Vingt-cinq ans après

Les femmes au rendez-vous de l’histoire

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CIP IN ATTESA

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ISSN 0223-5099
BECOMING MAINSTREAM?
PLACING WOMEN’S WORK IN ECONOMIC HISTORY¹

Women’s work is a useful vantage point to understand both the evolution of women’s and gender or feminist history, and the differences between these and social and economic history. These notes are intended as a reflection on how women’s work has evolved as a historical subject, and to what extent it represents the transformations of our field. Although most of my references are from Spain, to a large extent the developments I describe reflect the international situation.

Important contributions to the history of women’s work had already been made by the arrival of the post-1960s wave of feminism, of which women’s history as an academic field would be part. In the second half of the 18th century, inspired by the Enlightened thought that advocated individual rights and the transformation of the political and economic basis of the Ancient regime, in different European countries some exceptional women started to write and publish in defense of women’s rights. In these first works of what can already be called feminist thought, although the stress was on political rights, some interesting criticism of the way labor markets were organized can already be found. The idea that a paid occupation was the basis for economic independence, central to feminist thought since its origin, is already in these works. The barriers preventing a woman from having a wage of her own were rightly identified as a key element of women’s subjection, but, on the other hand, not all women shared the same situation and problems. Middle class women were legally and socially excluded from having a paid occupation, as well as from the education required to hold these positions, and denouncing these “immoral” barriers was their first task. In the last two decades of the 18th century, three women, thinking and writing in different European countries made this their first denunciation.

¹I thank the organizers of the Vingt-cinq ans après Conference (Les femmes au rendez-vous de l’histoire, hier et aujourd’hui) for their invitation to participate and particularly Anna Bellavitis and Manuela Martini for their friendly support.
In 1786, Josefa Amar y Borbón published her Discurso en defensa del talento de las mujeres y otros cargos en que se emplean los hombres (speech in defense of the talent of women and other positions in which men are employed), where she criticized what nowadays we call vertical segregation of the labor market:

Not content with having kept for themselves the employments, the honors, the profits, in a word, everything that could inspire the efforts of their waking hours, men have dispossessed women even of the pleasure that results from having an enlightened mind. Women are born and raised in absolute ignorance.  

In 1790, she published the Discurso sobre la educación física y moral de las mujeres (Speech on the physical and moral education of women), in which she deals with the Enlightened subject par excellence, defining education as “the biggest incentive to obtain the benefits that the State can expect from this noble and considerable part of its individuals.”

At around the same time, in 1791, Olympe de Gouges published her famous Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne, where she wrote:

all Female and all Male citizens, being equal in law, must be equally entitled to all public honours, positions and employment according to their capacities and with no other distinctions than those based solely on talent and virtue [...] woman shares all the labor, all the hard tasks; she should therefore have an equal share of positions, employment, responsibilities, honors and professions. (XIII).

One year later, in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published her A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, where very similar remarks were made.

While middle-class women were excluded from paid work, working-class women worked very hard, since a very early age, with less pay and recognition than those granted to men. In their work, though, middle-class feminists made a consistent effort to reflect the situation of all women, to talk on behalf of all. During the 19th century, women’s, and their children’s, problems and poverty held a central place in the writings of feminists. The two best examples of this in Spain were probably Concepción Arenal and Emilia Pardo Bazán. In 1844, Concepción Arenal, best known in Spain as the main advocate of the reform of the penal code and the jail system, summarized the situation of Spanish working-class women for the

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2 Amar y Borbon 1786.
3 The Discurso was edited by María Victoria López-Cordón in 1994. For the figure of Josefa Amar, see López-Cordón 1994; López-Cordón 2005.
4 De Gouges, 1791.
BECOMING MAINSTREAM

In 1869, the same year when in London John Stuart Mill published *The subjection of women* (co-authored with his wife Harriet Taylor Mill), Emilia Pardo Bazán, the best known woman writer in 19th century Spain, as well as a feminist and cultural activist, had it translated into Spanish as *La esclavitud femenina*, also writing its prologue. She would write many other excellent pages on women's work, particularly in *The Spanish Woman*, which first appeared in English, denouncing the contradictions of the opponents of women's political rights, and at the same time providing us with a powerful insight into the hardship of rural women:

"In the largest part of the Spanish territory one can see women, pregnant or breast feeding, digging the earth, harvesting wheat and corn, cutting grass for the oxen. Such hard tasks raise no protest from the deep theoreticians who [...] when the slightest indication of widening women's rights in other spheres is made, claim [...] that women must not leave the Home, for their only mission is to accomplish the duties of mother and wife."  

