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A critique of approaches to ‘domestic work’: women, work and the preindustrial economy

What is work? The failure to consider the complexities of this apparently simple question has caused a great deal of difficulty for the history of women’s work, and it is argued here, for our understanding the nature of the preindustrial economy and economic development more generally. At the heart of this problem lie two overlapping definitions of work, only one of which would have been familiar to the preindustrial world. This is the definition which sees work in opposition to leisure or idleness.¹ However, this is not the definition commonly used now. Instead, in modern industrial societies work is what you do while ‘at work’ either as an employee or self-employed in order to earn an income. This is the work that counts as ‘labour force participation’, and contributes to ‘the economy’. Yet most people have another type of work in their lives: unpaid domestic work, which includes housework and the work of caring for family members. We tend to ignore this type of work, or consider it non-work,² despite the fact it is necessary, time-consuming, involves skill and physical exertion, and is essential

¹ See, for example, Michael Roberts, “‘Words they are Women, and Deeds they are Men’: Images of Work and Gender in Early Modern England”, in Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin (eds.), *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England* (London, 1985), 130-44. For a wider perspective, see Regenia Gagnier and John Dupré, ‘On Work and Idleness’, *Feminist Economics*, i (1995) and John Dupré and Regenia Gagnier, ‘A Brief History of Work’, *Journal of Economic Issues*, xxx (1996). Modern time-use studies divide time into work, leisure, and self-care: see International Classification of Activities for Time-Use Surveys (ICATUS), United Nations Statistics Division.

² As in discussions around the ‘work/life balance’.

for the functioning of the market economy. Unpaid housework and care work are also disproportionately undertaken by women.³

The division of work into labour force participation in the economy, and unpaid work in the home and for the family, is particularly problematic when applied to the preindustrial world. In the preindustrial economy most work was unpaid and centred around the maintenance and future survival of the family. To take the example of England in c.1500, the majority of households were rural and at least partly engaged in farming. Some of that farming was geared towards direct subsistence.⁴ Such households drew little distinction between money earning activities and those activities which saved money by providing directly for the needs of the family. When work was done, for instance milking a cow or growing a crop, it was not necessarily known if that work was going to contribute directly to the family's subsistence, or to income via sale.

The difficulties presented by a narrow conception of work are no less absent from the modern world. Estimates of the value of unpaid housework and care work as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) in modern economies vary from 19 per cent to 60 per cent.⁵

³ See for example Man Yee Kan, Oriell Sullivan and Jonathan Gershuny, 'Gender Convergence in Domestic Work: Discerning the Effects of Interactional and Institutional Barriers from Large Scale Data', *Sociology*, xlv (2011), 235-6; and Xiao-Yuan Dong and Xinli An, 'Gender Patterns and Value of Unpaid Care Work: Findings from China's First Large-Scale Time Use Survey', *Review of Income and Wealth*, lxi (2015), 545.

⁴ Christopher Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005), 173-210; Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy 1500-1850* (Cambridge, 1996), 10-62; Jane Whittle, 'Land and people', in Keith Wrightson (ed.), *A Social History of England 1500-1750* (Cambridge, 2017).

⁵ Therese Jefferson and John E. King, "'Never intended to be a Theory of Everything": Domestic Labor in Neoclassical and Marxian Economics', *Feminist Economics* vii (2001), 72; Dong and An, 'Gender patterns', 557. For higher estimates see United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report* (New York, 1995), 96-7.

The United Nations (UN) provides guidelines on national accounting (for calculating GDP) that are used across the globe. Criticisms of these guidelines have noted that two types of work are consistently underreported: women's work and subsistence orientated production. This is work that nonetheless generates wealth for the countries concerned. These are precisely the types of work that historians have had most difficulty documenting and describing, work that together made up the majority of the preindustrial economy. As a result historians have prioritised men's work and paid work. The UN has gradually revised their guidelines to correct some previous biases. Historians have yet to review or revise their definition of work in the preindustrial economy.

This article explores the problems created for the history of women's work by the application of a vague, and essentially modern,⁶ definition of work to the preindustrial economy. Further, the definition of work also determines how we understand the economy as a whole, and thus how we see economic change unfolding. Two key points are made: first, the history of housework and care work and their value to the economy have been overlooked and, secondly, that confusion between women's role in housework and home production in the preindustrial economy has consistently led to an underestimation of women's contribution to other areas of the economy such as agriculture, food processing and textile production. Men's work is always considered as part of the wider economy even when it is unpaid, but women's work is not.

