Sewing at Home in Greece, 1870s to 1930s

A Global History Perspective

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The sewing machine is an object familiar to most people worldwide: almost every house in Europe in the twentieth century had a sewing machine and almost everyone has memories of mothers or grandmothers sewing on their machines. These days, the return of the “do-it-yourself” culture caused by the global economic crisis has contributed to a revival of the use of modern sewing machines, while the old machines are viewed as collectible items or objects of decoration.

The sewing machine was the first mass-produced and mass-marketed consumer good of the twentieth century, and the first to be globally disseminated even before 1914. Moreover, it could be said that the sewing machine was the first machine to bring the industrial revolution into the home.¹ It was the first durable, technologically complex household appliance to find a national market first in North America, and soon after in Europe, India, and South America.

In this chapter, I explore the gendered aspects of the technology of the sewing machine in their interaction with the divisions of labour (paid and unpaid) within the Greek family, and the ways in which gendered hierarchies influenced the forms of labour and systems of payment in the clothing trade. I approach these questions following the Indian social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's ideas on modernity and the cultural dimensions of globalization. According to Appadurai, technologies cannot be understood without taking into account the local societies and cultures in which they came to be embedded; and globalization needs to be understood as a *localizing process* (not simply a homogenizing one).² Following also the discussion on how global labour history should be examined in connection with local histories, this chapter tries to combine theoretical approaches regarding modernity with historical research on the diffusion and appropriation of technology in

1 Cf. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, “The ‘Industrial Revolution’ in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the 20th Century”, *Technology and Culture*, 17/1 (1976), pp. 1–23.

2 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, 1996).

different contexts, and the transformation of labour through the use of new, mass-produced technology.

Work in the home—paid, but more commonly unpaid—cannot be easily traced in the literature. For this reason, research that seeks to throw light on aspects of women's work in the home has to investigate a variety of sources: illustrated, literary, and autobiographical testimonies. The sources for my research here are catalogues of international expositions, advertisements, the press (women's press, daily newspapers), feminist reports, trade union archives, literary accounts and photographs.

The first section of the chapter refers to previous studies that focused on the sewing machine from the differing perspectives of business and labour history, while providing a general overview of Greek historiography on labour. The second section examines the introduction and dissemination of sewing machines around the world; the third section—as a parentheses—provides an overview of Greek manufacture, labour and population movements during the nineteenth century and the interwar period in order to better understand the economic and social context of the spread of sewing machines in Greece. The fourth section of the chapter examines the promotion, advertisements and training for the use of sewing machines in Greece, while the last section studies work at home and some efforts at regulation.

1 Studies on Business and Labour History

A number of historical studies from the perspective of economic and business history, the history of technology and labour history/migration history/gender history, especially for the United States and Western Europe, have been published over the last thirty to forty years. The sewing machine has been at the centre of major debates in business and economic history, ranging from the invention of mass-produced technologies, and the development of modern advertising, managerial, and marketing strategies, to the origins of multinational firms³ and the emergence of the sewing machine as a global consumer

3 Fred V. Carstensen, *American enterprise in foreign markets: Studies of Singer and International Harvester in imperial Russia* (Chapel Hill, 1984); Andrew Godley, "The Development of the U.K. Clothing Industry, 1850–1950: Output and Productivity Growth", *Business History*, 37 (1995), pp. 46–63; Andrew Godley, "Pioneering Foreign Direct Investment in British Manufacturing", *Business History Review*, 73 (1999), pp. 394–429; Mark Casson and Andrew Godley, "Revisiting the Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise: Entrepreneurship and the Singer Global Distribution System", *Journal of Management Studies*, 44/7 (2007), pp. 1064–77.

good.⁴ Recently, business history has studied the gender strategies of marketing by the multinational firm Singer.⁵ New studies have examined the appropriation of technology in Europe and consumers' experience.⁶ There is also research on the advent and appropriation of the sewing machine in India, the Ottoman empire, Turkey, and the Middle East.⁷

The sewing machine has also been at the centre of major debates in social and cultural history, ranging from the distinctive character of female labour as a combination of paid and unpaid work⁸ to the "sweating" of garment industry workers;⁹ from the feminization of the garment trade to the idealization of home life and the "separate spheres"¹⁰ of gender relations, the social consequences of flexible labour for women and immigrants,¹¹ and the effect of the sewing machine on workers' health and sexual

- 4 Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999); Andrew Godley, "The Global Diffusion of the Sewing Machine", *Research in Economic History*, 2 (2001), pp. 1–45; Andrew Godley, *Fabricating Consumers: The Sewing Machine in Modern Japan* (Berkeley, 2011).
- 5 Paula A. de la Cruz-Fernández, "Multinationals and Gender: Singer Sewing Machine and Marketing in Mexico, 1890–1930", *Business History Review*, 89 (Autumn 2015), pp. 531–49.
- 6 Ruth Oldenziel and Mikael Hård, *Consumers, tinkers, rebels: The people who shaped Europe* (New York, 2013).
- 7 Uri M. Kupferschmidt, "The Social History of the Sewing Machine in the Middle East", *Die Welt des Islams*, 44/2 (2004), pp. 195–213; David Arnold, "Global goods and local usages: The small world of the Indian sewing machine, 1875–1952", *Journal of Global History*, 6/3 (2011), pp. 407–29; Ayşen İşler Sarioğlu, "My faithful machine: The role of technology in daily life. The case of Singer sewing machine in Turkey", MA dissertation, School of Social Sciences, Middle East Technical University (2011).
- 8 Karin Hausen, "Technical Progress and Women's Labour in the Nineteenth Century: The Social History of the Sewing Machine", in G. Iggers (ed.), *The Social History of Politics: Critical Perspectives in West German Historical Writing since 1945* (Dover N.H., 1985), pp. 259–81.
- 9 Andrew Godley, "Homeworking and the Sewing Machine in the British Clothing Industry 1850–1905", in B. Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 255–68; Nancy Green, "Fashion, Flexible Specialization and the Sweatshop: A Historical Problem", in D. Bender, R.A. Greenwald (eds), *Sweatshop USA: The American Sweatshop in Historical and Global Perspective* (New York, 2003), pp. 37–55; Colette Avrane, *Ouvrières à domicile: Le combat pour un salaire minimum sous la Troisième République* (Rennes, 2013), pp. 69–73.
- 10 Judith C. Coffin, "Credit, Consumption and Images of Women's Desires: Selling the Sewing Machine in Late Nineteenth Century France", *French Historical Studies*, 18/3 (1994), pp. 749–83; Eadem, *The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750–1915* (Princeton, N.J., 1996); Eadem, "Consumption, Production and Gender: the Sewing Machine in Nineteenth Century France", in L. Frader and S.O. Rose (eds), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, 1996), pp. 111–41.
- 11 Nancy Green, *Du Sentier à la 7e Avenue: La Confection et les immigrés, Paris–New York 1880–1980* (Paris, 1998).