Her interest in denouncing the painful working conditions of women led her to write a number of novels devoted to this. In fact, one of the best sources about women's work and living conditions are literary works by women writers. The first is Pardo-Bazán's *La Tribuna* (1883), set in a cigar factory where several hundred women work and considered the first naturalist novel written in Spain, in the same years when Emile Zola was writing in France (but before *Germinal* was published). The second was published two decades later, in 1914, by another well-known novelist, Concha Espina: *La esfinge maragata*, an impressive account of the life and work of poor rural women and of migration to America.

These early years of the 20th century also mark a new development in women's studies, the appearance of the first scholarly works. They began with Olive Schreiner's *Women and labour* (1911) and continued with Alice Clark's *A Working life of women in the seventeenth century*, published in 1919. Work meant wage work for these first authors, whose main contribution was probably to write about *all women*, showing the common ground they all shared, paving the way for our modern concept of gender.

In the first decades of the century, in Spain there were some interesting approaches to women's work. For instance, in 1933 Carmen Baroja published her study on *Lace in Spain (El encaje en España)*, the result of years of scientific research into the history of

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5 Pardo-Bazán 1889.
lace making. The book was a recognition of the skill of lace makers all over Spain, and of the economic and artistic value of their work, until then considered “women’s stuff”. But as elsewhere, during the first half of the 20th century the literature on women was centered on women’s political rights, particularly the right to vote, and on civil rights related to divorce, the right to higher education and admission to the professions. In this sense, surely the most important book of the 1930s was written by Clara Campoamor, the MP who was able to achieve for Spanish women the right to vote in 1931. In _El voto femenino y yo: mi pecado mortal (1935-1939) (Women’s vote and me. My mortal sin, 1935-1939)_ , published in 1939, during her exile to Buenos Aires, Campoamor explains, in a rare autobiographical account, what that historical struggle was like and how she was ostracized by all political parties after winning the right to vote.

It can be said that in Spain modern historical scholarship on women’s work started in 1976 with Geraldine Scanlon, who, in her groundbreaking _La polémica feminista en la España contemporánea_ , devoted a chapter to the topic. Although in the 1970s and 1980s an important part of feminist scholarship and politics focused on women’s sexuality and sexual rights, the other main concerns were work and working conditions. Fuelled by the 1970s economic crisis, which was taking so many women out of employment, and by the new statistical evidence of the disadvantaged situation women faced in labor markets in the Western world as much as in developing countries, many feminist scholars started to study work, wages and working conditions taking women into account. The main contribution of this modern scholarship on women’s work was, paradoxically, the debate on women’s domestic work. It was paradoxical because its main achievement was to force international agencies, scholars and policy makers to redefine work so as to include unpaid domestic work, to recognize the economic and social value of the unpaid work done by “housewives” for their families and for their national economies, to recognize that the position of both men and women in the labor market could not be understood without taking their relation to unpaid work into account. That unpaid domestic work was work was a truly scientific discovery, as Christine Delphy pointed out then. The new generations of feminist scholars must know that the recent focus on care, with the far-reaching implications that this new concept is having, would never have been possible without the recognition of unpaid domestic work in the 1970s.

The following pages contain some reflections on the place of women’s work in economic history. They are not a review essay.

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Scanlon 1986.
and are by no means systematic. Interested readers can find more systematic accounts in Díaz 1988, in Sarasúa and Gálvez 2004; and in a recent special issue of Revista de Historiografía (RevHisto) (22, 1/2015) edited by María Jesús Fuente Pérez with the title Del ayer al mañana. La historiografía de la historia de las mujeres, del género y del feminismo.

A Long way to take women to the central stage

In 1982, the most famous Marxist historian in Spain, Josep Fontana, published Historia: análisis del pasado y Proyecto social, where he angrily dismissed women’s history (and all the new research areas arising from new questions and concerns, such as environmental history), as “academic fashion” with no future. Fontana’s anger well reflected the perplexity felt by orthodox Marxist historians before the rise of new accounts and historical evidence that questioned the canon. There is only one past, they claimed. Yes, but should the questions we ask of that one past always be the same ones? Is it not legitimate to ask the historical past new questions, questions that reflect our changing interests and knowledge? In fact, women gained long ago the right to ask the historical past our questions, and this is precisely what gender history is about.

