

Threads of Power:  
Women's Work and the Shifting Landscapes of Early Modern Mercantile Atlantic Economy

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## Introduction

Early modern economic revolutions, mercantilism, proto-industrialization, and the development of capitalism transformed socioeconomics of Europe and its Atlantic colonies between the 15th century and the 18th century. These systems altered production, trade, and social hierarchies, albeit affecting men and women differently. From a feminist and postcolonial vantage, historians now ask not only how these changes affected women’s economic opportunities and status, but also how women themselves shaped these processes. Conventional narratives often assumed women’s marginality, but recent scholarship highlights women as active economic agents. This paper surveys the historiography, citing leading scholars in gender, economic and postcolonial history. It examines debates over whether early capitalism narrowed

or expanded women's roles, explores specific sectors, such as textile proto-industry, colonial trade, household economies, and peruses women's agency in both Europe and the Americas. It will also explore the reciprocal impact that women had on the development and operation of these economic systems. This paper adopts multiple historiographical lenses. A feminist perspective foregrounds gender relations and women's agency; a postcolonial perspective accentuates how empire intersected with gender; an economic-historical approach connects these to market and state structures. Key debates include whether women gained new autonomy through market work or lost privileges as family economies gave way to market economies. This historiography engage authors such as Maria Ågren, Catriona Macleod, Maria Mies, Sheilagh Ogilvie, Alexandra Shepard, Andrea Wilson, and many others, who represent a multitude of viewpoints.

## Scholarship of Women's Work

The history of interest in women's work in early modern Europe can be traced to early feminist pioneers like Alice Clark. In the second chapter of *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919), Clark contends that the rise of capitalism led to the loss of women's relative equality during the medieval and early modern periods. Before capitalism, the household served as a site of production, where women played a vital role in managing farms, various laborious trades, and even landed estates. She notes that most of the trades earlier relied heavily on their women's labor, so much that guild regulations normally mentioned female workers. Over time, capitalist economies increasingly shut married women out of a range of industries, driving them into household roles and making them economically dependent on their husbands.

Early modern women's history scholarship from the 1980s onwards revealed complexities such as tension and conflict within households and the significant number of

female-headed households. At this time, interdisciplinary approaches to feminist historiography arouse from social causes from second wave feminism. Maria Mies in her *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (1986) links a holistic approach of feminism, women's liberation and ecology to explain the global system of capital accumulation is predicated on the subordination and exploitation of women, nature, and colonies. In chapter three, she equates the underdevelopment of colonies with the "housewifization" of women's labor, integrating women globally as consumers and cheap labor, and traces the social origins of the sexual division of labor as an asymmetric and exploitative relationship. Sheilagh C. Ogilvie in "Women and proto-industrialization in a corporate society: Württemberg Textile Manufacture, 1590-1760" (1990), while not embracing activist or socio-political philosophy like Mies, still imbeds social consciousness on the issue of women's work and labor. In her chapter, she examines two theories: that proto-industrialization posits that this period greatly expanded women's market participation and increased their economic and social freedom, while the English empirical historiography, which Alice Clark ascribed to, argues that the transition to capitalist organization decreased women's market work and excluded them from many occupations. Ogilvie states that the English empirical historiography is correct in observing the exclusion of women from certain occupations as the cottage industry expanded, but it wrongly attributes this solely to capitalism. Unlike Clark, who portrayed guilds positively, Ogilvie states guilds primarily served the interests of male members and their families. Bennett, Judith Bennet's *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England* (1996) takes a similar negative approach to guilds, as women in pre-early modern England enjoyed the economic agency of ale-making until male-dominated guilds in the beer brewing industry took over.

By the 1990s onwards, influenced by Third Wave feminism, take a more intersectional, gender-inclusive interpretation of women's work in early modern Europe. Alexandra Shephard in "Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy" (2015) emphasizes the growing constraints and marginalization with commercial and capitalist development, but expresses unease that focusing solely on women's disadvantages overshadows their extensive economic participation. However, unlike Clark or Ogilvie, Shepherd examines women's impact on the early modern economy, not just the economy's impact on women, as she takes a micro-narrative approach over the macro. Catriona Macleod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren in *The Whole Economy* (2023) contend that foregrounding women's contributions raises serious questions about mainstream narratives based only on men's working lives, arguing that understanding a whole economy requires studying the work of all members of society. Unlike all other authors mentioned, intersectionality is embraced to understand how gender intersected with factors like class, race, marital status, and age to shape work experiences and opportunities.