politics.¹²

Since the mid-1980s, the history of labour has generated substantive renewal of the social history of Greece from the viewpoint of the history of women and gender.¹³ New research underlines the impact of gender in the formation of labour markets, in labour relations and the division of labour, and reports the female presence in business and in different sectors of the formal or informal economy. Studies of women and gender from a social history perspective have offered numerous case studies, reflecting the methodological and theoretical richness of the critiques of existing sources and the search for new sources. Moreover, the incorporation of culture in these approaches has enriched the field, with a focus on the historical construction of the gendered labour experience.¹⁴ There are lacunae still, however, and a large number of questions await answers: questions having to do with work at home, the composition of household incomes, the strategies of families to enter labour markets, paid and unpaid work at home and in family business are some of them.

2 Introducing the Sewing Machine into a Global Market

The new sewing machines were used, first of all, by garment manufacturers, but the sewing machine manufacturers realized that their largest potential market was the millions of families who intended to have a sewing machine in their homes when they could afford it. An advertisement campaign was launched

12 Karen Offen, “‘Powered by a Woman’s Foot’: A Documentary Introduction to the Sexual Politics of the Sewing Machine in Nineteenth Century France”, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 11/2 (March 1988), pp. 93–101.

13 For historiographical accounts of women’s and gender history in Greece, see Efi Avdela, “L’histoire des femmes au sein de l’historiographie grecque contemporaine”, in Gisela Bock and Anne Cova (eds), *Ecrire l’histoire des femmes en Europe du Sud, XIXe–XXe siècles / Writing Women’s History in Southern Europe, 19th–20th Centuries* (Oeiras, 2003), pp. 81–96; Efi Avdela, *Le genre entre classe et nation: Essai d’historiographie grecque* (Paris, 2006), pp. 13–25; Eleni Fournaraki and Yannis Yannitsiotis, “Three Decades of Women’s and Gender History in Greece: An Account”, *Aspasia, The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women’s and Gender History*, 7 (2013), pp. 162–73; A. Dialeti, E. Fournaraki, and G. Gotsi, “Εισαγωγή”, in A. Dialeti, E. Fournaraki, and G. Gotsi (eds), *Το φύλο στην ιστορία. Αποτιμήσεις και παραδείγματα* (Athens, 2015), pp. 7–52; Nikolaos Papadogiannis, “Gender in modern Greek historiography”, *Historiein*, 16, no. 1–2 (2017), pp. 74–101.

14 For a recent historiographical account on gender and labour, see Leda Papastefanaki, “Labour in economic and social history: The viewpoint of gender in Greek historiography”, *Genesis: Rivista della Società Italiana delle Storiche*, xv/2 (2016), pp. 59–83.

from the mid-1850s to the 1860s in order to distribute sewing machines to households in the US and all over Europe, and introduce new methods of payment. Among the manufacturers who introduced sewing machine models for families were the US firm Singer, which introduced the “New Family” model in 1865; the North American firm Smith & Egge MFG Co., which manufactured the model “Household” model sewing machine in the 1880s with a “Family” buttonhole attachment (Figure 4.1);¹⁵ and the Belgian house Sinave-Mignot, which specialized in different kinds of small machines for home industries (*industrie à domicile*) (Figure 4.2).¹⁶

Already by 1870, the sewing machine was capable of making 600 stitches per minute whereas a good dressmaker could not make more than 25 stitches per minute. The consequences were a rise in productivity and greater division of labour in workshops and home-based manufacture. The sewing machine brought about a “conciliation” of work for women working from home: household tasks could now coexist with paid work in the house. The introduction of the sewing machine into ateliers and households, it was believed, would have the following advantages: amelioration of the lives of numerous women workers who would now receive more satisfactory salaries, and augmentation of consumption and general well-being.¹⁷

The disadvantage was the relatively high price of the sewing machines, making them too expensive for workers and working-class households. Merchants and manufacturers began to sell the sewing machines on long-term credit, while the buyers paid for them through profits earned by using the machines.

Andrew Godley, in his study about the global distribution of sewing machines, has shown that Germany was the leading European consumer in the 1870s and 1880s, after Britain. However, by 1914, Ireland and Scandinavia had overtaken Germany, with the Netherlands, France, and Spain close behind. In Switzerland, Belgium, and Portugal, the distribution of the sewing machine was significant before 1880, while Italy and Russia experienced rapid distribution in the 1900s. Estimates on the distribution in the Ottoman empire and Greece point to more than 10 per cent of all households having sewing machines before the First World War.¹⁸ The development of an easy payment

15 *United States Sewing Machines Times*, 29 June 1889.

