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Time and Women's Work : Historical Periodisations

DELPHINE GARDEY

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Knowledge about women's work is still scarce and incomplete, despite much study. Moreover, our understandings of the history of women's work are too often warped by stereotypes, the most persistent of which is probably the exaggeration of the importance of war for "putting women to work." The accumulation of monographs and partial syntheses is not the best way to develop a body of common knowledge.

It is also the case that most women historians who strike out into new activities generally have to start from naught, just as their mothers and grandmothers did. It is as if memory, or the accumulation of knowledge about women's work, were out of the question and they must constantly reassert the importance of work in the lives of the women who came before them. The woman historian's first step is often to proclaim that "women have always worked" (Kessler-Harris, 1981).

Such a stance is necessary because, for too long and too often, economic and social analysis used categories that repeatedly omitted or denied women's participation in the work force (Perrot, 1978 ; Mathieu, 1991). Statistics recording and counting many types of labour force activity remain a problem for historians of the 19th century, when most work was done on farms, in shops and in artisans' workshops. In the case of family businesses, the conventions used in describing and measuring economic activity were crucial to whether women's work was counted. Women, children and parents of the head of household might or might not have been considered as "workers." Women's participation in farm work varied, while the social and institutional environment may have been more or less conducive both to the employment of women and to reporting it (Marchand and Thélot, 1991). Often, then, women's work was not recorded. Because of the excessive value attributed to productive work in the 19th century, only wage earners were considered to be "working women," leaving in the shadows all those who helped their shopkeeper or peasant husbands, and even more so the housewives, that huge majority of women without whom the industrial world could not have developed (Perrot, 1978). Recording of women's

participation in the labour force improved, then, only as structural societal changes occurred and salaried work became increasingly prevalent.

Over and beyond the difficulties, even refusal, involved in apprehending the various forms of women's work, the purpose of the present chapter is to establish the multiplicity of forms that women's economic activity has taken since the beginning of the 19th century. My basic proposition is that the history of women's work is a powerful tool for up-dating our understandings of contemporary trends in capitalist societies. One might posit, in particular, that critics of a strictly productivist definition of the economy and of social utility would have much to gain from looking at the way women's labour has or has not been integrated into the national economy over time.

My analysis of the phases of the history of women's work uses a periodisation developed for writing the history of job categories (Desrosières et al., 1988 ; Desrosières and Thévenot, 1992 ; Desrosières, 1993). The early 19th century vision of the organisation of labour focused mainly on the notion of having a "trade," as defined in the time of guilds. One major result was the lack of any distinction between the skill of the person and the name of the business -- baker and bakery were not distinct enunes. The rise of

the concept of "wage-earning" toward the middle of the 19th century, and the increasingly important division between salaried and non-salaried work, went hand in hand with the definition of different statuses or positions within the same occupation. By the end of the 19th century, clear distinctions were being drawn between bosses, workers and employees. More detailed and hierarchical distinctions were gradually introduced and documented in the censuses, which from 1930 on included lists of skilled jobs requiring specific types of training.

We may therefore divide the modern history of women's work into three phases. In the first, the notion of specific "women's work" prevailed. The most salient feature of the second was the greater visibility of wage earning women, both industrial workers and white-collar employees. In the third, starting in the early 20th century, women's access to the professions became the issue.

Following this periodisation, I assess the state of our knowledge and of historiography. For reasons of space, however, I am not able adequately to address the third phase. Therefore, before returning to the 19th century and the history of peasants and shopkeepers, workers and white-collar employees, I will briefly mention a few salient points that may help to establish the link between wage-earning women of the late 19th century and their contemporary counterparts.