Women's work and labor in history moved from initial structuralist examination by pioneering figures like Alice Clark to added depth and sectoral specificity in recent decades. Early writing had a tendency to explain the economic marginality of women in terms of a subsequent effect of capitalism's rise to prominence; later historians of one generation complicated such explanations, surveying different social, regional, and institutional conditions. Scholars such as Ogilvie critiqued capitalism as a monolithic phenomenon, while others, including Mies, emphasized the international and structural dimensions of labor exploitation and gendered subjugation. Modern scholarship, in particular by Shepard, Macleod, and Ågren, has moved ahead in that it encourages a gender-aware and holistic comprehension of women in the early modern economy. Collectively, these scholarly literature pieces demonstrate that the work

of women is more than a quest to reclaim vanished histories, but rewriting the axioms of social and economic history.

## Mercantilism and Women's Economic Roles

Mercantilism, an economic doctrine that ruled the major trading powers of Europe primarily in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, rested fundamentally on the conviction that national power and wealth were most effectively encouraged by a conscious effort to maximize exports and minimize imports. This system of mercantilism rested on the basic belief that a nation's wealth directly depended on its ability to accumulate precious metals, i.e., gold and silver, or collectively known as "bullion."<sup>1</sup> A nascent form of economic nationalism centered around the objective of creating a powerful and wealthy state at the expense of other rival nations.<sup>2</sup> Given the intense geopolitical competition among nation-states during this period, governments naturally designed economic policies to strengthen the nation and benefit a select few elites. These policies could affect women in various ways. For example, if their work was important in the production of goods for export, the state assisted by directly supporting their work through its policies. On the other hand, policies may have privileged male-dominated industries viewed as more important for strategic reasons. As such, one of the central tenets of mercantilist theory of a world economy as a "zero-sum game"—meaning that one player's gain is equivalent to another player's loss."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford R. Backman, *Cultures of the West: A History: Volume 2: Since 1350* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 545; Charles P Kindleberger, *A Financial History of Western Europe* (London ; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 2006), 33.

<sup>2</sup> Richard C. Wiles, "Mercantilism and the Idea of Progress," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 8, no. 1 (1974): 56–74, 62.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford R Backman, *Cultures of the West: A History: Volume 2: Since 1350* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 545.

The drive to achieve a trade surplus influenced the industries where women played the most active roles. As export demand for these goods grew, women gained more job opportunities, but they also faced increasing pressure to reduce costs of production, pressures that lowered their wages and worsened their working conditions. Such protectionist interventions took numerous shapes, for example, the provision of capital to infant industries, the establishment and “awarding of monopolies by government [...] the fixing of prices and wages, the blocking of competition, and the imposition of high domestic taxes.”<sup>4</sup> All these governmental interventions directly affected women’s economic opportunities by favoring specific sectors or by imposing regulations, such as those governing guilds, which had the effect of excluding women. Colonial powers made colonies a vital component of the mercantilist order by using them to supply essential raw materials and serve as captive markets for their manufactured goods.<sup>5</sup> Shepard, Macleod, and Ågren point that colonial expansion indirectly affected women in Europe by altering the demand for some domestically manufactured goods or by opening up new economic opportunities related to transatlantic trade.<sup>6</sup> Finally, a large population was considered a significant advantage in mercantilism because it provided a ready labor force, a huge domestic market, and a supply of potential soldiers.<sup>7</sup> The importance on population size encouraged women’s participation in the workforce to contribute to the nation’s economic productivity and power as a whole.

In Europe, mercantilist policies often favored male merchants and guilds, but household and agricultural production remained central. Many conventional historians across

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<sup>4</sup> Backman, *Cultures of the West*, 546.

<sup>5</sup> Clifford R Backman, *Cultures of the West: A History: Volume 2: Since 1350* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 545.

<sup>6</sup> Catriona Macleod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren, *The Whole Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 158–60.

