa (2012) emphasise that the term "worker" historically carried strong implications in terms of political and property rights, and as a result, it was predominantly associated with men. Work experiences differed between women and men. Women's distinctions between market and domestic, paid and in-kind, regular and unstable work, unpaid or commodified care work, and working from home or in well-defined workplaces were much more nuanced. However, it is important to note that many women did engage in regular paid work outside the house, while simultaneously many men were not employed in stable activities. Consequently, the estimation of male labour force participation rates at around 100% is as much a historical ideological construct as the low female participation rates (Zucca Micheletto 2013).

When discussing work in the past, particularly in pre-industrial societies, it is crucial to understand that most workers did not identify with a single occupational title over time. Artisans, especially those affiliated with guilds and corporations, as well as urban manufacturers, were not the norm. As early as 1990, Groppi underlined the necessity of exploring female employment beyond predefined categories to better capture the economic activities both of men and women (1990).[6] Analysing work in the past using a verb-oriented method (Ågren 2017) or focussing on tasks rather than single occupational titles (Whittle and Hailwood 2020) allows us to unveil the complexity of work activities that was concealed by the use of a single occupational title (Carus and Ogilvie 2009). Consequently, these approaches reveal a significant discrepancy between self-reported occupational titles and the qualitative sources describing the daily activities in which individuals engaged.

Two projects, one focusing on Sweden and the other on England, arrive at similar conclusions. Both male and female work typically involved multiple tasks. However, female work was notably more multifaceted, with an average of around 5-7 tasks compared to 2-3 tasks characterising male work. Furthermore, women, including not only single and widowed women but also married women, participated in almost every sector of economic activity, with female and male activities overlapping rather than being strictly segregated.

Bellavitis (2016) argues that there was no direct correlation between female occupational activity and marital status or the number of children. Also, supply-side factors worked differently historically than in modern times, surely when it comes to age-participation profiles (Humphries and Sarasúa 2012). The presence of children below the age of two in the household did not decrease female participation to the labour market, but, on the contrary, had a positive effect on the probability of the woman working. Women dropped the labour force as their children grew older, that is as they could substitute them in the labour market (Horrell and Humphries 1997). However, women mostly responded to opportunities presented by the market. The shift from a supply-side, worker-driven narrative to a demand-side employer-driven perspective has been supported by the influential works of  of Humphries and Sarasúa (2021). According to their findings, the hypothesis that women would choose not to work for pay if given the option is untenable. Ultimately, if work was available,

[4] The distinction of gender roles was not so clearcut also among corporations. Groppi (1996) has extensively researched women's role in guilds and corporations in Italy, underlining women's awareness of the existence of distinct gender roles and their capacity to subvert them, on the one hand, and to wisely exploit them, on the other.

[5] Although this contribution does not focus specifically on the role of carework, a note on its definition is necessary. Pescarolo (2018) outlines the evolution of the reproductive-productive work dichotomy, shedding light on its origins, limitations, and the abuses that have been done. In conclusion, she adopts a very broad definition, originally proposed by Tilly and Tilly (1998) of work, which embraces its multiple dimensions. Work is conceived as any human effort, with variable intensity featuring different technical conditions, which gives use value to goods and services. For other seminal contributions on productive and reproductive work see: Chisté, Del Re, and Forti (1979); Picchio (1992).

[6] Angela Groppi has been a pioneer in women's history studies in Italy, combining the study of economic activities and of women's rights. Her contributions and legacy have recently been discussed in the monographic volume *Angela Groppi e la storia sociale* (2021).

women indeed engaged in various market activities, paid domestic work, and unpaid care work. When considering both paid and unpaid work, studies demonstrate that women have historically shouldered most of the workload. This trend persists in developing and industrialised countries today, as it did in the past.

### 1.2 Female work in the Italian history

The statistical biases in recording female occupations in official sources mirror the differing attitudes towards female work. Social and cultural factors led to the perception of men as workers and women, particularly married women, as non-workers. As mentioned above, the fact that women that did not report an occupation in official documents did not actually work is oftentimes unrealistic. For instance, it is implausible to assume that women from shopkeepers' households did not engage in any work, considering recent research on paid and unpaid work within family-run economic activities.[7] The understanding that women from shopkeepers' and business owners' households performed a diverse range of activities was already evident to statisticians during the first Italian censuses. Sarti (2018) presents an excerpt from the general report of the 1881 census, which outlines the various activities carried out by daughters of innkeepers, tailors, hatmakers, and shopkeepers. Some of these activities pertain to the domestic sphere, while others clearly fall under market-oriented endeavours. Similar patterns have been observed in other parts of Italy and Europe, such as among glassmaker families in Liguria from the 16th to the 18th century, families involved in small textile manufacturing between the 18th and 19th century (Maitte 2016), and mid-19th-century Barcelona family workshops, where women played significant roles in various activities bridging the domestic and market realms (Romero-Martín 2016). Zucca Micheletto (2014) attempts to unravel the intricate dynamics of female labour within family businesses, emphasising the inadequacy of downplaying the significance of unpaid labour. The author highlights that woman not only contributed to the workforce of family businesses but also frequently invested their own financial resources, particularly through dowries.

This gendered view of work became increasingly prominent by the late 19th century with the widespread adoption of the male breadwinner model. Pescarolo (2019) describes the cultural diffusion of this model among the bourgeoisie during the 19th century. In contrast to the aristocracy of earlier times, the bourgeoisie sought to establish the male breadwinner model as a universal norm. This shift is evident in the legislative efforts of the early 20th century, which aimed to protect women in their biological reproductive role in society. The ultimate objective was to construct a female identity aligned with her maternal vocation (Pescarolo 2019).