New educational and employment opportunities opened up for women at the end of the last century. Despite girls' progress at every level of schooling,

and in particular their access to the *baccalauréat* (secondary school diploma) and to higher education and although the climate was much more conducive to the idea of the "career woman," women's presence at the higher occupational levels nevertheless continued to be limited between the two world wars. Aside from the recognition and appreciation of female secondary school teachers (Cacouault, 1984 ; 1987), advances made during that period were limited to a few individual experiences. Those women who finally succeeded in becoming doctors, lawyers, engineers and university professors were the exception, and integration into their professional milieu always provoked conflict. To understand women's lack of access to positions of authority and power, it is worth remembering that French women were deprived of their civil and political rights well into the 20th century. Not until 1907 were married women allowed to dispose freely of their wages, and it was only in 1938 that they were emancipated from male tutorship (Bard, 1995). The example of women entering the field of law and the legal professions symbolises the contradictions of the time : how could women become lawyers and judges when they did not have the right to vote and stand for office and therefore were automatically excluded from the legislatures in which laws were made? Minors within their family, minors in civil and political life, women could only be "of age" professionally as exceptions or by dispensation or transgression. The long history of this reality provides ample food for thought for every woman.

Women's Work

"Women's work," in the sense of the tasks done in traditional cultures or tasks traditionally assigned to women, first drew the attention of women historians (Perrot, 1978 ; Riot-Sarcey, 1987). This category may cover a number of issues. The first pertains to the status and place assigned to women's activities in what are known as pre-industrial cultures, therefore including the study of farm work, while the second deals with those activities that are always assigned to women.

French historians first focused on those spheres of activity viewed as specifically feminine, and on the way they became "trades" : sewing, care for children and for the body, housekeeping and domestic production. The womanly figures of seamstresses and nurses (Knibiehler, 1984), midwives and maids (Martin-Fugier, 1983), wet-nurses and teachers, as well as prostitutes all inspired early research.

In the case of sewing, housekeeping and care for family members, the early historical writings, viewed retrospectively, seem to seek to acknowledge

Time and Women's Work : Historical Periodisations 35 that women have always done the same things, with the same motions, over the centuries. They are pervaded with the idea that women have their own culture and are concerned with the transmission of that culture. Household linen and clothing as objects of culture and transmitted by washerwomen and seamstresses (so magnificently exemplified by the work of Y. Verdier) is indicative of this story of permanence and repetition, production and reproduction in women's work (Verdier, 1979).

A great variety of needlework (sewing, lingerie-making, corset-making, hosiery, embroidery - by hand or machine -, hat-making, *passemmentrie* , flowers and feathers, shoe-making) provided the rhythm of most women's days in the 19th century and show how thin the line was between domestic labour and paid work. Sewing, so essential for producing and repairing one's own belongings, was always a way to earn money, often by working out of one's home. It was - - simultaneously - part and parcel of girls' apprenticing to be women, a necessity and source of income for working-class women, a type of learning, and a form of sociability, as well as a leisure activity and an ostensible sign for girls and women of the bourgeoisie that they were women of leisure (Zylberberg-Hocquard, 1978a ; 1978b ; 1981).

Early historical writings on women's work, irrespective of any feminist leanings, took great interest in the connections between work and women's bodies. For a 19th century woman, work often meant selling or hiring out her body. This was clearly so for wet-nurses and prostitutes, but also for maidservants, who were often victims of sexual abuse and violence (Louis, 1994). Historians have often been intent on documenting these elements of servitude and servility in the condition of the working woman (Fraisie, 1979), and in doing so they produced perfectly accurate testimony of the economic and social organisation of these activities.

Far from being marginal, such female occupations were essential cogs in the overall functioning of society of the time. For instance, the work of wet-nurses in the Morvan region structured the entire local economy (Armangeaud, 1964). Moreover, it was also a necessary counterpart of the employment of city women, be they industrial workers, white-collar employees or domestic servants. It was, as well, the means of hiding a great many illegitimate children. Finally, women of the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie could not have lived their lives of leisure without the live-in nannies who shared the domestic life of well-to-do families (Martin-Fugier, 1978 ; Fay-Salloy, 1980).