The first section of the article examines approaches to domestic work in women's history, while the second section looks at approaches in economic history. It is concluded that the lack of a clear definition of types of work leads to an undervaluing of women's work and

⁶ 'Modern' in the sense of deriving from ideas that developed after 1750, as discussed below in section III.

distorts descriptions of change over time. The difficulties historians have experienced in conceptualising the nature of work have their roots in the theoretical structures adopted. For this reason the following two sections explore conceptual approaches to women's work in the social sciences, and particularly in economics. Section three looks at approaches to housework and care work in classical and neoclassical economics and also in feminist theories of the 1970s, arguing that all share common weaknesses. Section four introduces critiques of these approaches from development economics and more recent feminist theories, most of which are much less well known to historians, arguing that they offer a constructive alternative approach. Section five explores the application of these alternative approaches to the preindustrial economy, arguing that housework and care work have a more complex history than is often assumed. The conclusion suggests a new conceptual framework, which sees housework and care work as 'subsistence services', and sets out a research agenda for historians. Throughout the article historical examples are taken from late medieval and early modern England, but the implications of the issues raised are much wider.

Given that this discussion is concerned primarily with the definition of types of work, it is essential to be clear about the definitions used from the beginning. Throughout the article 'housework' refers to cleaning the house and its contents (laundry, washing-up, sweeping etc.), cooking (in the sense of meal preparation) and collecting water to carry out those activities. 'Care work' refers to the care of babies and children (including basic education), the sick, elderly and others in need of special care. Production for own use or subsistence refers to production of goods and services which are consumed by the same household and do not enter the market. Paid work refers to all work that is performed in return for a payment in cash or kind. Pre-industrial refers to the economies and time-periods in which the primary sector (largely agriculture) is the dominant form of employment, while 'modern industrial'

refers to the economies and time periods in which industrial and service sector employment dominate.

I: Approaches in Women's History

The history of women's work in preindustrial England was pioneered by Alice Clark, Eileen Power and Ivy Pinchbeck in the early twentieth century.⁷ However, these studies remained poorly integrated into mainstream economic history, and little further research was conducted on women's work until the influence of the second wave of feminism filtered into academic history in the late 1970s and 1980s. The late 1980s and 1990s saw the publication of a number of influential surveys on the topic, while the twenty-first century has seen the advent of innovative approaches to women's work that have significantly advanced our knowledge. This section examines one important and influential study from each of these phases, Alice Clark's *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919); Bridget Hill's *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (1989); and Marjorie K. McIntosh's *Working Women in English Society 1300-1620* (2005), and looks at how they approach 'domestic work', housework and care work. Each of these studies illustrates a different approach, applying different definitions of work. All three studies have significant strengths, but their cumulative effect is confusion over the definition of work and of women's overall contribution to the economy.

In particular, all of these historians describe some aspects of women's work as 'domestic'. What does this actually mean? Taken literally, 'domestic' means relating to the

⁷ Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1919); Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (London, 1924) and *Medieval Women* (published posthumously ed. M.M. Postan, Cambridge, 1975); Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers in the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850* (London, 1930).

house; but in describing work in preindustrial households, the term ‘domestic’ is used in three main ways. It distinguishes:

- (1) a set of tasks;
- (2) the location of work;
- (3) the market-orientation of work.

So domestic work sometimes means housework and care work (not all of which was done within the house); it sometimes means work done within the house (which might be income-generating work or waged work); and it sometimes means work for direct household use or subsistence (which might be done by paid workers such as servants and does not equate with modern housework). This is confusing, especially when meanings merge into one another, making it hard to discern what precisely is meant. Terms such as ‘housework’ and ‘family economy’ are occasionally used as alternatives to domestic work, but are also used in a variety of ways by different historians. These points are best illustrated by looking carefully at examples from the three chosen works.

