

ESF Exploratory Workshop on

**RECONSTRUCTING THE FEMALE
LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION
RATES IN WESTERN EUROPE,
18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES**

Barcelona (Spain), 4 - 6 November, 2010

Convened by:

Carmen Sarasúa and Jane Humphries

SCIENTIFIC REPORT

1. Executive Summary

The ESF Exploratory Workshop on *Reconstructing the Female Labour Force Participation Rate in Western Europe in the 18th and 19th Centuries* was held in Barcelona Spain on 4-6th November 2010. Fourteen participants from seven countries took part. Participants included historians and economists working in several different academic disciplines but all with long-standing interest in the history of women's work and specialist expertise in reconstructing female participation rates from incomplete and problematic historical evidence.

The main scientific objective of the workshop was to explore and evaluate methods of reconstructing female labour force participation (FLFP) rates from historical information relating to country, region, town and economic sector for the period 1700-1900. Our starting point was the dissatisfaction many historians have expressed with early census estimates of economically active women. Historians working on a number of different European countries have long suggested that the earliest census figures for female participation are suspect because the ways in which economic activity was conceptualised and counted fail to capture the ways in which women supported themselves and contributed to their families' survival. Wariness of the concepts and methods of the pioneer censuses has been reinforced by empirical studies, which have compared the census counts with the numbers of women judged economically active on the basis of other historical sources. These studies suggest systematic undercounting in the censuses, consistent with the feminist critiques of the concepts and methods used in census enumeration.

However, the purpose of the workshop was not to disparage national census estimates of FLFP rates. Indeed such censuses provide much useful and valuable information about women's activity especially if subject to close scrutiny and a comparative perspective. Critical accounts of the early censuses in several European countries were essential to our project for two important reasons. First, they facilitate the establishment of benchmark estimates of FLFP rates for the mid-late 19th century. Second, they identify the ways in which women's work fell below the radar screens of official enumeration, suggest strategies to capture historic FLFP rates, and indicate the likely biases of particular sources and methods of estimation. Estimates based on revisions of census totals represent points of reference from which to look back into the pre-census era, the central interest of the workshop.

There are few estimates, even rough estimates, of female participation rates in the era before national censuses. Such estimates are vital to mainstream economic history. Production theoretic accounts of the past need measures of labour inputs to chart patterns in growth and identify productivity trends. The problem is that pre-census sources are scattered and piecemeal, which has led some researchers to abandon the project arguing that there is not enough evidence to ground measures of women's participation. Participants at the workshop disagree.

Thus the main objectives were: (a) to identify the best sources and methodologies to calculate FLFP rates; (b) to use the reconstructed rates to understand the different regional models of female participation; (c) to identify the supply and demand factors that contributed to these rates; (d) to describe the historical evolution of FLFP rates. Most commonly, estimates related to particular cities, regions even villages for which detailed historical records on population and economic activities had survived. However, the aim was to extend beyond the partial reconstructions possible on the basis of guild or firm data to capture participation rates for whole female populations in different economic contexts. Where possible, economic participation was cross-tabulated with other economic data. In some cases, participation could be conditioned on individual information such as age, marital status, education level, number of children, etc., as a prelude to the investigation of the variation in FLFP rates.

Before the meeting, the convenors pre-circulated notes that identified the main objectives, summarized earlier discussions and offered guidance to contributors. These notes identified key technical issues, possible methodologies, common problems and creative strategies to overcome such problems, and likely sources. Papers prepared with these notes in mind made for strong links between the papers and gave the workshop coherence that was reflected in focussed discussions.

The workshop was organised chronologically, with the first day devoted to estimates of FLFP rates for the 18th and early 19th centuries, before national censuses, and the second day concentrating on the strengths and weaknesses of census estimates and what historians can infer from them. Power point presentations had been requested and these structured presentations and helped participants whose native language was not English. It was widely agreed that the power points expedited the communication of ideas and evidence and so made time for discussion. Several participants also circulated papers in advance of the meeting.

Chairs were tasked with summarizing the main points of each paper and leading the discussion. Discussions were lively and although wide-ranging focussed on common themes and issues revealing the expertise of participants and their interest in developing a collective story from the individual contributions. This was particularly apparent in the final discussion session where there was a clear focus on establishing the general “Barcelona view”. There was general assent when one participant remarked that, “the sum of the papers was more powerful and important than the individual parts”.

2. Scientific content

Main conceptual issues had been identified in earlier discussions among the workshop participants and noted in the pre-circulated memorandum. **The first conceptual problem concerned the identification of the age limits used to define the working population**, the denominator of participation rate calculations. Modern definitions of the working population rely of age limits that exclude school age children and the retired. These age limits are historically specific. Basing activity rates on the total female population ignores the fact that women in some age groups were not competent to work and that these groups vary with the age structure of the population. Using modern age limits, such as over 16 for example, would be historically inaccurate and leave many working girls out of the picture. It was important that contributors discuss this problem and their way around it in the historic and national context in which they were working.

