

Women Workers of the World United

A Comparative History of Households, Gender and Work

INAUGURAL SPEECH BY PROF. DR. ELISE VAN NEDERVEEN MEERKERK

*in au
gurele
redo*

change perspective

Radboud Universiteit



INAUGURAL SPEECH

PROF. DR. ELISE VAN NEDERVEEN
MEERKERK



This inaugural lecture highlights the importance of studying the work of women comparatively, and with an eye to gender and household relations, by focusing on three professions that have historically been important for women: textile work, domestic work and sex work. It states that while women's

work has in recent decades been researched more extensively, now is the time to draw larger comparisons over time as well as globally. Making such sweeping comparisons allows us to move beyond the - real - continuities in women's in terms of their generally poor working conditions, and simultaneously stress women's agency to enhance their living and work environments, despite all the constraints they faced over the centuries and across the world.

Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk (1975) is specialized in the history of labour relations, notably women's and children's work. In 2007, she obtained her PhD in Economic and Social History, on women's work in the early modern Dutch Republic. Van Nederveen Meerkerk published in several leading economic and social history journals. She has directed several comparative labour history projects, on the history of textile workers, child labour, domestic workers, and sex workers. Moreover, she is the author of the monograph *Women, Work and Colonialism in the Netherlands and Java Comparisons, Contrasts, and Connections, 1830-1940* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019).

WOMEN WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITED
A COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF HOUSEHOLDS, GENDER AND WORK

Women Workers of the World United A Comparative History of Households, Gender and Work

Inaugural speech delivered at the acceptance of the post of Professor by special appointment of Comparative History of Households, Gender and Work at Radboud University's Faculty of Arts on Friday 21 December 2018

by prof. dr. Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk

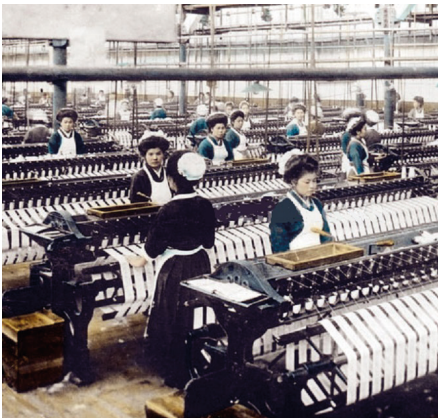
Graphic design: Radboud University, Facility Services, Post & Print
Photography cover: Bert Beelen

© Prof. dr. Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Nijmegen, 2018

No part of this publication may be reproduced and/or published in print, photocopy, microfilm, audio tape of in any other manner without prior written permission of the copyright holder.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome everybody. To begin this lecture, I will take you on a journey around the world and through time. This picture shows Japanese women working in a cotton factory around 1900. By then, Japan was quickly industrializing, and becoming a competitive player in the world's textile production. In factories like these, working days were long. Women, usually girls, worked around 12 hours per day, including night shifts, because the machines had to be constantly running to be profitable. Factory work was unhealthy, with all the noise from the machines, and cotton dust flying around, damaging the girls' ears, eyes and lungs. They received low wages, and the factory regime was harsh. It often included physical punishment and sexual harassment by male inspectors.¹



The second picture, on the right, is a painting of a black kitchen maid made by Velázquez in the early 17th century. It shows some of the work many domestic and care workers did throughout the centuries. This woman might, for instance, resemble one of the domestic servants of Jan van Riebeeck, the Dutchman who in 1652 established the first European settlement in South Africa. He and his wife had many black servants working for them. Their household included paid indigenous servants, but also enslaved domestic workers from other parts of Africa and Asia, such as Ethiopia, the Dutch East Indies and Bengal. We know that at least one of these young women, Krotoa, became very close to her master and mistress. She learned Dutch and Portuguese and often translated between her people and the colonizers. Possibly, she developed affective relations with Van Riebeeck, who spoke very fondly of her in his diary. Of course, we do not know how voluntary this relationship was on Krotoa's behalf, but the story raises many interesting issues about intimacy and power relations between masters and servants.²

The third picture shows a 21st-century prostitute from Rio de Janeiro, a city with a longstanding history of commercial sex. She may resemble Vânia, a Brazilian woman who was interviewed some years ago. In the early 2000s Vânia was a young real estate agent, when a friend persuaded her to go and work in a brothel. After nine years of sex work, when she was 31 years old, Vânia told the interviewers: “Now I am thinking of quitting whoring and going back to real estate, because I’m getting to be too old to be a whore. Except *this time*, I have my apartment, and my car, everything paid for by whoring. Now, I can get through the bad times.”³



WHAT DO THESE THREE WOMEN HAVE IN COMMON?

Most obviously, all of them are women. Throughout history, in most places of the world, the majority of textile workers, domestic workers and sex workers have been female. But, historically as well as geographically, gender constellations have differed, and in many cases it is still poorly understood how and why gendered divisions of labour change.

Secondly, these women all perform some kind of *work*. True, the conditions under which they worked vary immensely. It was often badly, sometimes unpaid work, perhaps even slave labour. What was the relation to the specific types of work women did, and the ways in which it was valued? Under what conditions and in which labour relations did they work? To what extent were they able to influence their position and working conditions? My three examples already highlight the different experiences of women in this respect. In recent years, historians have increasingly studied the appreciation of women’s work, for example by providing new information on women’s wages.⁴ But of course, apart from payment, work can be valued, or *undervalued* in many other ways. The social status or stigma attached to a job is one of these ways. In many societies, for instance, status and reputation are what separates the professor from the prostitute, while their *incomes* may in fact not differ so much...