Alice Clark largely excluded discussion of unpaid housework and care work from her classic study of women’s work, although she occasionally mentions ‘what we now call domestic work’, meaning housework and childcare, and interestingly argues that this was carried out by ‘young girls’ (daughters or female servants) in the early modern period, leaving the housewife free to conduct ‘family industry’ which generated an income. Clark did, however, propose a conceptual scheme for identifying different types of work and change over time. She argued that there were three main types of work or forms of production: ‘domestic industry’, ‘family industry’ and ‘capitalistic industry’. For Clark, ‘domestic industry’ was production for own use. She argued this was conducted alongside ‘family industry’, which was production within the home of goods for sale. Both are

distinguished from ‘capitalistic industry’, in which workers did not own the means of production and were paid an individual wage. She notes that ‘domestic industry and family industry existed side by side’, but ‘were gradually supplanted by capitalistic industry’ during the late medieval and early modern period.⁸ Clark’s desire to stress the extensive contribution women made to the economy via home production in the era before industrialisation is understandable in the context of early twentieth century feminism. However, her failure to consider housework and care work as part of women’s economic contribution, or to suggest how production for use and for the market within particular households might be distinguished from each other, created a problematic legacy for future historians. Her conceptual scheme of different types of work has not been adopted by other researchers, in part because the terms ‘domestic industry’ and ‘family industry’ are open to confusion.

Bridget Hill’s *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (1989) offers a thorough updating of research on the types of women’s work discussed by Clark and Pinchbeck earlier in the century, with the addition of chapters on housework and domestic service. It was the first of several important new overviews of women’s work in early modern England published in the late 1980s and 1990s.⁹ The extent of semantic confusion in women’s history is demonstrated by the fact Hill, in contrast to Clark, uses ‘domestic industry’ to mean production of textiles in the home for an international market and housework to mean production for subsistence as well as cooking and cleaning. Oddly, care work, including childcare, is not discussed at all, except for a brief mention of paid work

⁸ Clark, *Working Life*, 6-8, 11.

⁹ Other key works are Anne Laurence, *Women in England 1500-1760: A Social History* (London, 1994); Pamela Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism: Working Women in the English Economy, 1700-1850* (Basingstoke, 1996); Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550-1720* (Oxford, 1998).

in nursing.¹⁰ Hill produces a rich and nuanced picture of women's lives, and her conception of housework takes its cue from the early modern idea of 'housewifery' which included gardening, dairying, textile production, brewing, and medical care as well as cooking and cleaning; although it should be noted that the early modern writers expected women to market some of these products, while Hill excludes production for sale.¹¹ The strengths and weaknesses of her approach are illustrated by the chapter on housework, which offers a detailed and historically specific description of cleaning and water-collection, but introduces additional confusion about how housework should be defined. Despite beginning with a definition that excludes all production for the market, she then notes that it is virtually impossible to separate such work from production for own use 'if "housework" is work done within the home', which also implies a spatial definition.¹²

Marjorie McIntosh's *Working Women in English Society 1300-1620* (2005) shines the spotlight on an earlier period, building on the work of medieval historians such as Judith Bennett and Mavis Mate,¹³ but adding a significant body of her own research, drawn from the manorial court rolls of small towns and the records of the equity courts. Like Clark, she concentrates on the market economy, examining paid work and work that produced goods

¹⁰ Bridget Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1989), 11-25, 104, 256-7.

¹¹ Gervase Markham, *The English Housewife* ed. Michael R. Best (Montreal & Kingston, 1985); Jane Whittle, 'Housewives and Servants in Rural England, 1440-1650: Evidence of Women's Work from Probate Documents', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th ser., xv (2005), 61-8.

¹² Hill, *Women, Work*, 104, 119.

¹³ Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (Oxford, 1987); Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (Oxford, 1996); Mavis E. Mate, *Daughters, Wives and Widows after the Black Death: Women in Sussex, 1350-1535* (Woodbridge, 1998); Mavis E. Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society* (Cambridge, 1999).

and services for sale. She is particularly strong on the commercial service economy, which was largely ignored by Clark, but has very little to say about agriculture, despite its ubiquity in the period. Although she excludes unpaid housework and care work from her remit, McIntosh does refer to women's role carrying out unpaid 'domestic tasks' at several points in her study. She notes that in prescriptive texts, 'women were encouraged to remain within the domestic context, busily employed in their household labors, supporting others'; that 'domestic tasks were seen as naturally female'; and that women 'might try to generate income by transferring what they had previously done within the domestic setting into a for-pay context', referring to boarding, healthcare, sex work and the production of food, drink and cloth for sale. She also notes that 'few households hired women to do domestic tasks for these were normally performed by female members of the family or residential servants'.¹⁴ In these statements McIntosh implies elements of all three definitions of domestic work outlined above. The 'domestic tasks' that were seen as 'naturally female' seems to refer to a type of work, housework and care work, although other elements of preindustrial housewifery such as food processing, textile production and the production of medicines are also included. The encouragement to remain within the 'domestic context' suggests the spatial location of work within the house. The contrast between work done in a 'domestic setting' and that done for pay implies that women's domestic work is normally for direct use, and refers the market/non-market divide. So while McIntosh provides a valuable and meticulously evidenced account of women's work in the commercial economy, she also implies that women's work was normally concerned with housework and care work, located in the home,

¹⁴ Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society 1300-1650* (Cambridge, 2005), 4, 39, 45, 72, 84.

and unconnected to the market – reinforcing the stereotypical image of women’s work, for which she offers little explicit evidence.