A. Corbin first studied the strictly economic forms of prostitution, ranging from the brothel as a "business," to the new forms taken by the sex trade such as registered prostitutes, open brothels, cabarets, and so on. He also examined the "social functions" of women who satisfied frustrated bourgeois

men, the latter simultaneously inventing the idealised family, chaste mother and functionality of marital sex (Corbin, 1978).

Domestic work, in the broadest sense of the term, is central to the definition of the bourgeoisie and at the same time it defines the situation of a great many women who were helpers in farms, shops or private homes. In most western countries, domestic service was a major source of jobs for women. In 1866, 22% of employed women were in domestic service, far ahead of the textile industry's 10% (Scott, 1991). It was not until after World War I that the sector began to decline.

Similarly, historical investigation of the work of farm women focuses on defining women's tasks and the concrete motions involved in them. It draws much of its inspiration from anthropological studies as well as from the writings of specialists in folklore. Paradoxically, less attention has been paid to the more "economic" aspects of these activities. M. Segalen's research is noteworthy in that it takes an interactionist approach to the definition of male and female roles. She gives a detailed description of how work on farms was distributed between women and men, including regional variations (Segalen, 1980). She views the gender division of labour on the farm through an analysis of the distribution of space (the house, barn, courtyard and farmyard, kitchen garden and fields) and of gender specialisation in activities and concrete motions. This particular study is less concerned with diachrony and questions of change over time than with the rural household as a locus of agricultural exploitation.

The question of change is a major one, however, for anyone interested in working conditions during the Industrial Revolution. The historiography of that period initially emphasised the radical nature of the transformations. They looked at the changeover from family-based peasant and industrial production, characterised by home production and a subsistence economy, to a mode of production that separated the productive from the domestic sphere, and brought the spread of salaried work, the invention of the factory and the birth of consumer society.

How radical these changes were was already evident to people at the time, particularly where women were concerned. J. Scott has shown that political economy invented a new figure : the "woman worker" (Scott, 1991). In the mid 19th century the word "female factory worker" (1 *ouvrière*) implied "ungodly" and "sordid." She was an object of concern for charitable souls who despaired that the old order, so much more in keeping with what they construed as the "natural" role of women, was ending (Scott, 1987). J. Scott thus documents the growing opposition in discourse and public opinion between homework and the factory. The first evoked the ideal, or idealised, frame for women's work, allowing it to be undertaken without coming into conflict with family and

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themselves. It should be stressed here that working at home afforded no guarantee that the woman would have time to care for her children and house ; the work of a peasant woman was never-ending and needlework was so poorly paid that women were generally obliged to do eight or nine hours of unremitting labour. We now know, thanks to the work of Y. Knibiehler in particular, that the obligation to care for children is recent (Knibiehler and Fouquet, 1980 ; Thébaud, 1986). The medical discourse on child-rearing coincides with the invention in the late 19th century of the notion of housewife (Martin, 1984 ; 1987 ; Sohn, 1991). In other words, the "working woman" and the "angel of the hearth" (Woolf, 1995) are highly concomitant constructions.

In their early research, L. Tilly and J. Scott documented the variety of ways in which women have managed to reconcile their family and domestic responsibilities, using different formulas for "productive" work over time as well as at different points in their lives as women (Tilly and Scott, 1987 ; Meyering, 1990). As L. Frader has also well documented, such matters have inspired a great many innovative monographic studies by English-speaking historians. They have dealt, for example, with the region of Saint-Etienne, the vineyards of the Department of the Aude and the textile industry in northern France and Normandy (Frader, 1995). Women's history of this kind has been instrumental in reformulating the often simplistic approaches to the phases of economic and social transition (Hudson and Lee, 1990).

In closing this section, I would stress one particularly relevant point, first raised by specialists of modern and mediaeval history, and which definitely should be given similar attention for the 19th and 20th centuries. This is the fact that women have always plied some trades independently. During the modern period (16th to 18th century), some guilds were composed only of women, and others of both sexes. This was the case of laundrywomen, seamstresses and milliners, but also of seed merchants, who were either women or men. Many women worked in Paris as *"filles majeures"*, which is to say as independent women, neither married nor widowed (Truant, 1996). New historical work must now write a history of women "within trades," a history of their place, their role, and their rights. J. Scott (1991) also identifies large numbers of young women and girls working outside their home during the early 19th century. They were domestic helpers, farm help, and assistants in shops, often far from home. As already mentioned, many women gravitated around the garment and millinery trades, working at home and receiving wages, all well before wage-earning was the norm.