Third, age and marital status. The women shown here were all young and unmarried. While this was certainly not true for *all* times and places, young, unmarried women do form a large share of the historical textile, domestic service and prostitution workforce. This begs the question how women’s work related to the life cycle and the type of household they lived in. Could they contribute to the household income and thus

strengthen their position within their household? Or did young women's economic activities allow them to gain liberation from their families and live independently, or save up for a future household of their own? How *real* was this liberation, if they consequently had to deal with the harassment and even sexual assault of bosses, colleagues or clients?

With this special chair of the Comparative History of Households, Gender and Work, I aim to stimulate research on the history of women's work, asking these, and other, questions. Of course, these questions are too broad and too many to answer in a 45-minute lecture. Therefore, I will highlight two topics that in my opinion connect the long-term histories of female textile workers, domestic workers and sex workers:

- Their systematically weak position in the labour market compared to men
- The role of globalization in the development of gender-specific division of labour

I will argue that, although recently more attention has been paid to female labour in the past, we now need to assess how women played an active role in improving their working conditions.

But before I do this, first let me take a few minutes to explain why we need to study the comparative history of households, gender and work.

WHY WORK?

For many people in the past and present, work has been essential, not only for making a living, but also for their identity. Feminist scholars have traditionally understood paid work as important for women's emancipation. Economic independence and self-determination are key to women's empowerment. In this respect, gender differences are still large. Right now, in the Netherlands, for example, only about 60% of all adult women are economically independent, as opposed to 80% of Dutch men. This is not only because women tend to work fewer paid hours. Also, women have historically worked in lesser valued occupations. In addition, even for the same work, they have systematically been rewarded less than men. Their ability to work, and to be competitive in the labour market, has usually conflicted with other activities, most importantly unpaid housework, reproduction and childcare. Throughout history these activities have been highly gender-specific, for biological, but especially for cultural reasons.



WHY GENDER?

In the 1980s gender was introduced as a tool to analyze power relations between men and women. Instead of highlighting the *biological* differences between the male and female “sex”, the concept of gender stresses the *cultural* attributes given to men and women. Opinions of what is masculine and what is feminine are culturally determined and they thus also vary over space and time. This picture, turning around existing gender roles, was meant to be hilarious – in 1900. It also shows that gender is a relational category, in which the female is almost always defined in comparison with the male.⁵

Using a gender perspective is important for several reasons. It is *theoretically* relevant to understand broader mechanisms of how and why work is valued and divided. On the one hand, women have historically crowded into jobs that are valued lower than men’s, occupations such as hand spinning, or needlework. On the other hand, jobs that have enjoyed a high status at one point, tend to lose status and even relative remuneration when women enter in larger numbers. Compare, for example, the status and authority of a primary school teacher around 1900, with the situation today. Some people even speak of a “feminization of education”, which would be undesirable – especially for boys. *Empirically*, a gender perspective is necessary because we know much less about the development of women’s work patterns in most periods and regions of the world than we do about men’s.

Politically, a gender perspective also matters. In a recent report, the International Labour Organization has argued that “over the past few decades, in both industrialized and developing countries, there has been a marked shift away from standard employment to non-standard employment”.⁶ Standard employment here refers to a full-time, open-ended and reasonably paid labour contract with an adequate degree of social protection. The shift away from standard employment, which according to the ILO is taking place worldwide, is also associated with a *precarization of labour*. Feminist scholars have recently argued that the features which historically defined female work—flexibility, mobility, its casual nature, low status, and low pay—so, precarious work, have become increasingly typical for work under global capitalism in general.⁷ Think, for instance, of Australian miners, who only a few decades ago were a highly protected group of workers. Nowadays, they are hired on and off, on short-term individual

contracts instead of fixed collective labour agreements. Or consider the uncertain conditions in the tourist industry worldwide, which fluctuate with economic trends and political circumstances. Looking at how workers, and especially women, in the past, dealt with their precarious situation may provide important policy recommendations for the present.

WHY HOUSEHOLDS?

Almost all individuals live in a household of multiple people during a large part of their lifetime. The household fulfils important emotional, social and economic functions. These functions differ per period and region, and even across individual households. But in most cases, paid work for money or food by one or more household members is combined with activities such as reproduction, care work and emotional labour. All of these tasks can be done within the household, or they can be outsourced. They can be paid or unpaid, voluntary or involuntary. However, throughout history, most reproductive and caring tasks for the household have been performed *unpaid*, by women. Studying women's paid work in relation to their tasks in the household, and how this differed between regions, or changed over time, not only provides insights into the power relations between husbands and wives, parents and children. It also shows us how women have been able to flexibly change between caring duties and market work. This can, for example, help explain why across the world, particular niches of home textile production have remained vital for a long time.⁸

WHY COMPARATIVE HISTORY?