<sup>7</sup> Robert B. Ekelund and Robert F. Hébert, *A History of Economic Theory & Method* (Long Grove, Ill. Waveland Press, 2014), 40–41.



historiographical fields have shown that women's labor under mercantilism was ubiquitous but undervalued. For example, guild statutes typically barred women from apprenticeships or master status; widows might inherit a husband's trade, but their privileges were limited.<sup>8</sup> As Maurice Garden's article states, guilds enforced patriarchal rules, as women could not become master craftsmen, and their work was deemed "inferior or even outside the corporate order."<sup>9</sup> The general, classical historiography often portrayed mercantilist economies as masculine or male-dominated domains, with women confined to the household or menial labor.

However, feminist historians from the 1990s and onwards challenge this omission. They highlight that women integrated themselves in mercantilist economies as producers, traders, and consumers. In pre-industrial Europe, many women wove cloth, tended gardens or livestock, brewed, and produced food or goods for local sale, often within the so-called "family economy."<sup>10</sup> Engaging with Jan de Vries's thesis of the "industrious revolution," Alexandra Shepard observes that early modern households, including wives and daughters, increasingly worked for market wages to afford new consumer goods.<sup>11</sup> His industrious revolution concept suggests that rising consumer demand led families to turn unpaid domestic labor into paid work. As de Vries argues, consumers' taste for goods induced "households [to] reduce their leisure time and reallocate [labor] from goods and services for direct consumption to marketed goods."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Clare Crowston, "Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe: An Overview of Recent Research," *International Review of Social History* 53, no. S16 (December 2008): 19–44, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Garden, "The Urban Trades: Social Analysis and Representation," in *Work in France: Representations, Meaning, Organization, and Practice*, ed. Steven Laurence Kaplan and Cynthia J. Koepp (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 287–96, 288.

<sup>10</sup> Sheilagh C. Ogilvie, "Women and Proto-Industrialisation in a Corporate Society: Württemberg Textile Manufacture, 1590-1790," in *Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective*, ed. W. R. Lee (Manchester University Press, 1990), 76–103, 85.

<sup>11</sup> Alexandra Shepard, "Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy," *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (February 18, 2015): 1–24, 3, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Jan De Vries, "The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution," *The Journal of Economic History* 54, no. 02 (June 1994): 249–70, 257.

Shepherd concurs as women's increased textile work, spinning, and other market-oriented tasks were central to this process, especially in the colonies, but had not been driven by initial unpaid labor. However, Macleod, Shepard, and Ågren contest the de Vries' industrious revolution interpretation, as they suggest that the increase in women's labor during the eighteenth century had been driven less by consumer aspirations and more by economic pressures, such as rising prices, taxes, and poverty.<sup>13</sup>

In the colonial world, mercantilism intersected with empire. In settler colonies in North America and Caribbean, European legal traditions and property systems influenced women's rights. For example, in French-controlled Louisiana (*Louisiane*), civil law allowed married women unusually broad property rights. As Andrea Wilson noted in 1812, women there "have more influence over their husbands than is common [...] perhaps from [...] the almost exclusive right [...] to the property, in consequence of marriage contracts."<sup>14</sup> In practice, French and Spanish colonial wives could receive half of their husband's estate (dower) and manage family assets, unlike British coverture norms.<sup>15</sup> Yet, they still worked under mercantilist regimes. Local weaving was banned in St. Louis so that all cloth had to be imported from France.<sup>16</sup> This underlines how colonial women often had legal avenues for autonomy, even as imperial policy constrained colonial economies.

Yet, the very impact of mercantilism on women's status is debated. Some scholars, such as Alice Clark, a British first-wave feminist and historian in the early 20th century, argued that the rise of individualist capitalism destroyed female autonomy in the medieval family

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<sup>13</sup> Catriona Macleod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren, *The Whole Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 14–15.

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Wilson, "Agency on the Edge: Women of Colonial St. Louis and the Power They Held," *Fairmount Folio: Journal of History* 18 (May 16, 2018): 13–25, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, "Agency on the Edge," 17.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, "Agency on the Edge," 16.

economy.<sup>17</sup> Scholars alike claimed that as capitalist “commercial production” spread, women lost institutional protections and came under stricter patriarchy as men became the economic producer, or colloquially, as common people refer to as a “breadwinner,” of the household unit. In contrast, others, like American historian Judith Bennett, have argued there was no sharp break; women’s work remained consistently marginalized, with medieval and early modern women facing similarly limited opportunities.<sup>18</sup> Contemporary scholars tend to reject simplistic decline narratives of female autonomy in the economic sphere. For example, Shepard shows that early modern English women never enjoyed a true egalitarian “golden age,” nor were they uniformly victimized by market growth.<sup>19</sup> Both pessimistic and optimistic histories miss this complexity.