At the same time when Fontana and other Marxist historians were denying legitimacy to gender history, a sociologist, María Ángeles Durán, published a modest essay in a modest edited collection. Its title was An economic reading of fray Luis de León. This 16th century friar was the author of La perfecta casada (The perfect married woman), a guide for Christian brides. Before Durán, no one had read it as an account of the economic functions of the household and of the unpaid tasks that “non-working” women should perform. Durán’s brilliant, ground-breaking interpretation was a turning point for feminist scholars in Spain. It showed us a new way to understand family economies and economic thought. Yet I have never seen this article quoted by any historian, nor any economic historian, outside the field of gender history in Spain.

Just a few years later, in 1989, one the most prestigious historians of 18th century Spain, Berkeley professor Richard Herr, published Rural change and royal finances in Spain at the end of the Old Regime. After an extensive and detailed description, using a huge amount of evidence, on how 18th century Spanish rural society worked, from manufacture to agriculture, from banking to commerce, a reference to women could finally be found: “Meanwhile the wives kept the

7 Durán 1983.
hearth alive, prepared the thick bread soup and supper, washed and mended the clothes, and in the fall made the farinato sausages of pork and crumbs” (p. 207).8

The position portrayed here by Herr was a step forward from Fontana’s full dismissal. Despite being a well-meaning attempt at “saying something” about women, it still was a failed attempt, because of what the feminist literature defined in those years as the “add women and stir” methodology. In the region and period studied by Herr, women were massively occupied in textile manufactures for the market. In order to find them and study their lives, the impact of their work on their families’ economies, new sources, new questions and new methodologies are needed.

Mentions to women’s work can be increasingly found in the economic history literature. They rely on empirical work done by feminist scholars, beginning in the 1980s (Nielfa 2003, and for an overview Sarasúa – Gálvez, eds, 2002). Yet we see women’s work as consistently depicted as very different to men’s. Women’s work is described as unskilled, for family consumption and not for the market; as impossible to find out about due to lack of historical sources (or at least impossible to count in the same way men’s work [this is how part of the literature, particularly statistical literature, still justifies excluding women from their accounts]); and, finally, as informal and/or seasonal, and thus women’s wages irrelevant for their families’ wellbeing. That is, the existence of women’s work has been (in general) accepted, but their economic and social value is still denied.

A significant example of the last point is how historians of the working class have analyzed wages and living conditions during Franco’s dictatorship (1939-1975), to the point of finding themselves trapped in a paradox: while insisting that workers’ wages were low, insufficient to cover their families’ needs, they had to accept the fact that Spanish economic growth was intense during the 1960s, with internal demand accounting for a large part of it. How could that be possible? No unions existed, strikes were forbidden, and data on workers’ wages show them, in fact, as low. These were the years in which not only the middle classes, but working families too were buying all kinds of electrical appliances, their first cars, apartments and even summer apartments on the coast, not to mention sending their children to university. Should we conclude that Franco and the businessmen who profited so much from his rule were benefactors of the working class? The model of the working class breadwinner is so ingrained in their thoughts, that the possibility of a second wages

in the family has hardly been considered by these scholars. Yet since the 1950s there was a second wage in most working-class families: married and unmarried women worked in factories, in domestic service, in the manufacturing of consumption goods at home, in seasonal agricultural work, in hotels for tourists, in public services and as the new blue-collar workers. Their wages were fundamental to understand the rising material wellbeing of Spanish families, something not yet acknowledged by historians of the working class.

It is true that a percentage of women workers under Francoism, particularly those working at home manufacturing industrial goods such as clothes, shoes or toys, those working in domestic service, in agriculture and in family businesses have left no record in the official sources. But there are ways to overcome this limitation, as we know thanks to the work of historians or other social scientists that are using oral sources. Some extraordinarily valuable accounts based on oral sources have been written, of which I will mention just three here. The first one is by an Anthropologist, Anastasia Téllez: Las ‘mantecaeras’ de Estepa. Un trabajo antropológico sobre una industria local, 2002. Estepa is a small town near Sevilla where in the 19th century a new industry developed at the initiative of a local woman, to produce for the market the local sweets (mantecados) that women had traditionally been making at home (and also nuns at the local convents) for Christmas. This has eventually become a multi-million industry catering not only for the Spanish market but for the international one as well. But because it is a seasonal industry and because almost all workers were women, most of them married, nobody had paid any attention to it before. The second work is by José Antonio Pérez, Los espejos de la memoria. Historia oral de las mujeres de Basauri, 1937-2003, 2004; this is an extraordinary book that gives a voice to the thousands of women, mostly migrants, who in the 1950s and 1960s moved to industrial Bilbao. Finally, the third one is by Pilar Díaz (2007) and deals with textile workers, both in factories and at home. These are three extraordinary books that not only let women talk, but ask them the right questions. In them, women tell us what their occupations were, what happened when they married and had children, how much they were paid in the factories or workshops and what happened when they took their wages home. By listening to these women, we learn that many started working before the legal working age of 14, that most of them never registered themselves in the censuses as paid workers. We learn things that question what mainstream accounts tell of how labor markets and families work. Unfortunately, oral sources are

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9 Téllez 2002.
regarded as anecdotal evidence by “serious” economic historians, who never read, much less cite, what women and men actually say about their lives.