Although, as we have seen, women’s history has greatly enriched our understanding of the variety of women’s work that existed in the preindustrial economy, it has failed to establish a clear terminology with which to describe that work. Given that one of the features of a preindustrial economy is that most work was located in and around the home,¹⁵ describing women’s work as ‘domestic’ or ‘housework’ does not in itself distinguish a type of work unless additional details are offered. However, the more significant issues arise implicitly from the approaches taken and lead to the undervaluation of women’s work for the economy as a whole. First, studies of women’s work that have ignored women’s unpaid housework and care work for their families show that women worked in many sectors of the economy, but rarely to the same extent as men. By ignoring elements of women’s work, the overall picture appears to be one in which women worked less than men. Yet early modern commentators imply, and modern time-use studies show, that women work longer hours than men because of the significant quantities of housework and care work they do as well as other types of work. Second, women’s non-market work is often described as ‘domestic’ but never men’s work. When men grew crops to feed their families, or did maintenance work on the house and farm buildings, they are described as engaging in agriculture or building work, not domestic work. The terms used to describe men’s work in the preindustrial economy imply that their work was part of the wider economy. And of course, subsistence agriculture was an important part of the preindustrial economy – but if we apply this standard to men’s work why is women’s work treated differently? The failure to identify or resolve difficulties arising

¹⁵ For more detailed discussion see Jane Whittle, ‘The House as a Place of Work in Early Modern Rural England’, *Home Cultures*, viii (2011); Jane Whittle, ‘Home and Work’ in Amanda Flather (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Home: The Renaissance 1450-1650*, (London, forthcoming).

from an implicitly gendered definition of work are also apparent in economic history, where the changes in paid work and ‘labour force participation’ are contrasted with the supposedly unchanging nature of housework and care work.

II Approaches in Economic History

After decades of ignoring women’s contribution to the historical economy, economic historians have, since the mid-1990s, begun to integrate women’s work into accounts of economic change over time. Two issues related to the nature of ‘domestic work’ have played a crucial role in recent theories about the early modern economy. One is the consequence of time spent on unpaid housework and care work for women’s ability to perform paid work and generate income. The second is the balance between subsistence-orientated work and market-orientated work, and how this changed over time. The first is cited as an explanation of the gender pay gap, and the second is crucial in tracking the path of economic development. This section focuses on three influential studies, one from each of the last three decades; it examines how they have approached housework and care work, and the misunderstandings which have arisen as a result. It looks in turn at the role of ‘household duties’ in Joyce Burnette’s classic article on ‘the female-male wage gap during the industrial revolution’ (1997); Jan de Vries’s discussion of housework, care work and women’s changing participation in market-orientated work over time in *The Industrious Revolution* (2008); and estimates of women’s contribution to the preindustrial economy provided by Stephen Broadberry et al. in *British Economic Growth 1270-1870* (2015).

In her study of the gender pay gap Joyce Burnette argued that the majority of women received lower wages than men not because of customary discrimination, but because they were less productive. The two main reasons for this were women’s lesser physical strength

and the fact they worked shorter hours than men.¹⁶ She notes that ‘the average woman, having numerous household duties, spent fewer hours in market work than the average man’. Evidence of female day labourers in agriculture working shorter hours than men comes largely from early nineteenth-century Parliamentary reports. These record that while men worked from 6am to 6pm, women’s hours ranged from eight to twelve hours a day, and averaged 9.66 hours.¹⁷ For the eighteenth century Burnette cites the work of Elizabeth Gilboy, whose drew evidence from Tuke’s *General View of Agriculture in the North Riding of Yorkshire* (1794). This also states that men worked ‘in most places from six to six’ although ‘in others, from seven to five’, and notes that ‘women begin their work at eight in the morning, and continue to the same hour in the evening as the men.’¹⁸ Although specific to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Burnette’s arguments have been applied to medieval England by John Hatcher. He suggests that one explanation for female labourers’ lower pay in the late fourteenth century was that their productivity was ‘likely to have been constricted by the need to care for their families and to work in the house’, leaving ‘them with fewer hours in the fields each day’.¹⁹

As yet, no evidence of female agricultural labourers working a shorter day than male labourers has been uncovered for any period before the 1790s. We might question the logic of assuming that patterns of work observed for 1790-1850, a period of acute rural poverty,

¹⁶ Occupational crowding was also a factor.