Put simply, the comparative method analyses similarities and differences between two or more case studies or events. While each case may have unique features, the comparative historical perspective helps us to identify underlying mechanisms that explain particular historical events and processes. For instance, if we compare the development in the wage gap between men and women in Britain and the Netherlands, as Corinne Boter has done in her recent dissertation,⁹ we can establish similar patterns occurring in different time periods. This comparison shows the importance of the *timing and nature* of the process of industrialization in both countries, which for a large part explains how women's work was remunerated relative to men's. The comparative perspective enables the historian to find a middle ground between, on the one hand, simple generalizations and, on the other hand, the extreme relativism of treating each historical event as unique.¹⁰

It is almost impossible for one single historian to know every detail about a wide variety of time periods and regions in order to make systematic comparisons. Over the past fifteen years, I have been involved in three ambitious comparative labour history projects. In these projects, we brought together a large number of scholars with expertise

on the history of textile work, domestic work and sex work. These collective efforts resulted in systematic long-term comparisons and quite voluminous publications.¹¹ In these books we distinguish broader patterns through space and time, and try to explain these patterns. My lecture benefits greatly from this work by the many historians and social scientists who contributed to these projects. I will try to take our collective comparisons a step further by connecting these three types of work.

PRECARIOUS LABOUR? THE APPRECIATION AND ORGANIZATION OF
WOMEN'S WORK

Textile work, domestic work and sex work are in a sense typical for the work that millions of women worldwide have historically performed. The working conditions in these professions across time and space were generally poor in many ways. Whether in the factory, at the master's or mistress's home, or in a brothel, working hours were long and the working environment was stressful in various ways. Although these conditions have also applied to working men, in many contexts, women were worse off.

Many contemporaries as well as historians have even questioned if we can really label these activities of women as work. Cleaning, caring, being sexually or emotionally available, making clothes – aren't these tasks of many a wife and mother? Of course, much depends on how we define "work". Neoliberal as well as Marxist historiography has tended to use quite a narrow definition of work, juxtaposing "productive" and "reproductive labour". "Productive labour" in this context has been work that directly creates "surplus value". In contrast, it views much of the domestic and sexual services that have been provided throughout history, predominantly by women, as *unproductive*, or at best *reproductive*, in the sense that wage labourers were borne, raised and cared for. Even many Marxist Feminists have for long considered these activities by women as non-productive.¹²

For millions of women throughout history, ranging from Japan to Germany, from Iceland to South Africa, domestic service was part of their life cycle, just before marriage.¹³ Doing domestic chores in the households of others was useful to acquire particular domestic skills. Often, food and lodging formed the major part of remuneration. More in general, care work was associated with the female disposition and women's tasks in the reproductive sphere. Prostitution has, until today, not been considered as work by many people, or at least a very special kind of profession. In multiple ways, sex work has also frequently been related to women's position in the household. In early modern European towns, for example, ranging from Florence to Bruges, women were not prosecuted for "prostitution", but rather for "adultery", because they had sex outside of legal marriage, regardless if they were paid for it or not.

The blurred lines between reproductive tasks and paid services are still very much present today. As one 35-year old Copacabana prostitute reflected on her marriage at the start of this century: “It was a job, just like this here. Actually, that’s a lie: it was a duty. And you don’t make money off of a duty. Here at least I get paid for what I do. My husband never paid me.”¹⁴ This statement, as well as many other contemporary and historical examples from around the world, suggests that prostitutes have consciously perceived themselves as workers, even if their environment has not.

Not only domestic and sex work, but even textile production, especially hand spinning and weaving, have for a long time been seen as “household duties” of women and girls. From ancient Greece to precolonial Indonesia, women were symbolically depicted as spinners of the “thread of life”. In many historical contexts, especially in subsistence economies, the production of food, beverage *and* textiles for home use was part of women’s daily duties. This only changed when cities emerged and textiles were increasingly produced for the market. Interestingly, in many regions of the world this specialization was followed by a gender-specific labour division with women spinning and men weaving, often organized in guilds or other professional associations.

This brings us to another similarity between the three occupations, that the possibilities for *women* to organize themselves to fight for better working conditions were relatively limited. In the emerging textile factories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries all over the world, women did not form official trade unions and usually did not lead strikes.¹⁵ *Domestic and caregiving work* in the households of others has in most places and times been of such an isolated and a competitive nature, that it was extremely difficult for workers to



organize, both in a practical sense and in terms of feeling solidarity. Many lived in the homes of their masters and mistresses, and were subject to the rules and intimidation of their employers. This was not only the case with enslaved domestic servants, as in this picture from early nineteenth-century Louisiana. Also when they worked under freer labour relations, they could be fired at any time, and be replaced by a more obedient servant, if they protested against how their employers treated them. Similar conditions of individuality and a sphere of competition may apply to sex workers. For them, an extra complication was that in many times and regions, prostitution and other types of

sexual services have not been considered work, but as *criminal activities*. Even in the few countries where sex work is legalized, such as in the Netherlands today, it is morally condemned or stigmatized. All this has made labour organization, at least in a formal sense, difficult.¹⁶

Finally, the emerging historical scholarship on the gender wage gap shows that women have been systematically paid less than men, even for the same work. Although this difference varies over time and space, it persists until today, even in the world's most developed countries. One important mechanism explaining wage differentials throughout history is that women have tended to crowd into a much smaller number of occupations than men. Even if there was a high demand for labourers, this gendered segmentation also led to a *high supply of women* in these particular jobs, driving down wage rates.¹⁷

So far, it seems that women's position as workers was indeed precarious and even contested in most of history, and that they were very much victims of their circumstances, and perhaps of the sheer fact that they were women. But, there is another side to the story. Many examples through space and time show that women's work in textiles, domestic service or prostitution was valued. Within their socioeconomic, political and cultural constraints, female workers *could* indeed have considerable influence. Think, for instance, of the highly esteemed court prostitutes of medieval and early modern China,¹⁸ who as concubines exercised substantial political power. Or the fairly independent seamstresses in France around 1700, who established and managed their own guilds.¹⁹ And while it was perhaps difficult for domestic servants to formally organize, they certainly had some control, because they knew so much about their masters' and mistresses' personal lives.



