Introduction

Seafaring history has been all about men for a long time. The British historian Valerie Burton characterized this phenomenon as the ‘gender-blindness’ of maritime history.\(^1\) In recent years, however, the omnipresence of men is no longer self-evident, as historians become increasingly interested in the role of women in seafaring society.\(^2\) Research into early modern maritime communities has shown that women all over Europe and in North America had their place in the maritime economy.\(^3\) Especially in the fisheries, women played a prominent role in the industry ashore. In early modern northern Portugal, for example, women were engaged in financing fishing voyages, merchandising fish and in ship ownership. They also managed the household, taking care of day-to-day requirements, and arranging all business affairs while their husbands were at sea.

Although economic structures of fishing communities must have been more or less comparable in early modern Europe, one can not speak about a homogenous maritime sector. Differences in culture, law and in demographic, social and economic patterns influenced the position of women in maritime societies.\(^4\) According to Alice Clark, English women participated only in local trading and selling of fish, in contrast to Dutch women, who were also merchants, earning their money in long distance transactions.\(^5\) Clark, as well as many other historians, referred to the journals of foreigners travelling through the seventeenth century Dutch

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1 Burton (1991) 182.
3 Lorentz (1997); Fury (2001); Norling (2000).
5 Clark (1919) 219–220.
Italian and English writers were amazed by the independence of women and noticed that many women were alone for long periods of time, because their husbands were at sea. Indeed, seafaring was an important economic sector in the Netherlands. Around 1680, 50,000 people sailed out on ships leaving Dutch ports. In numerous villages and towns, the vast majority of men earned their living at sea. As a consequence, women had to manage the household without their husbands. In early modern Dutch society, where married women, according to the law, had to be represented by their husbands in public life, the position of sailors and fishermen’s wives must have been rather unusual. Certainly, women in seafaring communities were present in the public arena, but little is known about their social and economic position. Were they able to earn their own money, and arrange business affairs as their Portuguese counterparts did? And how did the absence of their husbands affect women’s position both in the household and in society?

Until recently the image of women in the Dutch Republic was rather impressionistic, but lately a lot of research has been dedicated to distinct groups of women, and to the position of women in specific geographical areas. The local and regional approach has proven to be successful in analyzing the social and economic position of women in early modern Dutch society. Following this approach, this paper examines the position of fishermen’s wives in two fishing communities in the area around the Maas (Maasmond) in the south of Holland. First, we will look at Ter Heijde, a coastal village of about 550 inhabitants, of which the largest part of the male working population was involved in the coastal fisheries. We will then look at Maassluis, a fishing town of about 3,000 inhabitants, where most men worked in the herring and cod fisheries. After a general survey of the two communities, attention is paid to male and female working populations and to changing labour patterns during the seventeenth century. The division of work, income, and power within the maritime household is analyzed, and the role of women in the local community is explored.

7 For example Guicciardini (1612); Howell (1622); Montague (1696).
8 De Wit (2005) 60.
10 For example Van de Pol (1996); Panhuysen (2000); Schmidt (2001); Van den Heuvel (2005); Schmidt (2005).