16 *Catalogue illustré de l'exposition internationale du petit outillage avec la description des machines exposés* (Ghent, 1904).

17 See, for example, this rhetoric in Association pour le développement de l'industrie ouvrière et des fabriques dans les Pays-Bas, *Exposition internationale d'économie domestique, Amsterdam 1869* (Hague, 1873).

18 Godley, “The Global Diffusion”.

scheme contributed to the rapid distribution of the sewing machine in France, where department stores pioneered credit systems, in Britain, in the Middle East, in the Ottoman empire, and in Greece.¹⁹ Although Singer dominated the world market around 1900, it appears that other brands from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy continued to be imported in the interwar period (and even after the Second World War) in Turkey, Middle East, Greece, and the Balkans. Singer's marketing success at the turn of the century was connected to the introduction of a monthly payment system. Most sewing machine manufacturers established a large network of agents and salesmen throughout France, Greece, the Ottoman empire, and the Middle East. These agents offered potential customers the machine, some lessons, credit, and possible work from local clothing manufacturers.

3 The Greek Economy, Manufacture, Labour, and Movement of Populations in the Nineteenth Century and the Interwar Period

The newly founded Greek state of 1830 was a predominantly agricultural country, with just a few small urban centres. It was a typical monetized economy of the Mediterranean, integrated with the region's commercial networks, with old cash crops (grain, olive oil, wine) and well-developed maritime communications. The expansion of cash crops for exports (olive oil, wine, currants, etc.) was a main feature of the economy of Greece in the nineteenth century, giving rise to movement of populations from the mountain regions to the lowlands, polarized social backgrounds, and rapid integration of a large part of the agricultural population into the market economy. The intensive cultivation of the Corinthian currant in particular combined well with the structure of small property ownership that prevailed in the Greek countryside, leading to the gradual descent of the mountain populations to the lowlands, and also absorbing a large part of the increasing population and available labour resources.²⁰

During the nineteenth century the older cottage industries began to decline. Home-based thread manufacturing, which met the needs of households,

19 Donald Quataert, *Manufacturing and Technology Transfer in the Ottoman Empire 1800–1914* (Istanbul, 1992); Coffin, "Credit, Consumption"; Eadem, *The Politics of Women's Work*; Godley, "Homeworking and the Sewing Machine"; Kupferschmidt, "The Social History of the Sewing Machine in the Middle East".

20 Christina Agriantoni, "Οικονομία και εκβιομηχάνιση στην Ελλάδα του 19^{ου} αιώνα", in V. Kremmydas (ed.), *Εισαγωγή στη νεοελληνική οικονομική ιστορία (18ος–20ός αι.)* (Athens, 1999), pp. 145–176, especially pp. 148, 150.

gradually disappeared from all regions of Greece, but textile manufacturing survived and its commercial character expanded not only to regions that did not have sufficient cultivation but throughout the country after the agricultural crisis of the late nineteenth century.²¹ The transfer of the capital to Athens and the general transformation of the economy gave an impetus to the growth of new port cities. Piraeus, Patras, Hermoupolis, and later Volos, provided with initial incentives to develop external trade, were to become centres for the reception of industry. The construction of towns absorbed a large portion of domestic public and private resources during the nineteenth century. Similarly, significant domestic resources in cash and labour were absorbed by the first public works in the Greek state.²² The first wave of systematic industrial investment can be dated to the years 1865–1875; industrialization was then quickened and expanded to several sectors: there were 110 steam-powered factories in 1875 distributed across a number of towns and different sectors (cotton-makers, flour producers, oil producers and soap-makers, tanneries).²³

The crisis in rural areas throughout the Mediterranean in the last two decades of the nineteenth century resulted in falling prices for agricultural products, increasing migration, and the search for supplementary incomes by rural households. The current crisis, which hit the Greek agricultural economy in the 1890s and contributed to mass transatlantic migration, illustrates the rural crisis most emphatically. The second wave of industrialization was supported by rapid urbanization, but was also accompanied by great inequality and social polarization. It followed various paths, primarily by using the available labour force but without, of course, being able to absorb all of it. The second wave concluded with the emergence of the country's first large industrial enterprises.²⁴

The revival of industrial activity in the late nineteenth century also occurred through the distribution of small production units throughout Greece. Given the prevailing conditions of poverty and emigration, small businessmen began to make more systematic use women's home-based work, organizing networks to commercialize home-made textile products or to establish

21 Ibid., pp. 150–52; Eadem, “Βιομηχανία”, in K. Kostis and S. Petmezas (eds), *Η ανάπτυξη της ελληνικής οικονομίας κατά τον 19^ο αιώνα (1830–1914)* (Athens, 2006), pp. 222–23; Socrates Petmezas, “Patterns of Protoindustrialization in the Ottoman Empire: The Case of Eastern Thessaly”, *Journal of European Economic History*, 19/3 (1990), pp. 575–603.

22 Christina Agriantoni, *Οι απαρχές της εκβιομηχάνισης στην Ελλάδα τον 19^ο αιώνα* (Athens, 1986), pp. 77–105; Eadem, “Οικονομία και εκβιομηχάνιση”, pp. 154–57; Eadem, “Βιομηχανία”, in *Η ανάπτυξη*, p. 223.