In this cartoon, the maid says to a hairdresser who comes at the door: "Law bless yer! That ain't missus's own 'air; it's a wig!". Servants gossiped, avoided work, stole from their bosses, sometimes blackmailed them. In more positive terms, many servants developed really intimate relationships with their employers and/or their children. They benefited in terms of confidentiality, emotional fulfilment, the informal influence they had. Also, they were frequently mentioned in their master's or mistress's will.²⁰

In terms of organization, history also reveals both informal and formal ways in which textile workers, domestic workers and sex workers have organized themselves. Take, for example, the sisterhoods that Chinese cotton and silk workers formed in the 1920s. These sisterhoods (or *jiemeihui*) were small groups of female workers, usually six to ten women from the same region, who swore loyalty to each other. Within these informal groups, women pooled resources, for instance to buy each other gifts, but they also protected each other and sometimes went on strike together.²¹ In more recent times, international activities have been undertaken to better organize both domestic work and sex work. In the case of domestic workers, there are even formal international organizations. Probably the most influential is the International Domestic Workers Federation. In 2011, it achieved the milestone of reaching an ILO Convention on decent work for domestic workers. For prostitutes, it has been more difficult to organize formally, as in many countries it is illegal. So, for example, in Russia, organizations such as the St. Petersburg group “Silver Rose” do exist, but they are not allowed by the authorities.²² Still, they continue to fight for the recognition of sex work *as work* and for better working conditions, usually underground, and via social media, despite all the risks involved.

Within the constraints of the segmented labour markets, women could choose alternative paths. Many of the women who were arrested for adultery in Amsterdam in the seventeenth and eighteenth century probably just *claimed* that they were a textile worker or a domestic servant in order to cover up their activities in prostitution. Still, we also know that there was a lot of flexibility and overlap in their work patterns. They may have switched between domestic work and prostitution several times, or worked part-time as a spinner or seamstress and part-time offered sexual services. Likewise, thousands of girls in industrializing Europe in the nineteenth century preferred to take a job in a textile factory rather than a position as a servant in a middle-class or elite household, despite the harsh working conditions. Factory work usually paid better, and in cash instead of in kind. Also, while factory hours were long, domestic work could be a 24/7 job, especially if you lived in the household of your master or mistress. Our comparative study of sex workers worldwide has shown that in many contexts, prostitution paid better than other available jobs, provided that a sex worker had sufficient control over her income. In contemporary Brazil, for instance, most prostitutes also work in formal employment, but they only get a minimum wage there, and prostitution pays much better. The most likely alternatives are for many women working as a badly paid domestic servant, unpaid as a housewife, or in a supermarket as a checkout clerk.²³

Changing employment was not always a positive choice. Sometimes women were forced by economic hardship, unemployment, or pressure by others. Many of the Japanese

girls in the textile factories I showed earlier, were pushed by their parents to migrate to a textile plant and live in dormitories for a long period of time. All over the world, ranging from Sweden to China, from the early modern period until the present, children have been sold or hired out as domestic servants by their own families or orphanages. Sex work too was not always a first choice, but sometimes working or living conditions were worse elsewhere. In present-day India, for instance, women working as unskilled construction labourers get paid very little. They perform hard physical labour, and many are even forced to have unpaid sex with their bosses. These women prefer to move into prostitution, to at least get paid for their sexual services.²⁴ For this, they are willing to travel great distances and cross borders. This brings me to the second theme I would like to address today – the role of globalization.

WORK(ERS) ON THE MOVE? THE IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION ON THE DIVISION OF LABOUR

Textile work, domestic work and sex work have all for centuries been greatly affected by the process of globalization, which means an intensification of connections between different parts of the world. As we will see, in the case of textiles, it was generally the industry that throughout history relocated to where labour costs were lowest. In the case of domestic and sex work, it was usually the workers who migrated.

Race to the bottom

Textiles are probably the oldest commodities traded over a long distance. Since the Middle Ages, with the rise of cities and specialization, luxury textiles such as silk, but also cloth for daily use began to be traded. Textile production, especially hand-spinning, is labour-intensive, and required a lot of workers. Therefore, when textile production became commercialized, producers started to look for cheap labour. So, urban weavers employed spinners in the countryside, where wage rates were lower. These rural workers were usually women and children, and they could be found throughout the world. In the seventeenth century, Tilburg spinners spun wool for weavers in Leiden. Eighteenth-century women in the Chinese countryside of Shaanxi province spun cotton for the city of Xi'an.²⁵ The same happened in early twentieth-century Egypt, where rural spinners spun for weavers in Cairo, but also for smaller provincial towns.²⁶ Over time, the distances yarn travelled became larger. Thus, eighteenth-century Dutch towns imported linen thread from Silesia. Women's wages were so much lower there that they could compensate for the higher transport costs. At the same time, cheap yarn spun throughout the Ottoman Empire was transported to the most important cities such as Istanbul and Cairo.²⁷