### Women’s Prior Labor Agency

Prior to the full emergence of mercantilism and early capitalism, late medieval and early modern European women engaged in all sorts of economic activities. Women in the home typically oversaw essential activities such as cooking, brewing, spinning, weaving, and animal care, all of which were economically vital to the household. Outside the household, ever-married or widowed women at times held the status of landowners and financial heiresses, as they demonstrated their capacity to wield economic agency outside the customary spheres of the home. Female laborers, especially in Italian and Dutch urban centers, pursued a wider range of trades, at times as independent workers or more commonly in the informal economy that coexisted with and occasionally in parallel with the formal guild system.<sup>20</sup> For example, in 1550,

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<sup>17</sup> Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*. (London: Routledge, 1919), 13, 43–63, 92, 196–97, 234–35, 300–01.

<sup>18</sup> Judith M. Bennett, “Medieval Women, Modern Women: Across the Great Divide,” in *Culture and History 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Wayne State University Press, 1992), 147–75, 148–49.

<sup>19</sup> Alexandra Shepard, “Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy,” *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (February 18, 2015): 1–24, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Catriona Macleod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren, *The Whole Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 16, 137, 147–49.

rural communities in Sweden and southern German entities enforced regulations to manage agricultural labor, which reflected a clear gender division of work, where women carried out tasks such as tending small animals, sowing, weeding, and harvesting, activities whose products were sold.<sup>21</sup> Notably, women who were never married or were widowed proved they could run farms independently, without relying on male labor.<sup>22</sup> Preindustrial Europe provided a variety of economic roles for women across social classes, ranging from domestic servants to respected midwives and women who ran small businesses in across European cities.

In Medieval England, most households with basic knowledge could brew ale for consumption or for sale, as ale brewing was an unspecialized trade, as “most households could and did produce their own ale at least some of the time, and this work fell most often on wives.”<sup>23</sup> The ale-brewer trade in the fourteenth century “attracted so few men that [...] women dominated brewing [...] few men brewed on their own, and most men, if active in brewing, worked alongside women. Before the Black Death, most of the brewing done in England—for domestic or commercial use—was done by women.”<sup>24</sup> However, as the brewing trade prospered and the market evolved in the early modern era, women brewers increasingly faded from the scene due to circumstances that disadvantaged them. By the 1600s, “women had only small amounts of capital to invest in new equipment, limited authority over large work forces, and few contacts for obtaining supplies and opening new markets,” coupled with As guilds offered brewers new ways to negotiate with civic authorities and express their trade status, wives found themselves second-rank members in organizations run by their husbands,” and government

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<sup>21</sup> Catriona Macleod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren, *The Whole Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 41, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Macleod, Shepard, and Ågren, *The Whole Economy*, 99.

<sup>23</sup> Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 18.

<sup>24</sup> Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England*, 24.

regulations favoring larger, male-run enterprises, led to a situation where women had difficulty competing.<sup>25</sup> This displacement from a once accessible trade contributed to a later period where women, facing these persistent constraints in established sectors, would have sought other opportunities for economic agency, adapting to the evolving economic landscape even if it meant moving into different, often less prestigious, forms of work.

### The Household Economy

Despite women's previous engagement, their economic lives remained pervasively shaped by prevailing social expectations and conventional gender roles. Of course, early modern European society was pervasively patriarchal, as men customarily dominated the public sphere of politics and the formal economy, and women relegated to the domestic sphere of the home. Legal restraints, namely the doctrine of coverture, further restricted married women's capacity to own property, enter into contracts, and engage in business on their own account in the formal economy.<sup>26</sup> Social conventions also regulated women's primary work to domestic management and child care, professions which, though economically vital to household survival, were undervalued or unpaid too frequently.<sup>27</sup> In southern Germany, for instance, social convention encompassed the exclusion of women from guilds, as it demonstrated the limits under which they existed in both participating in the formal economy and displaying economic standing.<sup>28</sup> It does not help that medieval mindset itself towards women as being inherently the lower order

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<sup>25</sup> Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 145–46.

<sup>26</sup> Catriona Macleod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren, *The Whole Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 161; Daina Ramey Berry and Nakia D. Parker, "Women and Slavery in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History*, ed. Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor and Lisa G. Materson (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 153–70, 157.