Some scholars have referred to this process as a "construction". Hudson (2008) talks about an "historical construction" arguing that gender ideology, rather than biology, has been the determining factor in shaping the distribution of work and gender segregation. She traces the definition of specific gender roles and the separation of home and work to the advent of industrial society. Prügl (1999) explores this debate from a transnational perspective and adds the term "global" to the notion of "construction." She acknowledges the existence of a process that led to the creation of distinct gender identities: the working mother, who faced social challenges, contrasted with the home-based mothers engaged in various activities but excluded from the realm of recognised work, and the wage-earning worker, namely the male breadwinner. This perspective became pervasive in the second half of the 19th century and was internalised by male enumerators, whose assumptions influenced how they reported data. It also affected women, who increasingly felt ashamed to disclose their involvement in paid activities (Humphries and Sarasúa 2012). This pattern has been identified in the Italian case and Betti (2012) provides a succinct but effective *excursus* of the historiography on the intricate relationship between the concept of female work and statistics. In particular, Curli and Pescarolo (2003) investigate this relationship in the Italian censuses focussing on the use of statistical labels and the consequences of the diffusion of the male breadwinner model on reporting occupations. Alberti (2015) digs deeper into the representation of female unemployment through censuses. Borderías (2018) finds a similar

[7] The project was led by the editors of the book *What is work?* (Sarti et al. 2018).

pattern in the Spanish context, confirming that the decline in female labour force participation at the turn of the 19th century and its link to ideological assumptions was a global phenomenon.

### 1.3 The story and the historiography of female work in the Italian censuses

The first Italian censuses (1861, 1871, 1881, 1901) provide valuable insights into how the male breadwinner model gained prominence in Italy, shaping ideologies and stereotypes. Two interconnected aspects require analysis. First, there is the underreporting of working women, particularly in agriculture, which is a common characteristic of historical sources (Humphries and Sarasúa 2012). Second, there is the increase in the number of women identifying as housewives across these four censuses, accompanied by a decline in women employed in the textile industry. Sarti (2018) traces the origin of the term *casalinga* (housewive) in the first censuses. In 1861, they were defined as *donne di casa* (women of the home) totalling nearly 3 million, and were included among those without a profession. However, in the subsequent census ten years later, this distinction was not made. In the 1881 census, a new category was introduced, namely *persone attendenti alle cure domestiche* (those attending domestic tasks), which was included in the broader category of people without an occupation.

The general report attached to the census highlights the difficulty in classifying women's activities because the taxonomy was designed for workers with a single occupation, which was inadequate for those, especially women, engaged in multiple activities. In 1881, women involved in multiple activities were classified as workers (Sarti 2018). Following these criteria, the census recorded a significant number of women employed in the textile industry, particularly in Southern Italy. However, the 1901 census marked a shift in this trend, since these working women were instead categorised as people carrying out domestic activities. Interestingly, the question posed by enumerators during these twenty years also changed. In 1881, workers were asked to report their occupation, while in 1901, they were asked to specify the occupation that provided their primary source of income. In this census, the number of women defining themselves as employed in the textile industry decreased dramatically, while the number of women "attending domestic tasks" increased.

Pescarolo (1990) argues that the decline in female labour force from 1881 to 1901 was a consequence of the increasingly rigid distinction between "employed" and "non-employed", which devalued the model of the family economy. Ortaggi Cammarosano (1991) acknowledges that the decrease in the number of women registered as working from the 1881 census onwards was a result of Italian statisticians' attempt to define a "modern" industrial sector that differed from the putting-out system. Patriarca (1998) suggests that the decline in female labour force observed in the early unitary censuses has been overestimated. This was due to a gendered conception of labour that aligned with the spread of a more domestic view of women. According to Patriarca, the 1861 census, often criticised, should be re-evaluated as it provides a more comprehensive definition of industry and offers a more nuanced understanding of women's participation in the labour force. Sarti argues that the "criteria adopted then represent an excellent demonstration of how ideas on the proper roles of men and women and their changes over time affect the representation of socioeconomic reality provided by the censuses" (2018, 192). In fact, while men in the 1901 census were categorised based on their occupation rather than their condition, the opposite criteria were applied to women. If a woman reported being in charge of domestic tasks (condition), but also engaged in other activities (occupation), the former took precedence.

Alongside the historians' critique of the progressive masculinisation of the concept of work in the censuses, an economic perspective has offered various adjustments to the figures of female textile employment. Vitali (1968) was among the first to recognise the issue of "overcounting" women in the textile industry. Zamagni (1987) proposed an adjustment to the female share in textile by utilising industrial censuses. Fenoaltea (2003) argued that accepting the share of women in textile employment at face value can lead to a misinterpretation of what constitutes "modern" industry, and he suggested capping female employment at four times the level of male employment. The latter has received support from other scholars (A'Hearn and Venables 2013; Ciccarelli and Missiaia 2013). Mancini (2018) proposed an adjustment that combines quantitative data with qualitative sources, such as family monographs.

However, it is important to note that these adjustments do not fully account for the inherent differences between male and female labour. The qualitative literature emphasises the need for a comprehensive quantitative assessment of women's employment and a re-examination of Italian economic history through a feminist lens. This approach aims to eliminate the gender bias deeply entrenched in mainstream economics.[8]

## 2. What do we measure?

### 2.1 A matter of sources

It is now evident that the underreporting of women's work was not simply a result of the nature of their occupations but rather deeply rooted in ideological preconceptions regarding women's societal roles. Consequently, economic historians face significant challenges when attempting to uncover the extent of female employment in the past, as available sources prove inadequate. Population censuses, commonly relied upon to estimate female labour, largely underestimated women's paid work and left it "off the record" (Humphries and Sarasúa 2012).