23 Agriantoni, *Οι απαρχές*, pp. 111–28; Eadem, “Βιομηχανία”, in *Η ανάπτυξη*, pp. 224–25.

24 Agriantoni, “Οικονομία και εκβιομηχάνιση”, p. 172; Eadem, “Βιομηχανία”, in *Η ανάπτυξη*, pp. 226–27.

seasonal agricultural processing factories (mills, oil mills, distilleries, currant processing), which provided supplementary daily wages to rural households. Correspondingly, the system of home-based work and small workshops expanded in urban centres as well. Patras, Volos, Hermoupolis, and, above all, Athens became filled with small knitting and garment workshops.²⁵

Industry soon followed the activities of the cottage industries, which in several cases had created a new demand for intermediate products. In the late nineteenth century, new textile industries were opened (Hermoupolis, Volos, Athens, and Piraeus in Greece, and Salonica, Veroia, Naoussa, and Edessa in Ottoman Macedonia),²⁶ while, thanks to the availability of raw materials at exceptionally low prices, alcoholic beverages, in particular Greek brandy, enjoyed significant exports. New distilleries were founded in Piraeus, Elefsina, Kalamata, and elsewhere. Small machinery workshops were established in all the important towns, while the largest facilities in the industrial centres were expanded to serve shipping and the railways. The most spectacular rise was that of the mining sector in 1895–1907, thanks to the increasing demand for minerals from the industrially developed countries.²⁷

In the interwar period the demand for industrialization became all the more urgent. In the absence of migration opportunities, industrial development became the only hope for absorbing the unemployed among both refugees from Asia Minor and the indigenous population. The 1920s were characterized by a high rate of establishment of new industries, especially cottage industries. The smaller units increased in number while the larger ones became more powerful.²⁸

The Greco–Turkish War (1919–22) resulted in a huge wave of refugees, of whom women, children, and elderly people comprised a major proportion. More than 1,221,000 Greek refugees came to Greece from Asia Minor in 1922 and settled in a country which had 5,531,474 inhabitants in 1920. Studies have pointed to the large number of refugee women who were employed mainly in textile, tapestry, and tobacco manufacturing, both in factories and workshops. According to the 1928 population census, 36.2 per cent of the total number

25 Agriantoni, “Οικονομία και εκβιομηχάνιση”, p. 173.

26 Agriantoni, *Οι απαρχές*, pp. 334–35, 343; Christos Hadziiossif, *Η γηραιά σελήνη: Η βιομηχανία στην ελληνική οικονομία (1830–1940)* (Athens, 1993), pp. 90–95; Leda Papastefanaki, *Εργασία, τεχνολογία και φύλο στην ελληνική βιομηχανία: Η κλωστοϋφαντουργία του Πειραιά, 1870–1940* (Herakleion, 2009), pp. 121–23.

27 Agriantoni, “Οικονομία και εκβιομηχάνιση”, p. 173.

28 Christos Hadziiossif, “Το προσφυγικό σοκ, οι σταθερές και οι μεταβολές της ελληνικής οικονομίας”, in Christos Hadziiossif (ed.), *Ιστορία της Ελλάδας τον 20ό αιώνα: Ο μεσοπόλεμος, 1922–1940*, vol. B1 (Athens, 2002), p. 26.

of industrial workers consisted of female workers, of which a large number were refugees.²⁹ Yet, the policy of state institutions and private organizations that directed women and children to home work and domestic labour is underestimated.³⁰

The use of statistical sources for women's participation in the labour force of the developing labour market in Greece has specific limitations. Identifying the "dark" spots and uncertainties in the censuses leads to the hypothesis that wage relations in Greece in the nineteenth century and the beginning of twentieth century were far more widespread than originally assumed. Wage relations operated within the context of disconnected or fragmented local or sectoral labour markets, which were distinguished by a gender division based on the gender divisions among the members of working and farming families.³¹ Family strategies regarding the selection of members who would 'proletarianize', migrate, enter into the service of third parties or remain within the family smallholding were determined by the gendered family division and resulted from the needs of the market.

4 Sewing Machines in Greece: Promotion, Advertisement, Education

Sewing machines, when introduced into the Greek market, were paid for in instalments or in cash. "Easy payments" (in instalments) were launched by sewing machine companies in the nineteenth century in order to make it possible for men and women of the working class to buy the machines. Easy payments were introduced into the Greek market by shops selling sewing machines from the 1870s onwards.³² In 1897, Singer advertised payment "in cash and on credit",³³ while in the years that followed, it advertised payment on credit in small, weekly instalments.³⁴ Retailers stressed weekly instalments in advertisements throughout the country.

The rapid spread of sewing machines was due not only to easy payments and the system of instalments it introduced, but also to the training provided

29 Papastefanaki, *Εργασία*, pp. 90–91.

30 Pothiti Hantzaroula, *Σμιλεύοντας την υποταγή: Οι έμμισθες οικιακές εργάτριες στην Ελλάδα το α' μισό του 20ού αιώνα* (Athens, 2012).

31 Leda Papastefanaki, "Μισθωτή εργασία", in K. Kostis and S. Petmezas (eds), *Η ανάπτυξη της ελληνικής οικονομίας κατά τον 19° αιώνα (1830–1914)* (Athens, 2006), pp. 278–79.

32 Newspaper *Ποσειδών*, 25 April 1874.

33 Newspaper *Εμπρός*, 30 December 1897.

34 Newspaper *Εμπρός*, 20 June 1906.

to their users and the provision for their repair. Retailers and agencies sold the machines and, together with these, a “package” of services, including training in how to use them and repair. “Training, teaching and repairs entirely free of charge” or variations on this wording are to be found in advertisements dating from the early twentieth century.³⁵

The spread of the use of the sewing machine in Greece was accompanied by systematic advertising in the Athenian and provincial press, as well as articles by journalists, many of which were paid for. The robust and simple features of the machines and the ease with which their use could be learnt were stressed in order to convince consumers—chiefly female consumers—that it was worthwhile to buy a sewing machine, for it was durable and simple to use. Advertisements for machines which sewed “any kind of textile or leather without a change of needle, thread or any modification” promoted gender-based conceptions of technology: the machine has to be simple in order to be operated by women.³⁶ At the same time, most of the advertisements of all the companies had references to the family, which women have to look after: machines for the family, for family use, was a repeated motif in all of them. Jones sewing machines were advertised, in 1908, as “the most durable machines for a family”;³⁷ Eldredge sewing machines advertised as the only “true friends of family harmony”,³⁸ because they are noiseless and when being used, do not annoy the husband when he is sleeping or doing his accounts.