¹⁷ Joyce Burnette, ‘An Investigation of the Female-Male Wage Gap during the Industrial Revolution in Britain’, *Economic History Review*, 1 (1997), 262-3, 268-9.

¹⁸ Elizabeth W. Gilboy, ‘Labour at Thornborough: An Eighteenth-Century Estate’ *Economic History Review*, iii (1932), 396; John Tuke, *General View of Agriculture in the North Riding of Yorkshire* (London, 1794), 78-9.

¹⁹ John Hatcher, ‘Debate: Women’s Work Reconsidered: Gender and Wage Differentiation in Late Medieval England’, *Past and Present* clxxiii (2001), 194.

underemployment and landlessness, were also present in earlier periods. In the centuries from 1350-1700 many agricultural labourers possessed their own land and livestock. Male labourers, as well as female labourers, would have had reason to spend time ‘at home’ working on their own farms and businesses before starting a day of paid work, or to work for wages some days but not others. Nor should we assume that housework and care work were ‘perpetual female chores’ as Hatcher does, implying they changed little over time.²⁰ The evidence that exists suggests that this type of work did change over time, both as a result of changes in the material culture and technology of the home, and as a result of social expectations and ideology. Modern evidence demonstrates that the amount of time spent on housework and care work varies significantly between countries and over time.

Jan de Vries’s *The Industrious Revolution* pioneers the integration of gendered work patterns into an overarching account of economic change in north-west Europe between 1650 and the present day. The study ‘is concerned with the interaction of the market economy and the family-based household’. De Vries deploys Gary Becker’s New Household Economics to conceptualise unpaid housework and care work undertaken by women.²¹ In this model, discussed in more detail in the next section, housework is understood as ‘productive consumption’ which prepares goods for use within the home. De Vries also makes an important argument that married women’s participation in market-orientated work changed over time, increasing in the eighteenth century and falling after 1850.

²⁰ Hatcher, ‘Debate’, 194.

²¹ Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2008), 7, 36.

Although women's increased occupation with unpaid housework and care work after 1850 is explored at some length by de Vries,²² the issue of what married women were doing before they increased their market-orientated work in the eighteenth century is not discussed in any detail. This omission is compounded by the use of Becker's model, which envisages a modern American family household, rather than a historical one, and thus does not consider subsistence production. De Vries argues that women increased their participation in market-orientated work more than men in the eighteenth century. What exactly were women doing before this time? He hints that 'proto-industry was of particular importance in redirecting the labor of women and children toward the market and in making effective market use of labor trapped in idleness and underemployment by the seasonal constraints of agriculture'.²³ But this scenario is not explored in any depth. The difficulty is that de Vries has taken an idea of women as the 'reserve army of labour' from the modern industrial world, and applied it to the preindustrial economy. But this model only makes sense if women's default work-pattern is unpaid housework and care work, and there is no evidence that this was the case in the preindustrial economy. As discussed in section V below, evidence suggests that women were already heavily involved in the commercial economy by 1600.

British Economic Growth 1270-1870 by Stephen Broadberry et al. estimates GDP across six centuries, five of which lie in the preindustrial period. In a discussion of labour productivity, Broadberry and his co-authors include estimates of women's contribution to the economy, and the distribution of female workers between the primary (mostly agriculture), secondary (manufacturing) and tertiary (service) sectors. In doing so they state that 'females

²² De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, 186-237. For an alternative view see Jane Humphries and Carmen Sarasúa, 'Off the Record: Reconstructing Women's Labor Force Participation in the European Past', *Feminist Economics* xviii (2012).

²³ De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, 97, 107-9.

are assumed to have worked 30 per cent of the total number of days in the economy' and note that 'on a full-time equivalent basis, it seems highly unlikely that women could have worked much more than 30 per cent of total days worked, given the unequal distribution of child-rearing and household duties in pre-modern times'.²⁴ The assumption of women's 30 per cent contribution to the economy is applied across the period to each of the estimates of occupational structure in 1381, 1522, 1688, and 1759.