World trade expanded, and Asian cotton cloth was increasingly in demand by consumers in Europe, Africa and North America. In the early eighteenth century, British woollen cloth producers called for protective measures to ban the import of cotton textiles from India. However, the desire for cotton was insatiable. Therefore, other ways to be competitive with Asia were sought, and the solution was found in technology. New spinning and weaving machines were invented to save labour costs, leading to industrialization all over the West in the nineteenth century. As a result, thousands of female hand spinners lost their work, and although some of them found employment in the new factories, these were generally unmarried, young women. With the new machines, new gender-specific divisions of labour emerged in the factories, and men moved into spinning. Although many low wage regions in Asia could remain competitive for much longer than previously thought, as I have shown recently for colonial Indonesia,²⁸ ultimately, the core of the world's textile production shifted to Europe and the USA. In Asia, only Japan managed to successfully catch up with the new technology, also because of the use of a large number of low-paid young women in the factories. After the Second World War, textile factories in the West as well as Japan quickly lost ground to the upcoming industries in Communist China and postcolonial India, and later also countries such as Indonesia and Bangladesh, where labour costs were even lower, particularly those of women and children. In many of these regions, such as China and Bangladesh, trade unions were not allowed, so that labour conditions, and thus labour costs, could remain low. We only have to think back to the disastrous collapse of badly maintained factory buildings at Rana Plaza in Dhaka, some years ago, where over 1,000 textile workers died. Despite these appalling conditions, recent studies by economists also show that many Bangladeshi women working in the export garment industries gain economic independence and status by their work, which gives them a stronger position towards their family, as well as to economic development in the region.²⁹ Also, the increased visibility of their circumstances in the international media and debates allows them to become more militant and demand better working conditions, as this picture shows. So, change does happen, and it often does so via more informal channels than the traditional labour organization such as trade unions.

Domestic and sex workers on the move

While in the case of textile production, it was the industry that moved over the globe, in the case of domestic workers and prostitutes, the *workers* were the ones who migrated. The history of their migration is in fact centuries old. Cities in particular drew large numbers of women from the nearby countryside or from further away. This migration was not always voluntary, as we have seen in the case of colonial South Africa, where Van Riebeeck, and many other European settlers, imported domestic slaves from other areas surrounding the Indian Ocean. Another example are the slaves from eastern Europe and central Asia who were brought in to do domestic work in elite households

in medieval and Renaissance Italian cities.³⁰ However, many young girls also chose to move voluntarily to find a job as a domestic servant, and perhaps even a marriage partner. Examples are the many Scandinavian girls who came to Amsterdam in the seventeenth century, or Irish girls going to the United States two centuries later.

In prostitution too, migrant women were well represented. Especially global trading hubs, such as Amsterdam, London, Istanbul and Cairo, attracted large numbers of single men, or men who were away from home for a long time, such as sailors and merchants. Thus in the middle ages and early modern period, these cities already formed a ready market for women offering their sexual services. Women came from nearby villages, but also from regions further away, and other countries. The intensification of colonialism and global trade further increased the demand for domestic and sexual services by European settlers in Asia and Africa in the nineteenth century. These were usually fulfilled by indigenous women, as at the start of the nineteenth century, not many white women migrated to the colonies.

This started to change however, towards the end of the nineteenth century. Then, the growing numbers of young single European women who wanted to migrate, for instance to Latin American countries or Asia, was increasingly framed as a problem of “white slavery”. According to the public imagery, these white women were victims of male pimps and traffickers, who lured them into prostitution under false pretences. This led to national and international initiatives to fight trafficking in the early twentieth century.³¹ For sure, there were girls, especially when under-aged, who were indeed tricked into sex work by men pretending to give them other jobs, or promising to marry them. But our global history of sex work also shows that often, girls and women knew what they were getting into, and sometimes themselves took the initiative to migrate. Moreover, women were not always the victims and men the perpetrators. As Magaly Rodríguez García has discovered for the 1920s, prostitutes often picked their *souteneurs* themselves. Contemporaries claimed that at least in Latin America [quote] “as many pimps are created by prostitutes as there are prostitutes created by pimps” [end of quote].³² In this respect, there are interesting parallels with the debate on trafficking today, when a large share of the sex workers in the Western world comes from non-Western countries. Although many of them work in the sex industry involuntarily, and under poor circumstances, there is also a larger share of voluntary sex workers among migrants than is often thought. It is mainly their illegal migrant status that puts them in a weak position towards their procurers.

This brings us to the present, postcolonial world, in which much of the sex work in the Western world is indeed performed by immigrant workers who are often illegal. We can see an interesting parallel with regard to domestic and care work in the West. With the rise of the labour force participation of ever higher educated women, households in

richer countries increasingly outsource domestic and caregiving duties to women from poorer regions of the world, such as Southeast Asian or Latin American nannies and nurses. In contrast to many historical societies all over the world, these present-day migrants are no longer necessarily young and unmarried. Often, these women have children of their own, who have been left in the hands of grandmothers, sisters or neighbours in their home countries. Therefore, this is also referred to as the “Global Care Chain”. Ironically, while those care-givers provide comfort and love to the children or parents of employer families, they often have to miss their own families for an extended period of time.³³ They are sometimes badly treated by their employers, and when their status is illegal, they may be seriously underpaid. On the other hand, with the considerable remittances these women send home, they gain economic standing in their countries of origin, and often manage to provide a better future, for instance education, for their own children.