<sup>27</sup> Alexandra Shepard, "Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy," *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (February 18, 2015): 1–24, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Catriona Macleod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren, *The Whole Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 9, 115, 153.

beasts, as it seems in anti-feminist polemics, also contributed to their economic and social status in the following early modern period.

Nevertheless, the household was one central unit of production and consumption, and women played a fundamental role in ensuring the economic well-being of their families. American historian Sarah Pearsall writes that “households, centered around hearths, organized people, property, and labor across the early modern Atlantic world [...] were places where labor was organized, and capital was amassed.”<sup>29</sup> One significant economic activity was women’s work in textile production, spinning, and weaving, which was often organized within the household but was ever more connected to wider market demands for cloth. For example, “Florence, in 1662–63, 84 per cent of silk workers were women [...] in London, between 1775 and 1787, women made up 57.9 per cent of workers occupied in cloth-making [...] in eighteenth-century Bologna, 12,000 independent female weavers worked for the merchants of the silk guild: 17 per cent of the total population of the city.”<sup>30</sup> As shown, women constituted the largest proportion of labor in the textile industry and, in some rural families, were even the primary cash earners, and debunk myths of their peripheral economic role during the period prior to the full impact of mercantilism. This pre-existing economic condition, with active female participation blocked by overwhelming social and legal barriers, was the circumstances within which mercantilism and the emergence of early capitalism unfolded.

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<sup>29</sup> Sarah M. S. Pearsall, “Women, Power, and Families in Early Modern North America,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Women’s and Gender History*, ed. Ellen Hartigan-O’connor and Lisa G Materson (New York, Ny: Oxford University Press, 2018), 138.

<sup>30</sup> Catriona Macleod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren, *The Whole Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 147–48.

## Proto-Industrialization and Women's Work

As the early modern economy expanded, many scholars point to a phase of proto-industrialization in which rural households engaged in manufacturing. A “cottage industry” was organized via putting-out systems, where merchants supplied raw materials to home workshops and the latter produced finished goods on the market.<sup>31</sup> Historiographically, proto-industry has been seen as a bridge to the factory age and a key stage of capitalist transition. For women, this shift had mixed implications. Conventional theories, often following Jan de Vries, celebrated proto-industrialization as offering more market work to women, loosening old guild and village restraints.<sup>32</sup> In this optimistic view, women moved beyond private domestic chores into public production. Factual, as Ogilvie states that proto-industrial’s “expansion of cottage industry brought women out of ‘private’ household production [...] into ‘public’ market production, in which they took an active role in the outside world.”<sup>33</sup> Her argument portrays cottage industry as emancipatory, as rural women worked for cash wages or piece-rates, it raised their income and bargaining power. Her statement thus extended the industrious-revolution logic of de Vries, as it punctuates demand-driven labor supply.

By contrast, English empirical historiography of, which reflects cases like England’s woolen industry, saw an opposite trend. According to Alice Clark, as merchants organized textile production in villages, women were actually pushed back into household dependency and

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<sup>31</sup> David Levine and Keith Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society* (Clarendon Press, 1991), viii; Rosemary O’day, *Women’s Agency in Early Modern Britain and the American Colonies.*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), 163–64, Apple Books.

<sup>32</sup> Jan De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 71, 96–104.

<sup>33</sup> Sheilagh C. Ogilvie, “Women and Proto-Industrialisation in a Corporate Society: Württemberg Textile Manufacture, 1590-1790,” in *Women’s Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective*, ed. W. R. Lee (Manchester University Press, 1990), 76–103, 93.

confinement.<sup>34</sup> Proto-industry did not liberate women but concentrated work among men's households. As Ogilvie summarizes: the English view holds that expanding cottage industry "gradually forced" women into subordinate roles, which made them economically dependent on husbands.<sup>35</sup> In England, the New Draperies coincided with unmarried weavers marrying later, or unmarried women forced back into villages, or many women dropped out of wage work.<sup>36</sup> Ogilvie's detailed studies challenge both simplifications. In her Württemberg case study, she finds that women's economic activity predated proto-industry, as rural women already wove, spun, and worked in workshops. "Proto-[industrialization] was not required for women to be economically active: it was happening already in the non-proto-industrial sector," she writes.<sup>37</sup> In other words, proto-industry did not create new female labor so much as redirect it under merchant control. Ogilvie also shows that corporate village institutions (guilds, courts) remained powerful. Despite new export work, churches and courts continued to regulate women's work. Notably, she finds no loosening of patriarchy, as illegitimacy and premarital births did not rise in proto-industrial areas, contrary to the declining hypothesis.<sup>38</sup> Instead, ecclesiastical penalties tightened over time. Married women still managed dowries and farms, and widowhood often meant independent household headship. Thus, Ogilvie concludes that proto-industrialization altered neither the scale of women's labor nor the firm grip of male authority as much as once thought.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*. (London: Routledge, 1919), 198–200.