However, it is not only censuses that fall short in accurately recording female occupations. Other historical sources, including occupation surveys and household listings, also reflect the biases and prejudices of bureaucrats, enumerators, and individuals of the time concerning natural gender roles.[9] Zucca Micheletto (2013), recognising the "complex relationship between work and archival sources", advocates for the use of alternative sources and methodologies to explore women's work in the past. Scholars have heeded the advice of Carus and Ogilvie (2009) to convert qualitative evidence into quantitative data, utilising diverse qualitative sources that have thus far been overlooked in the study of female labour. These sources are transformed into a meta-source that can be analysed quantitatively. Examples of such alternative sources include diaries, monographs, court proceedings, records of poor relief requests, occasional or nonstandard censuses, and cadastres. In the case of Italy, a recent contribution by Mancini (2023) re-evaluates the contribution of women's work in agriculture in the 1930s by using family monographies, whereas Zucca Micheletto (2013) uses registers of applicants for poor relief at the *Ospedale di Carità* in 18$^{th}$-century Turin.

However, each type of source raises an epistemological question related to the concept of objectivity. Historians must inquire about the identity and background of those conducting the interviews. Scott (1988), in her analysis of the statistical representation of work in the *Statistique de l'industrie à Paris, 1847-48*, offers an insightful perspective on how historians should approach this epistemological issue. According to her, "[a]n alternative approach situates any document in its discursive context and reads it not as a reflection of some external reality but as an integral part of that reality […]. Such an approach demands that the historian question the terms in which any document presents itself and thus ask how it contributes to constructing the 'reality' in the past" (203).

### 2.2 A matter of methods and methodologies

Recent literature also reflects on the limitations of female labour force participation as a measure of work in pre-industrial societies, particularly women's work (Burnette 2021). Female labour force participation is a binary measure, not suitable to capture changes in work intensity, unstable and precarious employment types, and forms of labour that fall between paid and unpaid categories. It assumes continuity in the employment relationship, disregarding the existence of precarious work. Betti extensively studied the emergence of precarious work in Italian history. While her work focuses on the second half of the 20$^{th}$ century, she emphasises the need to re-examine the history of industrial capitalism through the lens of stability/precarity to shed light on the lives of marginalised individuals, such as women (2018). Recent research on the Global South

[8] Spanish quantitative economic history has great examples of these efforts. Sarasua (2019) revisits the timing and the pattern of Spanish industrialisation including women by using data from the 1750-5 Cadaster of Ensenada. Muñoz Abeledo and Verdugo Matés (2023) focus instead on reassessing the occupational structure.

[9] Alberti (2011) acknowledges that in the 1835 Sicilian census, the Statistical Directorate had to explain to enumerators that they had to include women when accounting for occupations.

has revived interest in the informal work debate by expanding the concept of work to encompass a "multiversum" of male and female workers (Petrungaro 2013).

Alternative approaches to female labour force participation aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of women's work. For example, Humphries and Thomas (2023) estimated women's unpaid work in historical coalmining communities and attributed them a working wage through a social reproduction framework. Contrary to the predictions of orthodox economics' "income effect" of male breadwinner families, pit women worked longer hours than women in factories, yet their households earned less overall.

It should now be apparent that the issue encompasses not only different measures but also diverse theoretical approaches. According to neoclassical economics, women's decision to participate in the labour market is a result of a rational choice, aimed at maximising utility or satisfaction. In these models, it is a matter of demand: women compare the wage they would earn from paid occupations in the market with the so-called "reservation wage", which represents the value of their time. Other sources of income, such as their husbands' wages, and various factors that may influence their participation, such as the number of children and their husbands' occupations, are taken into account. Such models are at the basis of the branch of economics known as *gender* economics, which integrates gender into mainstream economics by employing standard neoclassical analytical tools, mostly focused on markets, labour, and marriage, without adequately considering the impact of ideological and institutional factors (Horrell and Humphries 1995). In contrast, *feminist economics* is a branch of heterodox economics that recognises the historical subordination of women's work, the discrimination of women and seeks to acknowledge the central role of care and unpaid labour in economic activities (Becchio 2019).

In conclusion, these issues highlight the necessity of adopting new approaches to female employment, utilising sources that may sometimes appear impressionistic, employing mixed methodologies, and striving to capture the multifaceted dimensions of female employment and their complex role in the socio-economic life of past societies. The following section presents an empirical application of this approach, describing the sources and alternative measures used.

## 3. Empirical analysis: a case study

This section presents an empirical application to the case of 19$^{th}$-century Italian women. To study female employment, I use women's occupational titles from marriage certificates compiled in the Civil Register to study female work in 19$^{th}$-century Italy adopting a case-study approach. Instead of estimating female labour force participation, I provide a snapshot of the occupational structure of women, employing standardised occupational categories to ensure comparability over time and across regions. While occupational categories are useful, they do have certain drawbacks, particularly when it comes to women. Therefore, I propose an alternative scheme for categorising occupations. To paint a comprehensive picture of the women who remain invisible in the data intended to capture occupations, it is essential to examine those who were not accounted for. Consequently, I investigate the evolution of non-reporting rates. In this chapter, I am interested in identifying the women who did not report any occupation and exploring the intersection between the decision not to report an occupation and their social class. Additionally, I empirically examine whether this phenomenon can be attributed to the gradual spread of the male breadwinner model, thus corroborating the qualitative analysis of feminist scholars and the findings observed in other European countries. Hence, I investigate whether there was a convergence over time in the tendency of women from different socio-economic backgrounds to refrain from reporting their occupations. Furthermore, when working with historical sources, it is crucial to adopt an epistemological perspective that considers questions of objectivity: Who conducted the interviews? What was their background? I strive to address these inquiries.