TO CONCLUDE: THE GAINS OF COMPARATIVE LABOUR HISTORY

Textile work, domestic work and sex work have formed the majority of *paid work* for women through space and time, as in most contexts, alternatives were limited.³⁴ For sure, their work was often precarious: it was underpaid, casual, and poorly organized. Moreover, globalization and increasing commercialization of these types of work may not necessarily have improved the position of women in the labour market. While in some parts of the world women’s position has improved, a specific international division of labour seems to have emerged. Poor and migrant women from the global south are increasingly performing the textile, domestic and sex work of the world.

Yet, the long-term global comparisons I have made here also show many examples of the choice and agency women had through the centuries. First, migration by women has been much more prevalent, and much older, than previously thought. Indeed, part of this migration was forced, but a lot of women also consciously chose to move, to find better work opportunities. Even under involuntary conditions, they tried to make the best of it, like Krotoa in the Van Riebeeck household or Filipina nannies in the US today. Second, although women’s formal organization in these occupations has proven difficult throughout history, we find many instances of more informal resistance, organization and influence. Precisely the intimate and affective character of their work, and their closeness, in many ways, to their employers or clients, could be used to female workers’ benefit. Third, within the constraints of the segmented labour market, paid textile, domestic and sex work have provided women a degree of economic independence throughout history. Young textile workers or domestic servants could be freer from their parents, saving for marriage or their own business. Sex work, despite its low status and even illegal character in many contexts, paid better than many alternatives, provided that the prostitute had sufficient control over her earnings.

One of the huge gains of Global Labour History over the past two decades has been that it shows that the “standard employment” model is in fact an exception in history, with a strong Eurocentric bias.³⁵ Focusing on global women’s work only further emphasizes this non-standard character of employment. It suggests that we should move beyond intellectual discussions about which types of activities qualify as “work” in the past and present. For sure, following Marcel van der Linden, we can take a broad definition, such as “work is the production of useful goods and services”. However, we can doubt whether such a broad conception is still meaningful, and what it brings us analytically. Instead, I would like to argue the point that it is much more important to investigate *under which conditions* people have performed their productive activities, how these conditions have benefited or harmed them, and why workers were, or were not, able to change them.

The inclusion of women – more than half of the world’s historical labour force – in the picture is crucial. It shows that while workers may often have been *formally* powerless, informal networks, and forms of resistance against bad working circumstances or against existing power relations, did much to enhance their living and working conditions in the past. To quote the wise words of migration historian Dirk Hoerder: “The emphasis on ‘exploitation’ in both labor and women’s historiography is justified, [but] an emphasis on ‘victimization’ [...] overlooks women’s agency [...]”.³⁶ Rather than restrict, or criminalize, or neglect these circumstances, policy makers and NGOs should try to connect to these existing forms of organization.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Please allow me to proceed in Dutch.

Het schrijven van het dankwoord was natuurlijk het allerleukste onderdeel van mijn werk aan deze oratie. Ik sta hier nu alleen, maar achter en naast mij hebben de afgelopen jaren vele anderen gestaan. Allereerst wil ik het bestuur van het Unger van Brerofonds hartelijk danken voor het instellen van deze leerstoel. Met name voorzitter Ad Knotter, die zich bijzonder heeft ingezet voor mijn benoeming, ben ik grote dank verschuldigd.

De Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen bedank ik voor het onderbrengen van deze leerstoel. In het bijzonder Jan Kok, voorzitter van de vakgroep Economische, Sociale en Demografische Geschiedenis, en de decaan van de Faculteit Letteren, Margot van der Mülken, die allebei direct enthousiast waren over het plan om mij te verwelkomen op deze mooie universiteit.

Arthur Mol, rector van de Universiteit Wageningen en Keimpe Algra, decaan van de Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen van de Universiteit Utrecht, ben ik erkentelijk omdat zij als mijn succesvolle werkgevers akkoord zijn gegaan met deze benoeming.

Ik wil graag al mijn collega's bedanken van de instellingen waar ik de afgelopen negentien jaar werkzaam ben geweest: Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, Universiteit Utrecht, Universiteit Wageningen, Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Universiteit Leiden. Het zijn te veel collega's om stuk voor stuk te noemen, maar elk op jullie eigen manier hebben jullie bijgedragen aan mijn academische vorming en het feit dat ik hier vandaag sta. Enkelen wil ik echter met naam en toenaam noemen, in chronologische volgorde.

Gerard Trienekens, Maarten Prak en Jan Luiten van Zanden, jullie vergrootten tijdens mijn studie in de jaren '90 mijn enthousiasme voor de sociale en economische geschiedenis met jullie prachtige colleges, waarin jullie oog hadden voor zowel de grotere sociale en economische structuren als de ervaringen van de "gewone man en vrouw" in de geschiedenis. Gerard, jij was ook mijn eerste mentor in het universitaire onderwijs, en ik heb daarvan veel geleerd. Maarten en Jan Luiten, de cirkel is rond – na twintig jaar ben ik weer terug op het nest in Utrecht. Dank voor de geweldige samenwerking het afgelopen jaar.