These remarks point to an important question : what is at stake when an activity is designated a trade or profession? Is it only women's occupations that are both trades, in the strictest sense, and also more poorly defined, elusive activities? Or rather, is this type of co-existence historically conditioned, in that it

is rooted in a different way of defining economic activity and production? In my opinion, the history of the construction and deconstruction over time of women's occupations as "work" is a promising approach. There is indeed reason to believe that just as French democracy was grounded in the exclusion of women (Fraisie, 1989), the definition of political economy has been grounded in the exclusion of women's work from the definition of value and social utility.

Viewed from this angle, women's effective presence in many jobs and occupations actually suffered a setback in the 19th century, and the same regression is seen for some representations of women's work. I will conclude with two indicators of this setback. First, the number of women heading post offices dropped considerably in the first half of the 19th century in comparison with the 18th century (Bachrach, 1984). Secondly, the Napoleonic Code, by considerably whittling down their independence and property rights, represented a great loss of power for many bourgeois women in the management of their own affairs (Bonnie, 1989).

Women Working for Wages : Industrial Workers and White-Collar Employees

The discussion thus far demonstrates that there are not two radically opposed historical periods, one in which women mostly worked at home and did not earn wages, and another in which most women workers were wage-earners working outside of their home. There is a passage from one period to another, however, just as there are also some obvious reversions to earlier organisational forms. One noteworthy example is the upsurge in the early 20th century of homework in the garment, shoe and artificial flower industries, with the corresponding difficulty of enforcing labour standards. The French Bureau of Labour conducted several surveys of homework between 1907 and 1914 and the subject also elicited many essays and discussions during World War I (Guilbert and Isambert-Jamati, 1956).

Before delving any further into the specific situation of female wage-earners, I would like to make several remarks. First, it is still difficult to get a clear picture of the evolution of women's work over this long period of time (1850-1940), because much was not reported or registered, and because the categories used in surveys and censuses were variable and lacked uniformity.

A look at the available data (Bouillaguet and Germe, 1977 ; Zerner, 1985 ; Marchand and Th  lot, 1991 ; Dup  quier and Kessler, 1992) does reveal a few facts, however. We do know, for example, that the female labour force participation rate rose during the 19th century and dropped between the two world wars. It is interesting to note -- and contrary to popular belief -- that World War I actually interrupted the increase. The "mobilisation" of women during the conflict, evidenced by their entering sectors and job categories to which they previously had little or no access (the weapons industry, for instance, but also tramway driving), struck their contemporaries because the women were visible and circulated in public places. Thus the war did accelerate women's advancement in some types of jobs and branches of activity, but it was neither the starting point nor their introduction to the labour force. It was, moreover, followed by rapid demobilisation, and for many women by a return, often forced, to their homes (Dubesset, Th  baud and Vincent, 1977 ; Th  baud, 1986).

Looking at the structure of the economy, women were working in about equal numbers in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors between the two wars. The feminisation of industrial work up to 1914 thus merits attention. The same proportion of women continued to work in industry before and after the war, but with a change in the distribution among the different branches of activity. Two other major changes occurred between the two world wars. The number of salaried women (outside of agriculture) increased enormously, making women's economic activity much more visible. Secondly, the "the triumph of the female white-collar employee" was part of an on-going trend toward the growth of public and private service industries. The composition of the female non-agricultural work force underwent a lasting transformation at the time : whereas there were three industrial workers for every employee in 1906, we find one employee for every two industrial workers in 1931 (Zerner, 1987).

I would now like to deal in greater depth with two aspects of this subject : the changes within the world of female industrial workers and the transformations that occurred in service industry jobs, and more specifically, the rising numbers of women in white-collar work.