In the paid articles inserted in newspapers, the sewing machine was promoted as a philanthropic and beneficial invention, which, as it increases productivity, allows women who use it to work and easily earn their living, but also to carry out the family’s sewing tasks with comparative ease.³⁹

In earlier times, impoverished widows and unfortunate orphan girls, unable to resort to any other occupation to earn a living, devoted themselves day and night to needlework by hand, but although they wasted away as a result of their labours, were just about able to survive; but now, thanks to the beneficial invention of the sewing machine, an industrious woman can comfortably sew enough to enjoy an income of up to eight drachmas a day. A middle-class housewife engaged in the upbringing of her children and the running of her home was unable also to carry out the

35 Newspaper *Μακεδονία*, 29 January 1912, p. 4.

36 See, for example, the newspaper *Ποσειδών*, no. 481, 4 September 1876.

37 Newspaper *Εμπρός*, 25 October 1908, p. 6.

38 Advertisement of Eldredge sewing machine, newspaper *Εμπρός*, 30 March 1908, p. 6.

39 “Οικιακή βιομηχανία”, *Ποσειδών*, no. 719, 17 July 1877, p. 3.

"FAMILY"

BUTTONHOLE ATTACHMENT.

YES IT IS
— A —
SUCCESS

And Helps Sell a Sewing Machine.
Try It! THE SMITH & EGGE M'FG CO.
17 East 16th St., New York.

THE

HOUSEHOLD

Always acknowledged without an equal for Capacity,
Simplicity and Superior Construction, and now with

NEW IRON STAND AND WOODWORK

beyond comparison in elegance. The same machine, used in doing the most delicate sewing, can equally as well be used by the manufacturer with steam power at the highest rate of speed, and in the heaviest grades of sewing. Responsible dealers wanted.

FIGURE 4.1 The model "Household" sewing machine with a "Family" buttonhole attachment
SOURCE: UNITED STATES SEWING MACHINES TIMES, 29 JUNE 1889

FIGURE 4.2 Advertisement of the Belgian house Sinave-Mignot, which specialized in different kinds of small machines for home industries

SOURCE: CATALOGUE ILLUSTRÉ DE L'EXPOSITION INTERNATIONALE DU PETIT OUTILLAGE AVEC LA DESCRIPTION DES MACHINES EXPOSÉS (GHENT, 1904)

necessary sewing tasks, and so was put to additional expense. Now, by means of the machine, she can happily overcome this deficiency.⁴⁰

The motif of the mother who can, by working at home, contribute to the family income without neglecting her maternal and household duties was repeated in similar articles for the promotion of sewing machines in the American and European press in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Of all the companies selling sewing machines in Greece, it was Singer that carried out advertising campaigns of the longest duration. The publications stressed the possibilities afforded by Singer sewing machines to craftsmen, tailors, seamstresses, and housewives, as they supported “healthy, useful, and gainful” labour.⁴¹ Emphasis was also laid on the lightning speed of the sewing

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “Το δῶρον των καλῶν νυμφῶν”, *Εμπρός*, 12 March 1903, p. 3.

ΓΝΗΣΙΑΙ
 ΡΑΠΤΟΜΗΧΑΝΑΙ
 ΣΙΓΓΕΡ
 ΑΠΑΡΑΜΙΛΛΟΙ
 ανά την
 ΓΡΗΛΙΟΝ
 Η „66 K.“
 ΣΙΓΓΕΡ
 ΕΙΝΕ Η ΝΕΩΤΕΡΑ
 & ΤΕΛΕΙΟΤΕΡΑ
 ΡΑΠΤΟΜΗΧΑΝΗ
 ΑΠΑΡΑΙΤΗΤΟΣ
 εις πάσαν
 κογένειαν
 ΜΠΟΡΝ & ΣΙΑ
 Μόνοι αντιπρόσωποι διά την αποκλειστικήν πώλησιν
 των Ραπτομηχανών ΣΙΓΓΕΡ
 εις Ἑλλάδα καὶ τὴν Ἰονίαν

FIGURE 4.3 Advertisement of Singer sewing machine for families in the daily press of Athens, c. 1910

machines, which were driven by electricity, and the great ease of handling the machines for factory and craft-industry use; the ease of use was impressive even in the case of more bulky sewing machines, so that even a “smaller girl” could use them “without any trouble”.⁴² The machines for family use sewed noiselessly, with the same speed and perfection as the professional models, and produced the most perfect stitches in all kinds of materials, both coarse and fine, with the same needle. Thus, the machines for household use repaired tablecloths, napkins, etc., but also produced a variety of artistic embroidery. Consequently, the use of the simple family sewing machine made “skilled and artistic embroidering” accessible to all.

42 “Ἡ Ἑταιρεία Σίγγερ εις τὴν Διεθνή Ἐκθεσιν”, *Ἐμπρός*, 8 June 1903, p. 3.