### 3.1 My sample

The primary source consists of individual-level occupational data extracted from marriage certificates, collected in the Civile Register (*Registro dello Stato Civile*) for two benchmark years, 1815 and 1866.[10] Marriage certificates provide socio-demographic details about the spouses, their parents, and their witnesses, including information such as birthplace, residence, age, and occupation.

The Civil Register was introduced at the beginning of the 19th century from Napoleon and was subsequently adopted by all pre-unitary States and by the unified country in 1866. This makes it an invaluable source, since, unlike many pre-unitary censuses, it is homogeneous across pre-unitary states, enabling comparisons between them and over time. Moreover, unlike census data, the information recorded in marriage certificates is at the individual-level and self-reported, making it a more suitable source for investigating female employment. However, while marriage certificates provide a more nuanced understanding of female work by capturing unstable and informal types of labour, they do not allow for the differentiation of various tasks or the distinction between paid and unpaid work.

Relying on microdata, I employ a case-study approach selecting four areas with two objectives in mind: i) to cover both the North and the South of Italy; ii) to maximise differences between more industrial and rural municipalities within each macro-area. The two industrial areas are Brescia (Lombardy), encompassing both the cities and the surrounding municipalities that played a pivotal role in the province's industrial development, and Salerno (Campania), following the same criteria. The two rural areas are Pisticci (Basilicata), an agrotown, and the province of Udine (Friuli).[11]

The case-study approach allows for the augmentation of information with secondary sources and local historical literature. This micro-historical approach proves significant when examining women, as contextual factors can significantly influence local labour demands (Zucca Micheletto 2013), and it facilitates an exploration of how different economic systems may have shaped the types of jobs women engaged in, both within and outside the household. This approach aligns with Boserup (1970)'s hypothesis that the prevailing agricultural systems in the preindustrial period had an impact on the gendered division of labour and, of utmost importance for this study, on the dissemination of gender norms.

### 3.2 Occupational categories and structure

I categorise occupations using a standardised classification scheme called the Historical International Social Class Scheme (HISCLASS), as introduced by van Leeuwen and Maas (2011). I start from the classification of occupations in Freschi and Martinez (2023), which utilises a 5-catagroy scheme. This scheme is a modified version of HISCLASS, tailored to account for the specificities of the Italian labour market. However, I contend that HISCLASS fails to capture the multifaceted nature of female work. Departing from HISCLASS-5, I propose an alternative classification called HERCLASS. HERCLASS offers several advantages, including the incorporation of women who did not report any occupation and the flexibility to accommodate *ad-hoc* adjustments to align with diverse local economic systems.

*Table 1: Comparison of the occupational classification schemes for women (HERCLASS) and HISCLASS-5.*

| HISCLASS | HERCLASS |
|---|---|
| 1 - Landowners, managers, and professionals | 1 |
| 2 - White-collar workers | 2 |
| 3 - Artisans, shop-keepers, and small business owners | 3 |

[10] The data have been collected for a joined project with Marco Martinez. See: Freschi and Martinez (2023) for a detailed description of the source. We used scanned pictures of the certificates from the project Antenati, a Government-financed genealogical platform, where individual state archives upload the scanned pictures of their civil registers.

[11] See Freschi and Martinez (2023) for a detailed description of the selection criteria used to identify the case studies.

| | |
|---|---|
| 4 - Lower-skilled and unskilled workers | 4 |
| 5 - Lower-skilled and unskilled farmworkers | 5 + spinners in Pisticci |
| - | 6 - Outside the labour force |

The case-study approach allows for the examination of specific scenarios, such as that of spinners in Pisticci. The number of women reporting themselves as spinners in Pisticci is remarkably high (over 60% of working women). If these data were used to estimate industrial production or productivity, adjustments would be necessary to prevent inflation. Reports from the time indicate that textile production in the province, both in factories and through the putting-out system, was almost non-existent (D. G. d. S. MAIC 1880). However, the objective here is to describe female work in all its complexities and contradictions. It is plausible that women engaged in spinning, among various other domestic or non-domestic activities. If, among these activities, they chose to identify as "spinner", it is important for historians today to respect their choice. To address the large number of women in the textile sector in Pisticci (**Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.**) and ensure comparability with other locations, I place them within the fifth occupational category, alongside farmworkers, although conventionally they are considered part of the fourth category. Pisticci was an agrotown, an agglomeration comparable to cities in terms of population and density but predominantly rural in its occupational structure, hence this adjustment is aligned with its economic structure. While the peak percentage of sewers across the entire population is around 13% and is reached in Brescia, the percentage of weavers does not even exceed 2%. However, the percentages of spinners are much higher. Unlike Pisticci, Salerno and its neighbouring municipalities played a central role in textile production, so the high figures of female textile workers there are not surprising (D. G. d. S. MAIC 1888; A'Hearn 1998).