These are but a few examples of the argument I intent to defend in these pages: that despite the impressive contributions made by women historians in the past decades, their impact on general history and economic history is just too small. There is a huge gap between the scientific value of these contributions and the place that “general” history awards to them. In Spain and elsewhere, in fact, economic history can still be done without reference to women’s work or to gender differences in wages, working conditions, gender segregation of the labor market, etc.

My proposal to “become mainstream” is an alternative way with a potentially higher impact than women’s histories have had. Engaging in the general debates, placing women in the general picture might be a more efficient way to guarantee that women’s work is acknowledged and their contribution to society’s wellbeing understood. In my area of research, women’s paid work and participation rates, the mapping of the existing coverage of women’s work in the past is concluding that there is overwhelming evidence of women working everywhere, at every historical time. Another good example of this are the works by Pilar Pérez-Fuentes, who, initially trained as a demographer, while working in mining localities of the Basque country where, according to the population censuses of the 19th century, only men were employed, “discovered” the work of women lodgers. They were not identified in the censuses, but more significantly, historians had never before asked themselves where miners slept, who washed their clothes and cooked their food. Now we know that, in the 19th as well as in the 20th century, this was the occupation of hundreds of women and that their work was a large part of their families’ income. Historians of women’s work have been able to find new sources and develop new methodologies to uncover women’s work. There are sources to find out women’s work in the past, not only as case studies but in an aggregate way.

The proposal to become mainstream is about inserting women’s history in general (men’s) history, getting “general” historians to change their narratives and interpretations so as to include women. This is in fact already taking place. Mainstream economic history (and I do not mean any ideological stand, but the History made by well-known scholars, published in well-known journals and then widely cited) is surprising us in recent years with a number of works that not only mention women, but put them at the center

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of the stage. The recent publication of *Girl power. The European marriage pattern and labor markets in the North Sea region in the late medieval and early modern period*, by Tine de Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden, 2010, is significant of this trend. According to the authors, the 14th century Black Death in England would have cause a sharp increase in women’s real wages, which would have increased women’s economic participation, which in turn would have caused a delay in their marriage age and an increase in celibacy, accounting for the fall in fertility, main features of the EMP. “A strong increase in real earnings especially for women [...] accelerated the general adoption of the EMP [...] particularly among servants” (p. 11). This marriage model was based on institutions (landownership systems and inheritance systems) which strongly incentivized women’s paid work and the subsequent rise in women’s participation rates. The EMP, the authors conclude, “has played a fundamental role in western Europe’s economic development”11.

In *The Malthusian intermezzo: Women’s wages and human capital formation between the late Middle Ages and the demographic transition of the 19th century*, Van Zanden claims that “the gender wage gap explains “the great conundrum”, the acceleration of population growth in England in the second half of the 18th century”12. The factor accounting for it was the gender wage gap.

The gender wage gap increased a lot during the early modern period, which was caused by (a) the switch from post Black Death labour scarcity to labour surplus, which in particular harmed the economic position of women, and (b) changes in the structure of agriculture, leading to the rise of large-scale, capital intensive and labour intensive farms, which had very limited demand for female (wage) labour. This is also suggested by the fact that on the Continent (in the Netherlands) a much smaller decline of female wages occurred because there family farms continued to be quite important.

According to Van Zanden, the demographic consequences for this period were the opposite of the ones described for the late medieval and early modern period in the previous article: fall in the age at marriage between 1600 and 1800, increased fertility and population growth, more intense in England than anywhere in the western world. Be this a convincing explanation or not, what these examples reflect is that in the last few years, the changes in women’s place in the labor markets, in marriage and families are playing an increasingly central role in the works by a few historians.