FIGURE 4.4 Advertisement of the commercial firm Benmayor, Molho and Cohen in Thessaloniki, for sewing and knitting machines for home industries and manufacturers, c. 1930

SOURCE: ΓΕΝΙΚΟΣ ΕΜΠΟΡΙΚΟΣ ΟΔΗΓΟΣ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗΣ (THESSALONIKI, 1930)

Apart from being a means of paid labour for poor male and female workers, the sewing machine was, for well-to-do women, a marvellous means “whereby an artistic talent is created and formed and tasteful inclinations and proclivities are interpreted with grace and perfect precision”.⁴³ Philanthropic bourgeois ladies who were members of associations and sisterhoods that provided assistance to orphan girls and widows, as well as principals of schools and institutions, were enjoined to appreciate and lend practical support to the work of Singer, that is, “the shaping, in this way, of good taste and an artistic spirit in the works of handicraft of our female youth”.⁴⁴

Artistic embroidery was addressed not only to middle-class women but also to those of the working class, who, by producing embroideries, would be able to find additional means of making a living. The multinational company Singer,

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

as early as the 1870s, had expanded into the manufacture of sewing machines which produced embroidery in order to address American and European women of the middle class. In addressing women of this category, Singer promoted the idea of female work as a form of “art”, while the company projected itself as a trustee of domesticity, of the “private sphere”. In the 1890s, Singer set up its Embroidery Department, which would function on a world-wide scale to adapt the company’s embroidery machines to specific local conditions.⁴⁵

In Greece, as also in cities of the Ottoman empire, in order to boost the market for embroidery sewing machines, exhibitions were held in which embroideries produced by Singer machines were displayed. On the new artistic forms created through the use of the Singer “New Family” embroidery sewing machine, the Athens newspapers commented, “more importance must be given to production by the sewing machine of women’s handicrafts, and the introduction of these into charitable institutions and girls’ schools is a necessity”.⁴⁶

In 1910–11, an advertising campaign was launched for a new Singer family sewing machine, the “66” model, describing it as the machine of the twentieth century, since it had even more labour-saving accessories, such as a tool that performed the difficult task of darning to perfection.⁴⁷ What is of interest is that in this new advertising campaign, the sewing machine is treated as an ornament to the household. The specific machine for family use could make the best Christmas present for any family, “of whatever class”.⁴⁸

Advertising campaigns in the local and women’s press, especially from Singer, addressed both workshop owners and private consumers, women and men.⁴⁹ A Singer advertisement c. 1910 in an Athens daily (Figure 4.3) and that of a commercial house in Thessaloniki selling sewing and knitting machines for houses and manufacturers c. 1930 illustrate this double orientation (Figure 4.4).

45 Paula A. de la Cruz-Fernández, “Marketing the Hearth: Ornamental Embroidery and the Building of the Multinational Singer Sewing Machine Company”, *Enterprise and Society*, 15/3 (2014), pp. 442–71.

46 “Η νέα καλλιτεχνία”, *Εμπρός*, 24 November 1904, p. 4.

47 Advertisement, “Η ραπτομηχανή του 20ού αιώνας”, *Εμπρός*, 16 December 1910, p. 5.

48 Ibid.

49 Elisabeth Frierson, “Cheap and easy: The creation of the consumer culture in late Ottoman society”, in D. Quataert (ed.), *Consumption studies and the history of the Ottoman Empire: An introduction* (New York, 2000), pp. 243–60.

5 Education and Training in Sewing

The art of sewing was a substantive item in the curriculum for women's education in private girls' schools and state schools in most European countries from the nineteenth century onwards. This was because sewing was considered a part of a woman's household duties, but also a suitable way of making a living for married and unmarried women.

In Greece, practice in "womanly arts" formed a basic constituent of the primary and secondary education of girls from the nineteenth century to the interwar period.⁵⁰ With the appearance of the sewing machine from the 1870s onwards, many educational institutions and charitable foundations undertook to introduce sewing lessons with the use of these machines, and then introduced cutting. This development occurred not only in institutions of the Greek state, but also in Greek institutions in the Ottoman empire.

Singer organized regular instruction in the use of its sewing machines in Athens and in the provinces. The company announced, in the press, to ladies of the cities of Aighio, Agrinio, Aitoliko, and Mesolonghi that one of its special teachers of embroidery would teach, free of charge, embroidery with the "Central Bobine" sewing machine. The "Central Bobine" machine for family use was suitable for sewing for family needs, for repairs and darning, as well as for embroidery. The specialist embroidery teacher would stay five to eight days in each city. Teaching would be daily and would take place at Aighio in the city's two girls' schools and at the Singer agency of Athanasios Mentzelopoulos; in Agrinio at the linen draper's shop of M. Yerapanda and at the embroidery school of Photeini Karayianni; and at Mesolonghi at the Xenokrateio Girls' School. The teacher would be accompanied by an employee of the company. In the subsequent period, similar teaching of embroidery was scheduled for Zakynthos, Cephalonia, Corfu, Gastouni, Amaliada, and Lechaina.⁵¹ Embroidery teaching was also conducted in the Zagora villages of Pelion, in the villages of Crete, of Lesvos, Euboea, and in many other agricultural and provincial areas of the country.⁵² Commemorative photographs which are to this day to be found in houses, museums, and small-circulation publications of local interest provide evidence of this activity (Figure 4.5). "Schools" for

50 Sidiroula Ziogou-Karastergiou, *Η μέση εκπαίδευση των κοριτσιών στην Ελλάδα (1830–1893)* (Athens, 1986); Alexandra Bakalaki and Eleni Elegmitou, *Η εκπαίδευση εις τα του οίκου και τα γυναικεία καθήκοντα: Από την ίδρυση του ελληνικού κράτους έως την εκπαιδευτική μεταρρύθμιση* (Athens, 1987), pp. 33–65.