<sup>35</sup> Sheilagh C. Ogilvie, "Women and Proto-Industrialisation in a Corporate Society: Württemberg Textile Manufacture, 1590-1790," in *Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective*, ed. W. R. Lee (Manchester University Press, 1990), 93.

<sup>36</sup> Ogilvie, "Women and Proto-Industrialisation in a Corporate Society," 76–103, 84, 87–88.

<sup>37</sup> Ogilvie, "Women and Proto-Industrialisation in a Corporate Society," 85.

<sup>38</sup> Ogilvie, "Women and Proto-Industrialisation in a Corporate Society," 93.

<sup>39</sup> Ogilvie, "Women and Proto-Industrialisation in a Corporate Society," 85–86.



## Early Capitalism and Gender: The Industrious to Industrialization

By the late 17th and 18th centuries, Europe and the colonies were moving towards what is broadly called “early capitalism,” characterized by expansive trade networks, financial markets, and emergent factory production. Historians have debated how these changes affected women. The “domestic service versus market labor” debate is central: as new industries and wage work grew, did most women leave farm- and family-based work for paid employment, or were they pushed back into home-making roles?

The idea that household labor increased to fuel markets was articulated by de Vries. He suggested that new consumer demands led families, including wives and daughters, to increase labor supply. Alexandra Shepard notes that de Vries’ model predicts women’s labor peaked in a pre-industrial “golden age” and then fell as adult males became primary earners. This “U-shaped” labor force participation curve suggests high female labor force participation in the pre-industrial era, a decline during the 19th century with industrialization, and a subsequent return, has been contested by Shepherd. She mentions the 19th-century nadir, seen as a statistical mirage resulting from census takers’ failure to account for women’s work, and reinterpreted labor statistics to argue that women’s work was consistently undercounted.<sup>40</sup> In her view, women never lost the proportion of work they did; earlier counts simply ignored much domestic labor.

Some women became entrepreneurs within early capitalism, especially in the colonies. In cities, widows could inherit shops or taverns and run them. Female creditors existed colonial New England. Women in Boston and Newport actively managed financial records and employed established practices common to both sexes. Within households, all members could find

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<sup>40</sup> Alexandra Shepard, “Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy,” *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (February 18, 2015): 1–24, 1–2.

themselves in roles as creditors or debtors, necessitating engagement in associated financial activities. some women acted as *femes sole*. More interestingly, widows were more often to incur credit and debt than unmarried or married women. For example, when Ann Chaloner, the widow of a Newport merchant, passed away in 1770, she possessed bonds and notes worth £1,116, amounting to over a quarter of her total estate value.<sup>41</sup> Yet these opportunities were exceptional in a male-dominated market. Most women labored as domestic servants, factory textile workers, or farmhands, often at lower wages and with less security. As Shepard notes for England, women were “clustered in the lowest paid and lowest valued sectors, denied access to formal training.”<sup>42</sup>

By the 18th century, wages for men rose in some places, and social norms increasingly idealized women’s domesticity. Paradoxically, even as many rural women took wage work in putting-out textile systems, emerging middle-class ideology insisted that a virtuous woman should stay home. Married women’s legal identity was subsumed under coverture in British law, and unmarried women had limited property rights. Maria Mies theorizes socio-economic evolution as part of capitalist patriarchy: as capitalist progress advanced, women, like colonies and nature, were relegated to a non-market private sphere.<sup>43</sup> In her literature, the very idea of industrial labor going outside home was tied to the subordination of women: what was good for the capitalist was often bad for the household.<sup>44</sup>

## Women’s Influence on Economic Change

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<sup>41</sup> Sara T Damiano, *To Her Credit: Women, Finance, and the Law in Eighteenth-Century New England Cities* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 56.

<sup>42</sup> Alexandra Shepard, “Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy,” *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (February 18, 2015): 1–24, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 77–78, 217.