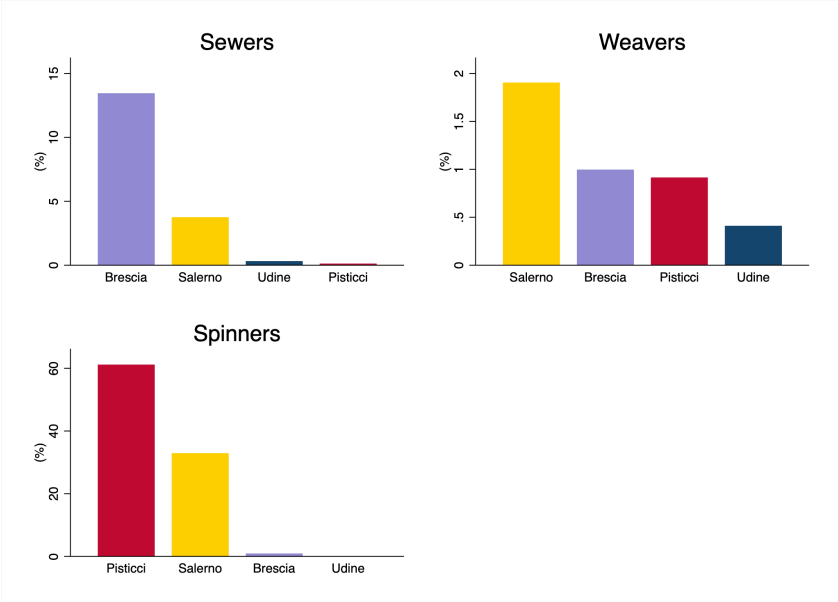


*Figure 1: % of women in textile over working women, by archive 1815-1866.*
*Source: author's elaboration. Note that the scale on the vertical axis for the upper and lower panel are different.*

Figure 2 illustrates the occupational composition of grooms and brides using both HISCLASS and HERCLASS. Over time, there was a notable transformation in the occupational structure for both men and women. The most significant changes occurred in Brescia, the most industrialised area in the sample. While men experienced a decline in the number of farmworkers, this was offset by an increase in the proportion of non-farm workers, artisans, and shopkeepers. Conversely, for women, the rural exodus resulted in a rise in the number of women who did not report an occupation. In the two rural areas of the sample, namely the province of Udine and Pisticci, men underwent a gradual occupational shift during the period. However, it appears that

women were overlooked during the initial stages of industrialisation. It is now widely recognised that the decline in women's labour force participation was neither continuous nor uniform across occupations (Horrell and Humphries 1995). However, non-reporting by women appears to be more nuanced than simply being categorised as outside the labour force.

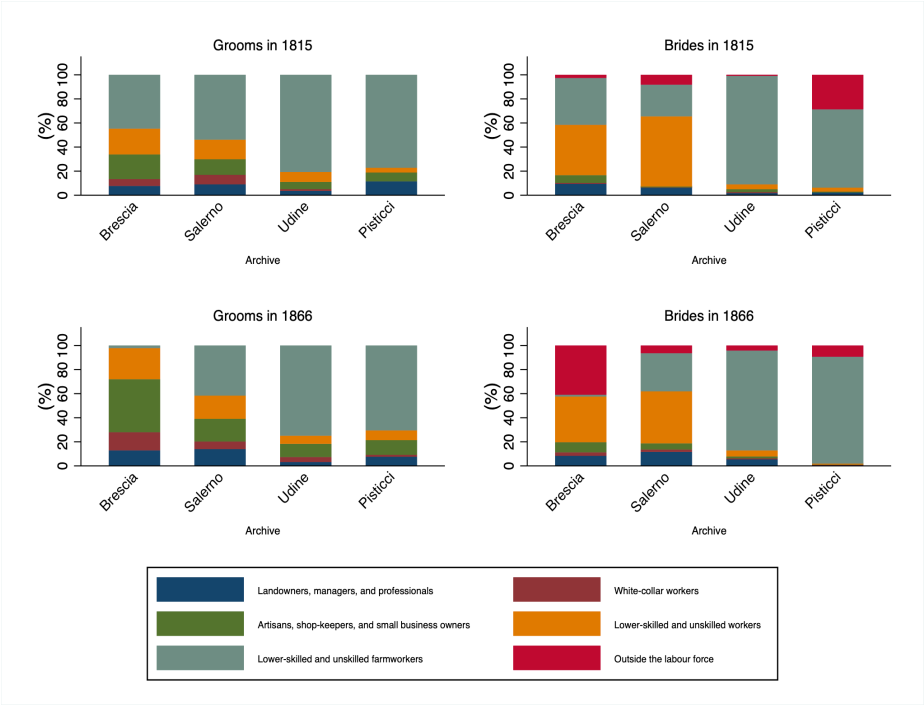


*Figure 2: Occupational structure of brides and grooms in marriage certificates by archive, 1815-1866. Source: author's elaboration.*

### 3.3 The issue of non-reporting

Table 2 presents the percentage of women who did not report their occupation, disaggregated by year and location. The third column displays the non-reporting rate among brides, while the fourth column focuses on mothers. The pattern is consistent across all locations. In Brescia, Salerno, and Udine, non-reporting significantly rose over time, albeit with notable variations. Among these locations, Brescia experienced the most pronounced increase, reaching a peak of 66% for mothers in 1866.