The second conceptual problem concerned the definition of “economically active”. Modern definitions rely on the existence of a wage labour market and accompanying institutions (employment insurance, labour exchanges, etc.). This approach is not helpful in a context where much work was unwaged as in small-scale businesses and family farms. Omission of such work would be particularly likely to undercount active women who were disproportionately likely to work unwaged and represents one source of dissatisfaction with conventional approaches. Early censuses and other historical documentation often used the designation of an occupational title as the mark of economic activity. This is not useful when people either pursued several different types of work or undertook work that was not graced by an occupational title or whose marital status trumped any occupational title. Again, women were particularly likely to lack occupational titles for such reasons and so disappear from consideration. Contributors needed to be clear about how they conceptualized and as a result measured female activity. Different definitions are acceptable but it is important that their basis and therefore comparability be clear.

Participants approached female participation in diverse ways related to the sources available, including the possession of an occupational title, being observed working, being observed earning, etc. Comparisons of measures based on different definitions were revealing often highlighting “hidden participation”. Thus, women’s tendency to work part time, at seasonal jobs and often in an assisting role meant that participation rates based on occupational titles were usually lower than those based on observation of any sort of work or on contribution to family subsistence. The observance of differences according to the definition adopted afforded several participants the chance to approximate “hidden participation” and so indicate the extent to which standard sources underestimated female activity.

Married women were a particular focus for several contributors. The nature of their work and its location meant their economic activity was particularly difficult to uncover and measure. Contributors highlighted the historical constraints on married women’s work (marriage bars, social norms, large families, need for women workers to live in, etc.). Geographical variation in married women’s work indicated the uneven incidence of opportunities and the demand constraints on female participation.

Several contributors went beyond measures of FLFP rates to explanations of geographical, temporal and life cycle variation. An interesting theme of the workshop involved historicising the standard model of female participation in which entry into the labour force varies negatively with husband’s wage and positively with own potential wage.

While own and husband’s wages appear relevant explanatory variables in most times and places, other economic and cultural factors were also important. One further consideration here was the possibility in many historical contexts that children could act as substitutes for mothers in the labour force.

3. Assessment of the results, contribution to the future direction of the field, outcome

During the workshop it became clear that the individual contributions made up an interesting and coherent, if as yet incomplete, account of European developments. The final session included discussion about future research collaboration and plans for publication. Future collaboration is planned around a network that will take advantage of various upcoming general meetings of economic and social historians to meet and present new research. However, participants thought the papers from the workshop were sufficiently developed and coherent (with revision) to merit publication.

Various options were discussed. The most attractive to participants was to publish the papers as a whole as a special issue of an economic and social history journal or as a collection of essays. Professors Humphries and Sarasua undertook to investigate the possibility of publishing the papers as a special issue of the international journal *Feminist Economics* of which they are both Associate Editors. Professor Goose was optimistic about the possibility of publishing as an edited collection in a new series sponsored by the Economic History Society of which he is the general editor.

Discussions about publication of at least a substantial sub-set of papers as two symposia in successive issues of *FE* are on going. Publication in this form has an additional advantage. The journal has an agreement with Routledge Press to publish collection of papers and such a collection could be expanded from the initial cluster to include additional contributions. Papers would have to be peer refereed before accepted for publication, but the convenors are convinced that their quality will ensure a successful special issue will be forthcoming.

4. FINAL PROGRAMME

Thursday 4, November 2010

- Afternoon *Arrival*
- 20.00 *Dinner at Mercado de Santa Caterina* (Avenida de Francesc Cambó, s/n, inside the old market of Santa Caterina, at walking distance from the hotel)

Friday 5, November 2010

- 09.10-09.20 **Welcome by Convenor**
Carmen Sarasúa (Dpt. of Economics and Economic History, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, Spain)
- 09.20-09.40 **Presentation of the European Science Foundation (ESF)**
Dr. Savvas Savvides (Standing Committee for Social Sciences (SCSS), European University, Nicosia, Cyprus)
- 09.40-13.00 Morning Session: Women's occupations in pre-census Europe. Chair: Beatrice Moring**
- 09.40-10.10 **Presentation 1 "Participation rates and occupational descriptors: from local registrations to female labour force participation rates: Dutch towns in the 18th century"**
Ariadne Schmidt (International Institute of Social History, Leiden University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands)
- 10.10-10.40 **Presentation 2 "Female activity rates in 18th century Castile. The dominance of the wool industry"**
Ricardo Hernández (Dpt. of Economics and Economic History, Universidad de Valladolid, Spain)
- 10.40-11.00 *Coffee / Tea Break*
- 11.00-11.30 **Presentation 3 "Accounting for women's participation rates in 18th century Spain"**
Carmen Sarasúa (Dpt. of Economics and Economic History, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, Spain)
- 11.30-12.00 **Presentation 4 "Reconstructing Female Participation Rates in the Pre-Census Past: Great Britain"**
Jane Humphries (All Souls College, Oxford University, United Kingdom)
- 12.00-13.00 **Discussion**
- 13.00-14.00 *Lunch*
- 14.00-18.30 Afternoon Session: The impact of Industrialization in women's employment. Chair: Nigel Goose**
- 14.00-14.30 **Presentation 1 "Female economic activity in Biscay (Basque Country) through the Police Census of 1825"**
Arantza Pareja (Dpt. of Contemporary History, Universidad del País Vasco, Spain)
- 14.30-15.00 **Presentation 2 "Female labour force participation during early industrialisation in Sweden. Discourses and statistical representation in the Swedish population census"**
Inger Jonsson (Dpt. of Economic History, Uppsala University, Sweden)
- 15.30-15.50 *Coffee / tea break*

