Introduction

Exactly 65 years ago, in 1947, Marga Klompé was selected as a delegate to visit the United Nations. Soon after, Klompé became Member of Parliament for the Roman Catholic Party, and in 1956 she was appointed the first female Minister in the Netherlands. Klompé, the daughter of a small entrepreneur, studied Chemistry and Physics in Utrecht, and worked as a teacher. During the Second World War, she was active in the resistance against the German occupiers. Her life was quite unusual, and not only because she became a prominent person in politics. Unlike most women in this period, Klompé pursued a paid career and did not marry—rather striking in a period when women’s labor force participation was at an all time low. Indeed, statistics show that about 65 years ago, the share of women active in the labor market was historically low in most Western European countries, and proportionally lowest in the Netherlands. Instead, the “male breadwinner model” was in full bloom at the time: the husband was the only member of the family active in market work, while the wife’s responsibility was to do unpaid reproductive tasks, such as cooking, cleaning and the bearing and raising of children.

However, this “male breadwinner” family-model was in truth an exception in history. Presumably, it had already existed as an ideal for much longer, but the historical evidence shows that it was realized among large segments of Western European societies only from in the late 19th century, and dominated until the mid-1960s approximately, after which more and more women across Europe (re-)entered the labor market. For many

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non-Western countries, it is questionable to what extent the model of the “male breadwinner” has actually ever been achieved for large segments of the population. But even in European countries, such as Belgium or Spain, many families remained dependent upon the earnings of women and children until well into the 20th century. Moreover, the concept of the “male breadwinner” is focused on work for wages, while other forms of remuneration were important as well, perhaps even more so for women and children. Undeniably, the economic contributions of women and children were very important, both in pre-industrial and in industrializing Europe throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, whether directly in terms of wage labor, or more indirectly, by bringing home income in kind, or by being active in their husbands’ and fathers’ enterprise.

Nevertheless, many historians have claimed that there was one society where the ideal of bourgeois domesticity—and therewith the model of the breadwinning husband and father—already pervaded most social echelons during the 17th century. In the prosperous Dutch Republic, the “first modern economy,” many women did not “have to” work, because of the relatively high standard of living compared to other Western European countries. This supposedly “constrained their work lives already in the 17th century”, and would explain the historically low labor force participation of Dutch women compared to many other countries.

In what follows I will show that the participation of Dutch women and children in gainful employment was not lower, and perhaps even higher than in surrounding countries such as England and Germany, at least until the second half of the 19th century. Insofar as we can make reliable measurements of women’s and children’s work activities, we may just have to conclude that they differed greatly according to geographic region and economic structure. Also, it is important to explore the relationship between the share of women and children working for wages and other forms of gainful employment. For the Northern Netherlands, I will try to estimate the involvement of women and children throughout the period under investigation, and make sketchy comparisons with England and

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