<sup>44</sup> Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World*, 75–78.

While assessing how economic shifts affected women, it is equally vital to recognize how women influenced those shifts. Although most European jurisdictions did not legally permit women to achieve any institutional or occupational prominence, according to Macleod, Shepard, and Ågren, women actively shaped the economy as dynamic producers who contributed significantly to the labor force and entrepreneurship, and as influential consumers who drove market demands and trends with their purchasing power.<sup>45</sup>

Women's labor powered many nascent industries. In the cloth and textile trades, for instance, wives often served as the master weaver's primary assistants. Ogilvie notes that "the wife [...] was often a craftsman's main assistant, even in such a heavy craft as building."<sup>46</sup> Widows frequently took over businesses. Without their work, families could not produce the surpluses that sustained mercantilist export economies. Even under restrictive laws, some women became entrepreneurs. Widows commonly inherited shops or inns and effectively ran them as proprietors. In Louisiana and other colonies, married women managed estates, as Stoddard's report of Creole Louisiana notes wives held "half of the estate plus a dowry [...]" and without heirs upon a husband's passing the "wife received everything."<sup>47</sup> In Southern Europe, women managed olive estates and engaged in labor, with equal share of products and profits produced from these estates, as it was also easy for women to be estate managers.<sup>48</sup> Unknowing to most, female creditors existed, rare but influential, and even this expanded into a household economic unit. In Sweden, ever-married women engaged in financial crediting visibly, as stated by

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<sup>45</sup> Catriona Macleod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren, *The Whole Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 14–16, 116.

<sup>46</sup> Sheilagh C. Ogilvie, "Women and Proto-Industrialisation in a Corporate Society: Württemberg Textile Manufacture, 1590-1790," in *Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective*, ed. W. R. Lee (Manchester University Press, 1990), 76–103, 82.

<sup>47</sup> Andrea Wilson, "Agency on the Edge: Women of Colonial St. Louis and the Power They Held," *Fairmount Folio: Journal of History* 18 (May 16, 2018): 13–25, 17.

<sup>48</sup> Catriona Macleod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren, *The Whole Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 44.

Macleod, Shepard, and Ågren, with the effect of making marriage lucrative for women and strengthening the household's creditworthiness among borrowers.<sup>49</sup>

Women made early modern economies possible and promoted their growth. Their labor underpinned proto-industrial expansion; their productivity raised families' standards; and their consumption patterns drove global trade links. Even if not major traders themselves, women actively participated in mercantile cities and colonial outposts, worth nothing in the market only if historians ignore their true contributions. Hence, an economic and gender historiography recognizes a feedback loop: emerging capitalist systems molded women's work and legal position, and in turn women's collective economic role supported and sometimes directed those systems. As such, the gendered division of labor became a self-reinforcing norm as markets matured, as men's wages were often assumed family support for dependents, which limited married women's formal employment and kept wages low. Conversely, women's increasing demand for imported commodities became a motive force for colonial and domestic manufacturers.

## Conclusion

The historiography of women in mercantilism, proto-industrialization and early capitalism shows a plurality of experiences. The expansion of mercantilism, proto-industry, and early capitalist markets shaped women's opportunities in contradictory ways. On one hand, these developments sometimes created new wage-earning roles, in colonies, and in nascent factories, that brought cash to women's households. On the other hand, market economies frequently reinforced patriarchal norms, as most guilds excluded women, and male-headed households

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<sup>49</sup> Catriona Macleod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren, *The Whole Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 41–42.

became the labor norm. As Ogilvie succinctly finds, many optimistic assumptions about women's empowerment in proto-industrial Europe were far from the case. Mies states that capitalism subjugated women and defined their economic role to the household as housewives. Contemporary historiography recognizes that women influenced these systems as much as they were influenced. Women producers enabled export industries; women consumers drove market demand; women financiers and creditors steered economic flows. In the colonial background, women formed the backdrop of mercantilist economies as creditors, an agency only recently receiving attention in scholarship. Persistent undervaluation of women's work, as noted by scholars like Macleod, Shepard, and Ågren, and the legal and social barriers erected in this era have had long legacies. Yet understanding that these were contested, not inevitable, outcomes, the result of economic pressures, is a key lesson of the historiography. Women fought for and claimed economic space whenever possible, from obtaining guild privileges, running businesses, to competing male authority in local markets.