- 15.50-16.20 **Presentation 3 “Female activity and the family economy in Finland”**
Beatrice Moring (Cambridge Group for the History of Population, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom)
- 16.20-16.50 **Presentation 4 “Female employment and fertility: evidence from contrasting industrial towns in England”**
Paul Atkinson (School of History, University of Leeds, United Kingdom)
- 16.50-18.30 **Discussion**
- 20.30 *Dinner*

Saturday 6, November 2010

09.15-12.30 Morning Session: “At the bottom of the activity curve?” Chair: Carmen Sarasúa

- 09.15-09.45 **Presentation 1 “Continuity and Change of Women’s Work in Turin during the 18th century”**
Beatrice Zucca (Ecole Des Hautes Etudes en Science Sociale Department, Paris, France)
- 09.45-10.15 **Presentation 2 “Revisiting female activity and households’ labor strategies in 19th century Catalonia”**
Cristina Borderías (Dpt. of Contemporary History, Universidad de Barcelona, Spain)
- 10.15-10.45 *Coffee / Tea Break*
- 10.45-11.15 **Presentation 3 “A comparison of female activity rates in rural and industrial towns, 19th century coastal Spain**
Luisa Muñoz (Dpt. of Contemporary History, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Spain)
- 11.15-11.45 **Presentation 4 “Female labour force participation and the coming of industrialization: a comparative study of two northern French regions”**
Beatrice Craig (Dpt. of History, University of Ottawa, Canada)
- 11.45-12.30 **Discussion**
- 12.30-13.15 *Lunch*

13.15-16.00 Afternoon Session: Women’s employment in the national population censuses. Chair: Jane Humphries

- 13.15-13.45 **Presentation 1 “National registrations, additional sources and female labour force participation rates: the Netherlands in the 19th century”**
Elise van Nederveen (International Institute of Social History, Leiden University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands)
- 13.45-14.15 **Presentation 2 “Local labour markets and the representation of women's work in the Victorian census”**
Nigel Goose (Dpt. of Humanities, University of Hertfordshire, United Kingdom)
- 14.15-15.30 **Discussion**
- 15.30-16.00 **Follow-up activities/networking/collaboration**
- 16.00 *End of Workshop and departure*

5. Final List of Participants

Convenor:

1. **Carmen SARASÚA** (Department of Economics and Economic History, Autonomous University of Barcelona, ES)

Co-Convenor:

2. **Jane HUMPHRIES** (All Souls College, Oxford University, UK)

ESF Representative:

3. **Savvas SAVVIDES**
Department of Accounting, Economics and Finance
School of Business Administration, European University Cyprus

Participants:

4. **Paul ATKINSON** (School of History, University of Leeds)
5. **Cristina BORDERÍAS** (Department of Contemporary History, University of Barcelona)
6. **Beatrice CRAIG** (Department of History, University of Ottawa)
7. **Nigel GOOSE** (Department of Humanities, University of Hertfordshire)
8. **Ricardo HERNÁNDEZ** (Department of Economic History, University of Valladolid)
9. **Inger JONSSON** (Department of Economic History, Uppsala University)
10. **Beatrice MORING** (Cambridge Group for the History of Population, University of Cambridge)
11. **Luisa MUÑOZ** (Department of Contemporary History, University of Santiago)
12. **Arantza PAREJA** (Department of Contemporary History, University of the Basque Country)
13. **Ariadne SCHMIDT** (International Institute of Social History, Leiden University)
14. **Elise VAN NEDERVEEN** (International Institute of Social History, Leiden University)
15. **Beatrice ZUCCA MICHELLETO** (LaDéHis, Laboratoire de Démographie et Histoire Sociale, EHESS - Ecole Des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris)

6. Statistical information on participants

- a. Countries of origin. The fourteen participants came from seven European countries: Spain (5), the UK (3), Holland (2), Finland (1), Canada (1), France (1), and Sweden (1).
- b. Average age of participants was 48 years.
- c. Gender composition. Three participants were male (21,5 %) and eleven female (78,5 %).