There are enormous gaps in our understanding of the overall structure of women's participation in the 19th century industrial labour market. On the other hand, many monographs yield detailed descriptions of specific activities or of a local labour market. Here too it is work with fabrics and the textile industry that have received the most attention. Studies of hosiery-making in Troyes (Harden-Chenu, 1989) and of ribbon-making in Saint-Etienne (Dubesset and Zancarini, 1993) share the same conceptual approach. They provide a detailed examination, at the level of a local industry, of the differentiation of women's and men's career paths, with the tasks and functions of each sex, and

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in some cases the reorganisation of work due to the introduction of new technology (Robert, 1980 ; Perrot, 1999). These studies address the forms of the gendered division of labour over time and the construction of gender relations as well as of women and men's skills. In ribbon-making, essentially a silk-weaving process, there was a relatively clear-cut division of tasks and of spheres, despite the presence of a great many women in the branch and the increase in their numbers in the late 19th century. The very names of the jobs occupied by men and women were different and distinguished by gender in the French terms : women were fitters, threaders, reelers, warpers, cutters, and so on, whereas men were silk-throwers, dyers, readers, etc. However present and active, and even excessively active and often highly qualified they were, when questioned these women minimised their role. For them the possession of a trade was defined by the ownership of the object required to perform the job (the ribbon-weaving loom). Only men possessed that object (and therefore the trade), and transmitted it to their sons. Women's own incapacity even to say, and therefore to assert, their professional competence is patent here.

H. Harden-Chenu, who has studied the Troyes hosiery industry, points to the relations between the evolution of techniques, the sexual division of labour and the process through which skills are constructed in the knitwear industry. With mechanisation, men began to spin, a job previously done by women, and the work finally came to be defined as skilled, whereas the women who replaced men when weaving was mechanised were never viewed as any more qualified. It is this division between skilled men's trades and "women's work" that shapes women's exclusion from membership in a trade association, in the noble sense of the term (Chabaud-Rychter et al., 1987).

Women's difficulties, past and present, in gaining recognition of their professional skills have been documented by M. Perrot in a special issue of *Le Mouvement Social* devoted to "women's trades." Although an overall trend toward greater professionalisation is evident at the end of the 19th century, women's skills were dissembled as "talents," thus disguising the fact that they actually occupied positions requiring a great deal of skill. The concept of a "women's trade," developed at the end of the 19th century, revolved specifically around those occupations that are extensions of women's supposedly natural or mothering work, such as nursing, elementary school teaching, midwifery, and so on (Perrot, 1987), and confined them to those acknowledged skills only. A female industrial worker, however qualified, could not have a trade. And it was out of the question for women's trades to be defined as professions.

The pivotal role of the textile industry in the Industrial Revolution, and the fact that women were massively present in this sector should not obfuscate the great variety of positions occupied by women in the industrial world. One

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example is the presence of a small but noteworthy number of women who worked in the mines, as coal washers and sorters during the Second Empire.

Women also have a long history of participation in the metal-working industry. They represented 20% of the total labour force in fine metal work in 1866, another fact that has received little attention. Statistics on women's jobs in industry at the end of the 19th century clearly show how varied they were.

Women were employed in the emerging food industry, in particular, as well as in the chemical and electrical, earthenware, and paper and cardboard industries (Guilbert, 1966 ; Blunden, 1977 ; Zylberberg-Hocquard, 1978a ; 1978b ; 1981 ; 1995). In 1914, 20% of workers in the food industry and 12% of those in the chemical industry were women. Women sardine-packers, workers in the state-run tobacco and match works and bleach-makers then came to symbolise the female industrial worker.