51 Newspaper *Εμπρός*, 9 October 1902, p. 2; newspaper *Σκριπ*, 3 October 1902, p. 2.

52 Newspaper *Εμπρός*, 3 December 1905, p. 4.

FIGURE 4.5 School of embroidery by Singer in Lesvos island, c. 1930

SOURCE: FILIA MUSEUM IN LESVOS

training, free of charge, in the use of sewing machines were also organized by other manufacturers between the beginning of the twentieth century and the first decades after the Second World War.

Cutting and tailoring were also taught by seamstresses in women's clothing and fashion stores.⁵³ However, learning under a seamstress was not without problems. Until the interwar years, it appears that girls worked with seamstresses without being paid or receiving only tips from customers when they delivered dresses or hats. Young girls went to women's clothing workshops as apprentices with a view to becoming professionals. It was however well known that the first, and perhaps the second, year of their "apprenticeship" would be spent in running errands and performing menial tasks for the seamstress–employer.⁵⁴ Apparently, the employer–teacher taught little or nothing of her art to the girls, so as to keep them longer in the workshop as unpaid or low-paid apprentices. The demands voiced by the feminist Labour Inspector and member of the Resistance, Maria Desypri-Svolou,⁵⁵ in the early postwar years

53 Newspaper *Σφαίρα*, 8 October 1902, p. 2; 31 January 1905.

54 Contemporary Social History Archives (ASKI), Archive Maria Svolou, f. 1, "Εκθεση για τη γυναικεία απασχόληση" (1936), p. 17.

55 Maria Desypri-Svolou (1892–1976) was a leading member of the Greek feminist movement in the interwar period, and a member of the Resistance during the Nazi occupation of Greece (1941–44). As a Labour Inspector in the interwar years she wrote broadly about

regarding apprentice seamstresses were concerned with precisely the institutionalization of the apprenticeship system. She sought an apprenticeship agreement that would determine: (i) the qualifications of the individuals who were to undertake the role of teachers to give professional training to male or female apprentices; (b) the duration of the apprenticeship; (c) the monitoring of the apprenticeship. Maria Desypri-Svolou also wanted unpaid apprenticeship to be banned in instances where the apprentices provided their labour.⁵⁶

6 Working at home

For men and women in the periphery of industrialized countries, the domestic sewing machine might have had a more direct impact on their daily lives than steam technology. The use of the sewing machine made possible the continuation of home-based manufacture right up to the end of the twentieth century. In the Ottoman empire, the diffusion of sewing machines contributed to the revival of small-scale garment and shoe manufacturing in Istanbul and Salonica (Thessaloniki) until 1914, while in Greece, from the 1890s until the interwar period, it contributed to the production (at home or in small workshops) of uniforms for the army and to the systematic organization of mass production of garments.⁵⁷ In France, Italy, and Greece, the relatively cheap sewing machine allowed manufacturers, until recently, to hire (married or unmarried) women who could work for lower wages at home for the garment or leather industry.

The social consequences associated with the diffusion of domestic sewing machines led also to the development of sweatshops and home-based work (*travail à domicile*). A whole invisible (informal) sector of urban and rural economies developed thanks to cheap female labour that operated sewing machines at home to gain some additional family income. From the nineteenth

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the working conditions of women workers. See Efi Avdela-Angelika Psarra, "Εισαγωγή", in *Ο φεμινισμός στην Ελλάδα του Μεσοπολέμου: Μία ανθολογία* (Athens, 1985); Efi Avdela, "Contested Meanings: Protection and Resistance in Labour Inspectors' Reports in 20th c. Greece", *Gender & History*, 9/2 (1997), pp. 310–32; Dimitra Samiou, "Svolou, Maria", in Francisca de Haan, Krasimira Daskalova, and Anna Loutfi (eds), *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms in Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York, 2005), pp. 552–57.

56 ASKI, Archive Maria Svolou, f. 2, "Εισήγηση πάνω στην οικονομική και κοινωνική θέση της Ελληνίδας", 2 May 1946, p. 6.

57 Quataert, *Manufacturing and Technology Transfer*; Agriantoni, "Βιομηχανία", pp. 173–221; Eadem, "Οικονομία και εκβιομηχάνιση", p. 173.

century in Greece, the sewing machine gradually became a much desired element included in the dowries of women getting married. Ownership of a sewing machine was important as it gave economic initiative to the owner and even some economic power to women of the working class. Women in urban or semi-urban environments in Greece in the interwar period could run an *atelier* (with young seamstresses), or enter into a business contract with an urban shop-owner, or become itinerant seamstresses selling their services from house to house. Women of the middle class and working class could also use the machine in unpaid domestic work for the needs of the family economy (as clothes needed to be repaired).

Work carried out in the home was an important alternative for the bourgeois morality of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Furthermore, in capitalist relations of production, home-based work had important advantages, as working women did not have control over their labour or any significant scope for bargaining—advantages which explain the delay in the mechanization of this branch in Western Europe. In Greece, even in the case of women of the middle class with their limited career opportunities, paid work in the home in arts that were “noble and refined” (in various forms of small-scale handicrafts) seemed a “respectable” solution, according to the bourgeois feminist Kallirrhoe Parren.⁵⁸

More or less simultaneously with the appearance of sewing machines on the Greek market, a relatively high-profile (at least in the press and advertising) piece-work network also made its appearance. How else do we interpret the advertisement for the sewing work branch operated by the Central Sewing Machine Warehouse of Dimitrios Constantinou, which accepted orders for sewing jobs of all kinds: for dowries, linen, clothing, etc., sewing work for tailors and shoemakers, and work by the yard, carried out “with precision and speed”.⁵⁹ The sewing machine, then, served not only for the carrying out of sewing work within the family, but also for the execution of orders. This is noted, in his own way, by the writer Alexandros Papadiamantis in his short stories about working-class families living in the neighbourhoods of Athens at the turn of the nineteenth century: the wife of the drunken carpenter Manolis is “industrious”; she has a sewing machine at home with which she makes shirts; in this way, she earns five drachmas a week, approximately one-third of what her husband earns.⁶⁰

58 Kallirrhoe Parren, “Γυναικείαι τέχναι και επαγγέλματα”, *Εφημερίς των Κυριών*, 19 September 1899; Quataert, *Manufacturing and Technology Transfer*, pp. 22–25; Frierson, “Cheap and easy”, pp. 243–60.

