

Reconsidering Women's Labor Force Participation Rates in Eighteenth-Century Turin



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How much did women work in the European past? Conventional thinking holds that until the mid 1970s, women in Western Europe mostly performed unpaid domestic labor, but recent feminist economics scholarship is challenging this long-held assumption. One obstacle to correctly evaluating women's labor force participation rate (LFP) in the past is the complicated relationship between women's work and archival sources, such as population censuses, which date to when formal censuses were introduced in Western Europe in the eighteenth century.

Focus on men's work. Often carried out for military or tax purposes, censuses were always interested in men's work and, more generally, in the principal breadwinner's occupation only. Since women were obliged to reconcile a paid job with childcare and housekeeping, they frequently worked outside or at the margins of the official labor market, invisible to census enumerators – as well as underpaid. Even those women who performed skilled, paid work were often not considered “real” workers and, as a consequence, were scarcely registered by record keepers. To escape this impasse, Beatrice Zucca Micheletto, in research focusing on eighteenth-century Turin, proposes an improvement in the methodological approach to evaluating women's LFP rates using non-conventional archival sources.

Suspiciously low participation rates. According to the population census of Turin carried out in 1802, 33.3 percent of women ages 15 and over stated they had a paid job, while 58 percent declared no job, activity, or status. (Of the remainder, 1.8 percent were identified as housewives and 1.3 percent as residing in a convent; 3.2 percent declared themselves to be poor or beggars, and 2.4 percent said they were living on their incomes.) Marriage was a watershed event: only 21.7 percent of the whole group of married women declared a job against 55.7 percent of unmarried women ages 25 and over and 48.6 percent of widows. Compared with the labor participation rates of unmarried women or widows, the rates of married women seem suspiciously low: Do they illustrate a dramatic reduction in women's activity after marriage? Or, are they the product of the ideology of the time, which considered the contributions of the male breadwinner to

be most important and undervalued the work of other family members?

An undercount is revealed. Zucca Micheletto seeks answers in the registers of the applicants at the Ospedale di Carità, the most popular charitable institution of Turin during the Old Regime. At the Ospedale, all members of a family seeking help were required to declare their occupations and activities in some detail in order to demonstrate their concrete contributions to family survival, and that they were deserving of relief. According to these registers, from 1785 to 1793, 63.2 percent of women ages 15 and over had a paid job (compared to 33.3 percent in the 1802 census). And, 73.3 percent of wives declared they had employment, exactly the opposite of the 21.7 percent figure in the census of 1802. These figures provide convincing evidence that the Napoleonic census seriously undercounted married women's labor force rates. Rather than being absent from the labor market, married women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries appear to be a hidden labor force.

New archival sources. Zucca's research thus highlights the usefulness of a methodological approach that uses new archival sources – namely non-breadwinner oriented sources – for achieving a more balanced picture of married women's historical LFP rates. These data also confirm the extension of the powerful ideological construction of the breadwinner. In early modern Europe, it was taken for granted that paid work was not central in a woman's life and that it should be limited to specific life-phases, particularly before marriage and during widowhood. Paid work was regarded as less important than unpaid domestic activities and housekeeping. These were considered the “natural” duties of a married woman who, in theory, was placed under the protection and care of her husband, who was assumed to be the main breadwinner. The persistence of this cultural element in conventional sources led researchers to seriously devalue the labor contributions of family members who did not occupy the role of “head of household,” or at least the role of “principal breadwinner,” as was the case with married women workers (and also of children workers of both genders).

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