It would be well worth our while to do more detailed analyses of these specific sectors, but in the meantime, analysis of the sectoral and occupational distribution of working-class women between the two world wars has progressed, thanks to a series of comprehensive studies indicative of a new trend in both the methodology and the content of historical work (Rhein, 1977 ; Zerner, 1985 ; Omnès, 1997 ; Gardey, 1995a). Positing the non-neutrality of economic concepts, S. Zerner chose to study female workers (in sectors other than agriculture) so as to observe "women as economic agents" rather than to treat them as "economic agents defined by the fact that they are women." She then went on to analyse the specific role of the female labour force in the transformation of capitalism, rejecting, above all, the conventional image of women as the reserve army of labour (Zerner, 1985). Her study of the evolution of women's economic activity in the different branches of the economy shows that working-class women were found in those sectors in which work was fragmented, while women office workers were confined to subordinate positions and their jobs were the most Taylorised. She focuses less on trades than on branches of industry, rising and declining occupations, and organisational models of businesses.

C. Omnès has studied the career trajectories of working-class women on the Paris labour market, providing an in-depth analysis of links between occupation, branch, location and family (Omnès, 1997). She provides a gendered reading of the labour market and an analysis of the characteristics of working-class women's milieu, by triangulating socio-geographic itineraries, family and social behaviour, and career paths. These painstaking studies of cohorts of working-class women shed considerable light on changes in the structure and functioning of the labour market as a whole during the first part of the 20th century. She concludes that it would be wrong to describe the market for women's labour as a fluid, precarious or contingent one. Furthermore,

despite their reputation for employment instability, women are apparently not the only ones to move from job to job, as shown by the enormous mobility of male workers in the 1920s. As for the difficult question of skilling, Catherine Omnès shows that it was easiest to be recognised as skilled in those industries in which female workers predominated, and in branches offering apprenticeship possibilities for girls (sewing, leatherwork, the cardboard industry, print shops). Outside of these sectors, women were confined to unskilled work as a rule.

This survey of Parisian working women also refines and confirms some points advanced by S. Zerner. The rising numbers of women in the expanding sectors (metalwork, chemicals, food) was not simply the result of the extension of mass production and assembly lines. Although femmisation and rationalisation of work often went hand in hand, there were instances in which more traditional tasks, such as packing in the chemical and food industries, were feminised but not rationalised, and others in which women were put on machines previously operated by men, especially in the metallurgical industry and related branches.

It is even more delicate, methodologically speaking, to document over time the participation of women in the service sector. Women have always worked in services, if these are defined comprehensively as work outside industry and agriculture, and particularly in the two principal spheres of the latter, trade and office work.

Any attempt to study the world of trade and particularly the highly diversified world of shop-keeping encounters the same difficulties we saw in studying farm women, that is, the question of how to define women's participation in what is often a family business. Historians of shop-keeping still need to do detailed studies of the gender and familial division of labour (Crossick and Haupt, 1995). While bakeries were mostly a "man's business" (Angleraud, 1993), it is common knowledge that others, such as flower

shops and haberdasheries, were run by women. The history of "independent" women shopkeepers -- that is, women who owned and ran a shop -- remains to be written.

Women were affected by the rise in salaried employment in shops, generated by the striking success of drapery and fancy goods shops and later of the department stores. They became saleswomen and cashiers. Department stores in particular, depicted in the novel *Le Bonheur des Dames*, definitely depended on the ceaseless efforts of shop-girls, whose work was organised and whose private life was controlled in ways similar in many respects to that of domestic servants (Lesselier, 1978).

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The Feminisation of Office Work

The world of office work, a far cry from shop-keeping, seemed to have more to offer women with an elementary education. Although history definitely yields evidence at various earlier times of women's presence in clerical positions (be it in postal services (Bertinotti, 1985), trade, family businesses or banks), the female office worker became a relatively common figure only in the late 19th century. This tide rose quickly in the early years of the present century and in the inter-war years. Women's work was increasingly white-collar employment and at the same time office workers were increasingly women (Gardey, 1995a). Because the study of white-collar workers had traditionally been somewhat neglected by French historians and sociologists (Gardey, 1996), from the outset the historical analyses of this group were gendered, and paid attention to the role played by gender in the constitution of the social category (Frévert, 1991).