*Table 2: % of women not reporting their occupation by year and location*

| | | Non-reporting(in%) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Archive | Year | Brides | Mothers |
| Brescia | 1815 | 6.96 | 24.04 |
| | 1866 | 26.66 | 75.10 |
| Pisticci | 1815 | 13.20 | 32.41 |
| | 1866 | 5.43 | 13.97 |
| Salerno | 1815 | 8.29 | 27.59 |
| | 1866 | 14.55 | 48.94 |
| Udine | 1815 | 3.20 | 10.65 |
| | 1866 | 5.90 | 18.55 |

*Source: Author's elaboration. Deceased mothers have not been considered.*

This chapter aims to examine the prevalence of the social norm that women enter marriage without a job or, more specifically, *without reporting a job*. The methodology I employ is heavily influenced by Van Poppel et al. (2009) who utilise it in the context of Dutch marriage certificates. Table 3 presents the odds ratios derived from a set of logistic regressions, where the dependent variable is the likelihood of brides not reporting any occupation. I am particularly interested in exploring the intersection between this gendered perspective on work and social class. My hypothesis posits that the probability of stating no occupation is closely linked to the socio-economic background of the brides. Within certain social classes, there was a distinct preference for women not to work, leading to a reduced likelihood of such work being mentioned in the source.[12] The probability that brides reporting no occupation is regressed on their fathers' social class, which is approximated by the father's occupational category using HISCLASS-5. This represents a key difference between this model and the one used by Van Poppel et al. (2009), which primarily use grooms' social class as their main independent variable.

Compared to the daughter of an unskilled farm worker, daughters from upper-class backgrounds were 6.4 times more likely to report no occupation at the time of marriage. The likelihood of reported non-participation in white-collar middle-class families was 2.57 times higher compared to unskilled farm workers, while daughters of shopkeepers and businessmen were 2.36 times more likely to report no occupations. The odds ratio for daughters of unskilled workers not in agriculture is positive but not statistically significant (Column 1, Table 3). Historical evidence suggests that women working was generally frowned upon in aristocratic circles (Pescarolo 2019), and our empirical findings support this notion.

The model explores whether adherence to the social norm varied across locations and over time. The year dummy variable does not appear to have a significant impact, whereas geography reveals some differences. Women from Salerno, Udine, and Pisticci were more likely to report an occupation than those in Brescia, as indicated by the negative coefficient on the t statistics, although the coefficient for Pisticci is not statistically significant. Age at marriage does not seem to play a significant role, as the odds ratios are not statistically significant. Similarly, the age gap between spouses (measured as the difference between the groom's and bride's age) does not affect non-participation. This is surprising, as one might expect that women marrying older men, who are more likely to have been married before, would be more inclined to give up their jobs to take care of the household. One potential explanation is that the observations capture women at the time of their wedding, so they may be relinquishing their jobs immediately after getting married.[13]

*Table 3: Logistic regression of not reporting an occupation at time of marriage by brides, 1815-66.*

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model I | Model II | Model III | Model IV | Model V | Model VI |
| Father's status(farmworkers=1) | | | | | | |
| upper class | 6.404*** | 2.759** | 33.26*** | 7.381*** | 33.69*** | 28.48*** |
| | [7.51] | [2.55] | [8.08] | [6.91] | [8.10] | [4.06] |
| white-collar middle class | 2.573** | 0.590 | 7.063*** | 3.287*** | 7.370*** | 6.110 |
| | [2.38] | [-0.49] | [3.25] | [2.68] | [3.30] | [1.35] |
| shop-keepers and skilled | 2.256*** | 0.375 | 4.800*** | 2.664*** | 4.994*** | 0.374 |

[12] In the international literature, this pattern has been recognized by Davidoff and Hall (1987) and Ågren (2017).

[13] The inability to properly capture the age profile is a disadvantage of marriage certificates. However, as mentioned above, historically women tended to remain in the labour force until their children grew older and could take their place in labour market (Horrell and Humphries 1997).

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | [3.14] | [-1.56] | [3.65] | [3.31] | [3.71] | [-0.90] |
| unskilled workers | 1.275 | 0.794 | 1.980 | 0.894 | 2.039 | 1.351 |
| | [0.77] | [-0.45] | [1.44] | [-0.32] | [1.50] | [0.26] |
| Years(1815=1) 1866 | 1.157 | | | 1.294 | 5.722 | |
| | [0.68] | | | [1.01] | [1.24] | |
| Location(Brescia=1) Salerno | 0.186*** | 0.210*** | 0.293 | 0.0786*** | 0.0420*** | 0.0604** |
| | [-6.15] | [-5.63] | [-0.67] | [-2.59] | [-2.72] | [-2.18] |
| Udine | 0.0544*** | 0.0530*** | 0.103 | 0.230 | 0.0146** | 0.0219* |
| | [-6.46] | [-6.51] | [-1.28] | [-1.05] | [-2.05] | [-1.80] |
| Pisticci | 0.818 | 1.012 | 0.303 | 0.335 | 0.241 | 0.401 |
| | [-0.90] | [0.05] | [-0.75] | [-1.07] | [-1.14] | [-0.71] |
| Age at marriage(20-24=1) less than 19 | 1.277 | 1.218 | 1.009 | 1.214 | 1.007 | 0.980 |
| | [1.02] | [0.81] | [0.03] | [0.73] | [0.02] | [-0.06] |
| 25-29 | 1.152 | 1.083 | 0.908 | 1.101 | 0.932 | 0.884 |
| | [0.56] | [0.31] | [-0.27] | [0.35] | [-0.20] | [-0.34] |
| 30-34 | 0.814 | 0.842 | 0.656 | 0.791 | 0.663 | 0.646 |
| | [-0.53] | [-0.43] | [-0.80] | [-0.57] | [-0.78] | [-0.83] |
| 35-39 | 1.780 | 1.666 | 1.093 | 1.611 | 1.101 | 0.968 |
| | [1.29] | [1.13] | [0.13] | [0.98] | [0.15] | [-0.05] |
| 40+ | 1.000 | 0.937 | 0.616 | 0.779 | 0.628 | 0.657 |
| | [0.00] | [-0.15] | [-0.85] | [-0.55] | [-0.81] | [-0.73] |
| Gender age gap | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 |
| | [-0.13] | [-0.13] | [0.03] | [0.13] | [0.04] | [0.03] |
| Interaction father's status× year upper class × 1866 | | 4.920*** | | | | 1.339 |
| | | [3.04] | | | | [0.30] |
| white-collar middle class × 1866 | | 10.24** | | | | 1.586 |
| | | [2.00] | | | | [0.31] |
| shop-keepers and skilled × 1866 | | 15.60*** | | | | 22.60*** |
| | | [3.85] | | | | [2.59] |
| unskilled workers × 1866 | | 2.945 | | | | 2.025 |
| | | [1.64] | | | | [0.55] |
| Officers FE | No | No | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| Village FE | No | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 1672 | 1672 | 620 | 930 | 620 | 620 |