Jan Lucassen, Marcel van der Linden, en Lex Heerma van Voss, meer dan wie dan ook hebben jullie mij gevormd en gescherpt als onderzoeker in mijn tijd op het IISG van 2000 tot 2012. Jan dank ik voor zijn inhoudelijke en liberale wijze van begeleiding tijdens mijn proefschrift, Marcel voor zijn intellectuele inspiratie en Lex omdat hij altijd heeft geloofd – en gezegd! – dat het wel goed zou komen met mij in de wetenschap. Manon van der Heijden en Leo Lucassen dank ik voor mijn tijd in Leiden, waar ik alle vrijheid kreeg om mij verder te ontwikkelen als onderzoeker en bovendien ruime ervaring op te doen in het onderwijs, iets waar ik op het IISG natuurlijk weinig gelegenheid toe had.

Els Kuperus, Lex Heerma van Voss, Dirk Hoerder, Silke Neunsinger en Magaly Rodríguez-García dank ik voor de fantastische samenwerking aan de drie grote comparatieve projecten over textielarbeiders, seksarbeiders en huishoudelijke diensten. De inzichten die ik door deze projecten heb opgedaan, vormden de basis voor deze rede. Corinne Boter, Dirk Hoerder, Atte Jongstra, Maarten Prak, en Janneke Raaijmakers lazen mijn lezing in een eerder stadium en voorzagen deze van zinvolle opmerkingen.

Ewout Frankema dank ik voor zijn voortdurende steun en vertrouwen, zowel vakinhoudelijk als in de soms ondoorgroendelijke procedures van de academische wereld. Net als ik, en waarschijnlijk nog wel een beetje meer, kan hij zich ongelofelijk kwaad maken over onrecht, of het nu is omdat de inhoud geweld wordt aangedaan, of omdat er met mensen wordt gesold. Het leverde hem ooit de bijnaam “angry young man” op. Onze vijf jaar samen in Wageningen waren een prachtig avontuur, waarbij we elkaar goed aanvulden, ondersteunden en waar nodig kritische feedback gaven. In deze periode is een diepe vriendschap ontkiemd, die in de afgelopen jaren tot zoveel meer moois is uitgebloeid. Hopelijk blijven we in de toekomst steeds aan elkaar groeien en elkaars geesten scherpen.

Ten slotte wil ik mijn vrienden, familie en kinderen bedanken. Jullie zijn me allemaal heel dierbaar, maar ik ben vooral heel dankbaar dat Janneke, mijn lieve vriendin en briljante vakgenoot, er op deze speciale dag bij is. Hanne, Yula, Yune en Myla, bedankt voor al jullie liefde. Mama, bedankt voor je inspiratie en voorbeeld als studerende en werkende alleenstaande moeder. Jij moet vandaag trots zijn voor twee, want papa heeft dit moment niet meer kunnen meemaken. Stef, wij voeden samen twee fantastische kinderen op, bedankt dat dit in goede harmonie mogelijk is.

Rena en Noam, met jullie eindig ik mijn bedankjes. Wat ben ik blij met jullie: slimme, lieve, mooie en sociale mensen. Ik wens jullie toe dat jullie in alle vrijheid jullie talenten kunnen blijven ontwikkelen en van het leven kunnen genieten.

Ik heb gezegd.

REFERENCES

- 1 J. Hunter and H. Macnaughtan, "Japan", in: A.F. Heerma van Voss, E. Hiemstra-Kuperus and E. van Nederveen Meerkerk (eds), *The Ashgate Companion to the History of Textile Workers, 1650-2000*, Aldershot, etc.: Ashgate 2010, pp. 305-332, p. 319-320; Narayan, S. 2016. "Women in Meiji Japan: Exploring the Underclass of Japanese Industrialization", *Inquiries Journal. Social Sciences, Art, Humanities* 8:2, pp. 1-3.
- 2 S. Ally, "Slavery, Servility, Service: The Cape of Good Hope, the Natal Colony, and the Witwatersrand, 1652-1914", in: D. Hoerder, D., E. van Nederveen Meerkerk, and S. Neunsinger, S. (eds), *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers, Leiden*, etc.: Brill 2015, pp. 254-270, pp. 257-258.
- 3 T.G. Blanchette, and A.P. da Silva, "Prostitution in Contemporary Rio de Janeiro", in: P. Kelly, and S. Dewey (eds), *Policing Pleasure: Sex Work, Policy, and the State in Global Perspective*, New York: NYU Press 2011, pp. 85-93, p. 88.
- 4 E. van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Market Wage or Discrimination? The Remuneration of Male and Female Wool Spinners in the Seventeenth-century Dutch Republic", *Economic History Review* 63:1, 2010, pp. 165-186; J.L. van Zanden, "The Malthusian Intermezzo: Women's Wages and Human Capital Formation between the Late Middle Ages and the Demographic Transition of the 19th Century", *Journal of Family History* 16:4 2011, pp. 331-342; J. Humphries and J. Weisdorf, "The Wages of Women in England, 1260-1850", *Journal of Economic History* 75:2, 2015, pp. 405-447; C. Boter, *Dutch Divergence? Women's Work, Structural Change, and Household Living Standards in the Netherlands, 1830-1914*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation Wageningen University, 2017.
- 5 At the same time, feminists increasingly acknowledge that biological and cultural differences between men and women cannot be entirely separated. In recent years, therefore, gender is increasingly used as an inclusive term for female-male differences that may be caused by any combination of culture and biology. H.M. Lips, *Sex and Gender: An Introduction* 6th Edition, Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press 2008, p. 6.
- 6 International Labour Organisation, *Non-Standard Employment Around the World. Understanding Challenges, Shaping Prospects*, Geneva: ILO, 2106, pp. 10, 14. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms_534326.pdf
- 7 J. Oksala, "Affective Labor and Feminist Politics", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41:2, 2016, pp. 281-303, p. 281.
- 8 E.g. E. van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Challenging the De-Industrialization Thesis: Gender and Indigenous Textile Production in Java under Dutch Colonial Rule, c. 1830-1920", *Economic History Review*, 70:4, 2017, pp. 1219-1243.
- 9 Boter, *Dutch Divergence*.
- 10 See for an insightful discussion: G. Steinmetz, "Comparative History and its Critics.: A Genealogy and a Possible Solution", in: P. Duara, V. Murthy, and A. Sartoripp (eds.), *A Companion to Global Historical Thought*, Chichester: Wiley, pp. 412-436.
- 11 Heerma van Voss e.a., *Ashgate Companion*; Hoerder e.a., *Towards a Global History*; M. Rodríguez García, L. Heerma van Voss, and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s-2000s*, Leiden, etc.: Brill 2017.
- 12 Oskala, "Affective Labor", 285-286.
- 13 But see E. van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Temporary Service? A Global Perspective on Domestic Work and the Life Cycle from Pre-Industrial Times to the Present", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 43, 2017, pp. 217-239, for sexexceptions to this rule.