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12 Van Zanden 2011, p. 331-342.
outside the field of gender or women’s history. Not a minor role: we have come from being nothing to being central to industrialization, economic modernization, demographic transition, Great divergence, i.e., the most important paradigms or historical narratives. “From being nothing”, because women’s history was initially about putting women back into history. What historians like Michelle Perrot did years ago was precisely remember that *Les femmes ont une histoire*. Thanks to the first generations of women historians we are now in a better position. Sometimes we still come across historical works that make us wonder whether decades of women’s and gender history have existed at all. But, in general, I think we could agree that we are now in a much better position. What the authors just mentioned and a few other economic historians are doing has tremendous value, is a huge step forward: first of all, they are familiar with the empirical evidence collected by three generations of historians of women’s work and wages; they have understood the importance of this research; and finally, are attempting to integrate it into a general narrative of economic growth in Europe. Yet I think we should ask ourselves whether this is what women’s history, gender or feminist history were working for. Is this the “becoming mainstream” I have been arguing for here?

*Is just filling a void what we work for?*

Is our ultimate concern just filling a void or is it rather making sense of women’s secular subordination? To me, gender or feminist history is not only about filling a void, but about making sense of women’s secular subordination. It is about understanding the institutional framework that has denied women the rights that men enjoyed: political rights, economic rights, legal capacities, access to education, to the professions, to social consideration, good wages. It is about understanding the ideas that have justified and ‘explained’ this denial. About understanding why women were always the poorer of the poor, why their wages were so low that so many of them, no matter how hard they worked, had to live upon charity, or prostitute themselves; why women have always had poorer food and poorer education, why their skills have been denied. Why so many women had to abandon their children because unable to support them, or because of an unwanted pregnancy. Why men have been socially exempted from caring for the children and the elderly. Why all aspects of society were gender segregated, why women and men were systematically constructed as different and in all historical periods there have been endless regulations to separate, segregate, forbid access, isolate women.
Let me finish with an example of what is to me a historical work that makes sense of the immense explanatory potential the concept of gender has, particularly when focusing on the history of work and of how labor markets work. Céline Schoeni’s *Travail féminin: Retour à l’ordre! L’offensive contre le travail des femmes durant la crise économique des années 1930* 13, is a splendid example that helps us to understand the complex set of economic, institutional, demographic and cultural variables shaping women’s labor force participation rates. Changes in women’s participation rates are still in need of good explanations. The proposition of orthodox Economics that women’s place in or out the labor market is the result of women’s own decisions seeking to maximize utility is questioned by the increasing number of works by historians that describe women’s and men’s position in the labor market as a social construct 14. The book focuses on Switzerland and France in the 1920s and 1930s, an excellent period to observe women’s employment because of the unusually rapid and dramatic changes that shaped the world’s economy (from intense growth to depression, and again to fast recovery) and politics (with WWI and WWII). In this context, women workers were seen as guilty of increasing unemployment by taking jobs from heads of households, abandoning their own homes and children, only to be pictured as national heroines a bit later, when they took over the jobs of men at war and sustained the national economies. One of the book’s main achievements is to contest the idea that only fascist and authoritarian regimes were against women’s right to paid employment. Democracies such as France and Switzerland used less dramatic measures (such as laws and administrative norms, wage reductions, allowances, and so forth), only to obtain the same result: unsecure working conditions and limitation of women’s work as civil servants.

I wrote above that in my opinion after a few decades of women’s history we are at a crossroads, facing the challenge of making the huge historical evidence collected, everything we know, into a new inclusive “general” history. And doing this, in the second place, while at the same time making sense of what gender was about. I see two possibilities here, and I will return to the case of women’s work now: either women’s work is studied, not isolated, but *in relation with, or in comparison with, men’s work* (social prestige, wages, skills, occupational diversification…); or women’s work and wages are studied *in relation to women’s consumption and women’s living standards*: what part of women’s effort was returned to them in the form of

13 Schoeni 2012.
14 Humphries – Sarasúa 2012. See also Sarasua 2019.
money, food, education, political and economic rights and wellbeing in general (what in economics is called an input-output analysis). In both cases, including women’s unpaid work is fundamental because the origin of gender inequality is there, in women’s obligation to do the unpaid domestic and care work that society needs.

I would say, finally, that the concept of gender as not a biological reality, but as a social relation that has to do with power, inequality, legal and social restrictions for women, hierarchy, lack of freedom and women’s poverty, is more alive and useful than ever before. And that our historical research on Western women illuminates, and greatly helps to understand, what development economists and international agencies are finding today in developing economies. Much still needs to be done if we aim to understand how gender has historically operated; how gender has shaped the labor market (how come not all women were employed, being much cheaper workers?), and the families. How gender has constructed the historical realities we call women and men. No need to make big discoveries, let us just try to account for the key to everything: On ne naît pas femme, on le devient.

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