The coefficients are odds ratios; t statistics in brackets
* p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

As an initial step (Column 1), the model aims to investigate the origins of women who did not report their occupation. After discovering that these women belonged to the highest social stratum, the subsequent step involves examining the situation of all other women: did the trend of not reporting an occupation spread over time from the upper class to women in lower strata? By introducing interaction effects in the regression analysis (Column 2), it becomes possible to delve into the relationship between social class and the practice of reporting an occupation across different periods and locations. Considering two benchmark years, the first year, 1815, is utilised as the baseline. The odds ratios on the interaction term consistently indicate positive and statistically significant values, indicating a convergence over time among social classes in terms of the tendency to not report an occupation. Daughters of farmworkers in 1815 represent the baseline. In 1866, the probability of reporting no occupation is higher across all categories. The most significant increase in non-reporting over time is observed among daughters of shopkeepers and artisans, representing women from middle-class households. This finding corroborates the rich research on these categories mentioned above and provides empirical support for the long-standing arguments in historical literature, suggesting that the male breadwinner model became a prevalent norm among the middle classes toward the end of the 19$^{th}$ century (Pescarolo 2019).

Columns 3, 4, and 5 introduce a set of controls. Thus far, we have observed that non-reporting was more prevalent among women from upper-class families and that the tendency to not report an occupation spread over time from upper-class to lower-class families, coinciding with the diffusion of the male breadwinner model. By the end of the century, this trend became pervasive among middle-class families.

However, this chapter empirically investigates the dissemination of a gendered ideology not only within families but also among the authors of the documents we currently study. As underling by Scott (1988), the historian has to deal with the issue of objectivity. Our source permits to address this issue quantitatively. In column 3, I have attempted to do so, by examining the influence of the public officer responsible for preparing the marriage certificate. This also enables an investigation into whether women had limited agency in deciding whether to report their occupation or not, and whether the final decision to include it in the marriage certificate was made by a man: the public officer. Some public officers may have considered women's occupations as unimportant or may not have even asked about them. Controlling for this factor reveals a significant heterogeneity in non-reporting across social classes. The odds ratios for wealthy women not reporting their occupation are over 30 times higher than for daughters of farmworkers. For women from white-collar families, the odds are 7 times higher, and for daughters of artisans or shopkeepers, the odds are almost 5 times higher.

Accounting for officers completely captures the geographical differences among different locations, although the sign of the t statistic suggests that non-reporting was less likely in every location compared to Brescia. The disparity between the first column and the third column indicates the presence of substantial omitted variable bias, implying that the choice of officer filling out the marriage certificate must have been correlated with the probability of non-reporting and/or the father's socioeconomic class. The direction of the bias is noteworthy. Officers played a central role in perpetuating a gendered view of work across social classes, as some of them likely assigned all women the same occupational titles automatically. Moreover, women themselves had internalised a gendered perspective of their economic roles.

Controlling for village fixed effects indicates that there were geographical variations across villages, although their impact was not as significant as the heterogeneity across officers. In the preferred specification (Column 5), I include controls for both officers and village fixed effects, and the results remain consistent. The coefficients for Udine and Salerno become statistically significant, although their effect sizes are small.

In the final column, the preferred specification is presented, which includes an interaction term with the time dummy. Several coefficients that were previously significant no longer retain their significance. This

outcome is expected and likely attributed to the limited sample size, which can lead to collinearity issues arising from the inclusion of both officials' fixed effects and individual-level controls.[14] However, it is worth noting that the coefficients on the interaction term for daughters of skilled workers remain positive, exhibit a high magnitude, and retain their statistical significance, which highlights the strength of convergence of middle-class families towards the practice of non-reporting, hence the progressive and pervasive diffusion of the cultural norm of the male-breadwinner family.

A potential bias of the data arises from the fact that we are examining women at a specific moment in their lives, namely when they get married. However, considering the life-cycle is crucial as it plays a significant role. Therefore, investigating the status of mothers provides valuable insights into changes in female employment throughout their life-course. Interestingly, the percentage of non-reporting among grooms' and brides' mothers is considerably higher than among the brides themselves (Table 2). The underlying reasons for this discrepancy remain unknown: does it reflect a genuine trend of exiting the labour market as women age and establish families, or is it driven by cultural norms? To address this, I conduct a logistic regression analysis to examine the likelihood of mothers not reporting their occupations, conditional on their social class, which is now represented by their husbands' occupational status.