My own work deals with the feminisation of office work, analysing both the quantitative, macro-social dimensions and some case studies. One example of the latter is the feminisation of office work at Renault, a rapidly expanding firm, while another looks at the feminisation of a typical job, shorthand typist. The research also describes the creation and perpetuation of gender divisions of labour, and assesses the consequences for living conditions and relative social status of women and men of the new forms of organisation of office work.

The case study of Renault provides documentation of individual career paths and collective behaviour of employees, through the quantitative processing of individual personnel files, comparison of office photos, and use of other more qualitative sources depicting the functioning of various departments. In the 1920s, women, mostly working as ordinary office workers, occupied the majority of Renault's office jobs ; they were typists, telephone operators and adding machine operators. They were not promoted (except for a tiny group that achieved the status of "shorthand typist salaried by the month") whereas approximately one-third of male employees could realistically hope for promotion in a number of careers. They had the prospect of jobs in accounting, in the organisation of production (as technical employees and designers), in sales (as language-proficient employees and salesmen). Furthermore, many male office workers went on to take management positions in the workshops, as foremen. The only woman in a managerial position between the two world wars was an unmarried woman who supervised a domain populated exclusively by women ; she was head of the typing department for several decades.

The invention of office work as a female preserve is a product of the flood of women into posts and sectors that were taking off at the time. These

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were jobs not only in the public sector, but also included banking and insurance and the offices of industrial concerns. At first the pioneers were confined to few areas ; the women hired by the *Credit Lyonnais* bank in the 1880s were restricted for years to the Securities department. They were often highly qualified ; the first typists hired by the Ministry of the Interior at the turn of the century held the diploma required for elementary school teaching (Gardey, 1995a). Then the ranks of female office workers began to swell, and after World War I their backgrounds were increasingly varied. The feminisation of this type of position is part of the office revolution affecting many large companies. New communications

technology was introduced, many operations were mechanised, and rational organisation, in the Taylorist sense of the term, was applied in many departments.

This history shows us how women's access -- limited, at the outset -- to some occupations soon came to be construed by public opinion as "natural". The social construction of the typist as female, in that key late 19th century figure of the "charming typist" (Gardey, 1995b) is, however, only a partial truth, all the while contributing to the feminisation and naturalisation of a whole series of functions that had been strictly male up to that point.

I will close this brief overview of the findings of historians about women's work in France since the beginning of the 19th century, with the following observations. First, careful historical analysis leads to redesigning of the usual categories and to deconstruction of the commonly accepted borders between paid and unpaid work, as well as between paid work and social utility. There is good reason to analyse the monetary, economic and social recognition of the work of women and men (and the inscription of that recognition in social sciences such as descriptive statistics and political economy), since there is obviously nothing neutral about them.

The second observation is that experiences and career trajectories are reproduced, that reinvention is constant and that it seems impossible to build on the past. While such a conclusion appears valid as we look back on the hesitations of the 20th century, it also raises questions about potential channels for improvement. Did it require three generations of female schoolteachers to produce women graduates from the *Ecole polytechnique*, one of the country's most prestigious engineering schools (Marry, 1995)?

Finally, particularly clear is the great stability and, paradoxically the relativity, of definitions of the masculine and the feminine, where work is concerned. Some fields of activity are profoundly and continuously assumed to be feminine ; sewing is in women's realm, engineering techniques are for men only. But a closer look at so-called women's jobs shows that nothing is quite that simple. Many of the tasks involved in sewing (cutting, work on hides and

leather) are done by men, while women do graduate from the *Ecole polytechnique*. In other words, aside from a few spheres from which women are completely excluded, the frontiers between women and men's work are constantly being redesigned, while male strongholds themselves are gradually being conquered. Yet, as women push back the frontiers, the borders themselves move ahead just as they are crossed. The power of discourse and of organisational practices is patent here. In the last analysis, as far as women are concerned, the prevailing impression is that definitions of skill and qualifications for jobs remain vague and elusive notions.

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