59 Newspaper *Ποσειδών*, no. 481, 4 September 1876.

60 Alexandros Papadiamantis, “Πατέρα στο σπίτι!” (1895), *Άπαντα*, v. Γ’ (Athens, 1984).

Workers' collective action against the working conditions in home industry and piece-work in the garment industry was frequent in the interwar period, though often without success. Collective action by the Workers' Association in the garment industry of Piraeus (tailors and seamstresses) since 1937 remained unsuccessful, as employers' pressure to the piece-workers was important.⁶¹ In the workshops making women's clothing and in the various craft industries concerned with clothing in Athens and Piraeus, where the workers were mainly female, the legislation on working hours was not observed until the interwar years. Although this legislation stipulated an eight-hour working day for women and children, this was usually not observed and they worked eleven to twelve hours a day; at the same time, overtime was often not paid at the rate of an additional 25 per cent of the daily wage as laid down by the legislation, or was not paid in full. In workshops that operated from homes, in particular, the ten hours of work were systematically exceeded, as the feminist Labour Inspector Maria Desypri-Svolou noted in her report in 1936. The conditions of periodic unemployment in the majority of these small establishments forced their employees to accept work on any terms in the hope of keeping their jobs for longer, and they even resorted to working in shifts in times of great shortage of work. In occupations that required a long period of training, the working woman joined with the intention of becoming qualified as soon as possible, because she hoped the situation would change when she worked on an individual basis or when she realized the dream of later becoming an employer herself. Thus, generally, she did not pay much attention to the conditions of work, however crushing they were, calculating that they would be temporary. However, the situation of young seamstresses who worked on their own account or did sewing work in the houses of others was "lamentable". Their daily working hours were twelve or more, rather than ten. Moreover, the work was intensive, in order to satisfy the customers and to ensure, as far as possible, constant employment. It is not surprising that the majority of seamstresses, when still very young, were consumptive, while many of them suffered from stomach or heart conditions resulting from their posture during endless hours of intensive work, beginning in childhood.⁶²

The craft industries in this field, which included a large number engaged in producing linen, children's clothing, embroidery and lace, as well as carpets and textiles woven by hand, operated in conditions that were harsh for

61 ASKI, Archive of the Workers' Association in garment industry of Piraeus (tailors and seamstresses). On the extension of the piece-work system in many sectors of manufacture and home industry during the interwar years, see Papastefanaki, *Εργασία*, pp. 249–58.

62 ASKI, Archive Maria Svolou, f. 1, "Εκθεση για τη γυναικεία απασχόληση" [1936], pp. 10–12.

the women employees. In the interwar period, no legislative provision was made for them, nor was there any thought of making such provision for home-based occupations. It was a known fact that it was to these sectors of work, particularly embroidery, lace-making, simple kinds of sewing, etc., that thousands of refugee housewives who had not worked in their places of origin had recourse. Similarly, as a large number of widows arrived without any source of income, they were forced to engage in occupations that were most accessible to them, and, of course, to offer their labour in what were known as women's occupations: embroidery, simple needlework, etc. It was precisely because of the existence of this population of workers and the unemployment due to the economic crisis that plagued these sectors in the interwar years, that the working conditions, which were poor to begin with, became even more wretched. Further, the minimal profit for endless hours of work by the woman who produced men's, women's and children's clothing for a starvation wage—if she had work—was absorbed by intermediaries between the working woman and the trader.⁶³ And daily wages fell to an incredible extent since many housewives engaged in these occupations as supplementary work and accepted whatever payment was offered.⁶⁴ At the same time, there was total neglect of the workforce on their work premises with respect to welfare measures such as public health, in spite of legal regulations.⁶⁵

7 Conclusion

A global technology that was gender-specific, that of the sewing machine, invented for manufacturers, home industries, and families, was embedded in multiple ways in different countries by North American and European firms. In Greece, a whole network of agents and traders offered the sewing machine to women customers with the promise of training, credit (in instalments), and possible employment offered by local garment manufacturers. Advertisements, publications, and educational institutions emphasized in various ways the need for every woman to have her own machine, to either repair clothes for the family or to earn a living. In the case of Greece, ownership of the sewing machine stressed the gender division of labour in families (of the working class and the middle class), both in cities and in the countryside. Furthermore, adoption of the sewing machine in home industries stressed the class relations

63 Ibid., p. 12.

64 Ibid., p. 13.

65 Ibid., p. 15.

between women of the working class and bourgeois women and men (who acted as clients and entrepreneurs). The technological modernization of the garment industry contributed to the feminization of the profession throughout Greece, while piece-work as the payment mode in home industries tended to extend the working day and to increase the yield from labour.

Focusing on the sewing machine as a tool mass-produced and mass-marketed throughout the globe, this study explores home work in Greece as a meeting point for paid and unpaid labour, and the ways in which this modern technology has been integrated and *localized* in the historical context of Greek society in the period from 1870s to 1930s. The diffusion and adoption of the global technology of the sewing machine in Greece constitutes a good example of the interconnections between the global and the local regarding the transformation of labour for men and women in home industries.

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