- 14 T. Blanchette, "Seeing Beyond Prostitution: Agency and the Organization of Sex Work", in: Rodríguez García e.a., *Selling Sex*, pp. 748-774; p. 760.
- 15 L. Christensen, "Institutions in Textile Production: Guilds and Trade Unions", in: Heerma van Voss e.a., *Ashgate Companion*, pp. 749-772, p. 756.
- 16 To put this into international legal perspective: even although the International Labour Organisation acknowledges that labour standards for sex workers need to improve, it still has considerable problems positioning them on equal footing with other workers. M. Rodríguez García, "The ILO and the Oldest Non-profession", In: U. Bosma and K. Hofmeester, *The Lifework of a Labor Historian: Essays in Honor of Marcel van der Linden*, Leiden, etc.: Brill 2018, pp. 90-114.
- 17 van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Market Wage".
- 18 S. Gronewold, "Prostitution in Shanghai", in: Rodríguez García e.a., *Selling Sex*, pp. 570-593, p. 576.
- 19 C. Crowston, "Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe: An Overview of Recent Research", *International Review of Social History* 516, 2008, pp. 19-44.
- 20 E. van Nederveen Meerkerk, "The will to give. Charitable bequests and community building in the Dutch Republic, c. 1600-1800", *Continuity and Change* 27:2, 2012, pp. 241-270.
- 21 R. Cliver, "China", in: Heerma van Voss e.a., *Ashgate Companion*, pp. 103-140, p. 129.
- 22 P. Hetherington, "Prostitution in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia", in: Rodríguez García e.a., *Selling Sex*, pp. 138-170, p. 165.
- 23 Blanchette and da Silva, "Prostitution".
- 24 S. Dasgupta, "Commercial Sex Work in Calcutta: Past and Present", in: Rodríguez García e.a., *Selling Sex*, pp. 519-537, p. 530.
- 25 Cliver, "China", 107-108.
- 26 J. Beinín, "Egyptian textile workers: from craft artisans facing European competition to proletarians contending with the state", in: Heerma van Voss e.a., *Ashgate Companion*, pp. 171-197, pp. 174-175.
- 27 E. van Nederveen Meerkerk, L. Heerma van Voss and E. Hiemstra-Kuperus, "Covering the World: Some Conclusions to the Project", in: Heerma van Voss e.a., *Ashgate Companion*, pp. 773-792.
- 28 van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Challenging the De-Industrialization Thesis".
- 29 N. Kabeer and S. Mahmoud, "Globalization, Gender and Poverty: Bangladeshi Women Workers in Export and Local Markets", *Journal of International Development* 16, 2004, pp. 93-109.
- 30 See R. Sarti, "Historians, Social Scientists, Servants and Domestic Workers: Fifty Years of Research on Domestic and Care Work", in: Hoerder e.a., *Towards a Global History*, pp. 25-60, p. 26.
- 31 M. Rodríguez García, "The League of Nations and the Moral Recruitment of Women", *International Review of Social History* 57, S20, 2012, pp. 97-128.
- 32 Rodríguez García, "The League of Nations", p. 111.
- 33 D. Hoerder, "Historical Perspectives on Domestic and Care-Giving Workers' Migrations: A Global Approach", in: Hoerder e.a., *Towards a Global History*, pp. 61-109, p. 65.
- 34 Exception: agricultural work, but also in most contexts unpaid subsistence labour, probably even more so than handicraft textiles.
- 35 M. van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*, Leiden, etc.: Brill 2008.
- 36 Hoerder, "Historical Perspectives", p. 63.