[14] In very small municipalities, it is not uncommon to have a one-to-one correspondence between officials and individuals. In such cases, when conducting a regression analysis, these observations are typically excluded to mitigate the potential issue of attributing variations solely to different public officers across municipalities. By removing these observations, the analysis aims to ensure that the observed variations are not solely driven by the idiosyncrasies of individual officials.

*Table 4: Logistic regression of not reporting an occupation at the time of marriage by brides' and grooms' mothers, 1815-66.*

| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Model I | Model II | Model III |
| Husband's status(farmworkers=1) | | | |
| upper class | 3.115*** | 8.759*** | 4.604*** |
| | [7.15] | [8.35] | [3.24] |
| white-collar middle class | 3.562*** | 6.557*** | 1.629 |
| | [5.83] | [5.25] | [0.59] |
| shop-keepers and skilled | 2.900*** | 3.509*** | 1.999* |
| | [6.98] | [5.39] | [1.75] |
| unskilled workers | 1.781*** | 2.128*** | 2.626** |
| | [3.30] | [2.74] | [2.04] |
| Years(1815=1) | | | |
| 1866 | 1.981*** | 39367351.5 | |
| | [5.91] | [0.02] | |
| Location(Brescia=1) | | | |
| Salerno | 0.883 | 24.88*** | 23.40*** |
| | [-0.90] | [2.73] | [2.72] |
| Udine | 0.107*** | 3.93e-08 | 1.38e-08 |
| | [-11.81] | [-0.02] | [-0.01] |
| Pisticci | 0.333*** | 1.235 | 1.415 |
| | [-6.90] | [0.17] | [0.29] |
| Interaction husband's status× year upper class × 1866 | | | 2.529 |
| | | | [1.64] |
| white-collar middle class × 1866 | | | 6.090* |
| | | | [1.95] |
| shop-keepers and skilled × 1866 | | | 2.327* |
| | | | [1.73] |

The results indicate a class effect, but with greater homogeneity compared to the case of brides, suggesting that social class may not have been the primary driver of non-reporting (Column 1, Table 4). Similar to the analysis for brides, when controlling for officers, the impact of social class becomes more pronounced, but still exhibits a more consistent pattern (Column 2, Table 4).

In the interacted regression analysis (Column 3), the group that exhibits a stronger convergence over time towards non-reporting of occupations is wives in white-collar occupations. This convergence can be attributed to the prevailing social norm that women should withdraw from the labour market after getting

married. This finding helps explain why the differences across social classes among mothers are not as pronounced. Notably, in the regression analysis for mothers, the convergence towards the norm of non-reporting is more evident in the second-highest occupational category, specifically wives of white-collar workers, whereas among brides it is more prominent among the middle-class. Since the mothers in 1866 likely got married in the 1830s, they represent a generation situated between the brides of 1815 and those of 1866. The higher coefficient on wives of white-collar workers suggests a gradual dissemination of the cultural norm across social classes, confirming that the practice of non-reporting developed in a class-specific manner. Initially, it was prevalent among the aristocracy, then spread to white-collar workers' families (as evidenced by the interacted regression on mothers), and eventually extended to daughters of artisans and shopkeepers, who likely substituted registered work with unregistered work.

## 4. Conclusions

This study delves into the realm of female employment in 19th-century Italy, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's economic culture within historical contexts. With a focus on four Italian locations during the period 1815-1866, this research combines theoretical, methodological, and empirical analyses to shed light on the intricacies of women's work and how they, and the society they lived in, perceived it.

The first sections of this study lay the foundation by exploring the historical evolution of the concept of work, particularly in relation to female work. By delving into the theoretical underpinnings, this work uncovers the complexities and shifting perceptions surrounding women's economic contributions throughout history. Additionally, it examines the challenges associated with traditional sources used to measure female employment and the limitations of standard measures in capturing the nuances of women's economic roles.

By adopting an economic history lens, this research bridges the gap between feminist economics and historical analysis. The empirical exercise centres around the utilisation of marriage certificates, providing a lens through which to explore alternative measures of female employment beyond traditional labour force participation indicators (Burnette 2021). This approach allows for a more nuanced examination of women's economic activities within the broader framework of marriage and family, building from the starting point that if there was work, women worked, hence that demand factors (Humphries and Sarasúa 2021), but also cultural norms, played a central role in shaping women's employment in the past. Thus, the chapter advocates the importance to bring women back to the edge of economic history.

However, the most innovative aspect of this study lies in the final section, where I employ logistic regression analysis to investigate the probability of women not reporting their occupations. This section does not claim to provide new evidence on the participation of female in the labour market, but it focuses on the ideology influencing the reporting patterns. Building upon the methodology of Van Poppel et al. (2009), this analysis delves into the underlying question of women's economic culture that permeates the entire book. By exploring the factors influencing women's decisions to report or omit their occupations, we gain valuable insights into the societal norms and attitudes towards female work during this period. The results of this logistic regression analysis not only provide empirical evidence regarding the prevalence of non-reporting among women but also offer glimpses into the complex interplay between gender, class, and cultural norms. In fact, this study delves into the role of public officers in perpetuating cultural norms and stigma surrounding women's occupations. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to quantify the potential cultural stigma conveyed by these officers. Their influence on the reporting decisions of women underscores the intricate interaction between individual agency, societal structures, and the construction of economic reality.

Moreover, this analysis contributes to the broader narrative of the book by uncovering the intricate layers of women's economic culture, challenging conventional interpretations, inviting deeper reflection and future investigations into the rich tapestry of women's economic roles throughout history.

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