These statements require some unpacking before their full meaning can be understood. Broadberry et al. are interested in 'participation rates', or labour force participation, which record the proportion of people engaged in paid or income generating work, as opposed to unpaid housework and care work, or non-work activities. Their figure of 30 per cent is calculated from data provided in a provisional working paper by Leigh Shaw-Taylor, who states that participation rates were 43.0 per cent for women and 97.1 per cent for men in the census returns of 1851. However, Shaw-Taylor's 'participation rates' relate to the proportion of women and men for whom occupations are recorded in the census returns, not labour force participation rates. The census is known to significantly under-record women's work and aware of its extensive deficiencies, Shaw-Taylor notes, 'whether the figures for the period 1851-71 are broadly reliable remains a moot point which requires much further exploration'.²⁵ Broadberry et al. then translate these figures into an assumption that women provided 30 per cent of days worked in the economy, as opposed to men's 70 per cent ($43 + 97 = 140$, of which 97 is 69% and 43 is 31%, rounded to 70% and 30%). Thus questionable figures from 1851 are applied across a period of almost five hundred years.

²⁴ Stephen Broadberry *et al.*, *British Economic Growth 1270-1870* (Cambridge, 2015), 328.

²⁵ Leigh Shaw-Taylor, 'The Occupational Structure of England and Wales, c.1750-1911', Occupations Project Paper 19, Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, p.16. On underreporting see Humphries and Sarasúa, 'Off the Record', 44-50.

The concept of 'labour force participation' and 'the economy' used by Broadberry et al. follows that of the UN and International Labour Organisation (ILO) and excludes unpaid housework and care work. As a result, it is possible to compare their estimates for preindustrial England with those produced by time-use studies since the 1970s, as shown in Table 1 below and discussed in section IV. These comparisons suggest that it is the estimates for men's work which are most obviously out of line: in no region surveyed since the 1970s do men spend more than 85% of their work time on work that falls within GDP remit. Women's work is typically (although not always) higher than the 30 per cent estimated for preindustrial England. More importantly, time-use studies show that there is considerable variation in women's work patterns despite the fact women bear primary responsibility for housework and care work in all the countries surveyed. Thus the explanation of women's primary responsibility for housework and care work in preindustrial England cannot be used to justify a static estimate of 30 per cent participation in other areas of work across such a long period.

So while economic history has increasingly turned its attention to women's work as well as men's, a number of problems have arisen as a result. The assumption that women's role in housework and care work was unchanging over time in form and time-use is erroneous, as there is considerable evidence that this was not the case. Women's economic contribution also seems to be consistently underestimated and men's contribution overestimated. This unbalanced approach is partly a result of ignorance about preindustrial housework and care work, but also stems from an under-estimation of women's contribution to production within the household economy, which is often conceived as housework or domestic work, while men's is not. The definition of 'the economy' is not straightforward, and this causes serious problems when applying neoclassical economic models to past societies.

III Concepts behind existing approaches

The difficulties experienced by historians in conceptualising unpaid housework and care work, and valuing women's contribution to the preindustrial economy, have their roots in the theoretical structures adopted, implicitly or explicitly, to analyse the nature of work.²⁶ This section explores and critiques three widely used approaches to unpaid housework and care work and to modelling the economy: Gary Becker's New Household Economics; the feminist concepts of social reproduction and domestic labour; and definitions of the economy implicit in the development of national income accounting and calculations of GDP.

From the 1960s onwards an approach described as the New Household Economics was developed by a group of economists at Columbia and Chicago Universities, of whom Gary Becker was the most prominent, applying a rational choice approach to decision making within the family.²⁷ In his classic 1965 article on 'a theory of the allocation of time', Becker points out that individuals choose not just between paid work and leisure, but also whether to spend time on 'productive consumption' within the household. 'Productive consumption' involves not just purchasing goods, but the work needed to make those goods available for use, such as preparing meals and doing laundry. In addition, he notes that choices about how to spend time are made jointly by members of households, leading to some specialising in 'market activities' and others in 'consumption activities'.²⁸ These ideas are developed further in *A Treatise on the Family* (1981). Here Becker argues that the increased returns resulting

²⁶ Jefferson and King review these approaches in "“Never intended”".

²⁷ Gary S. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), p.ix. See also Shoshana Grossbard-Shechtman, 'The New Home Economics at Columbia and Chicago', *Feminist Economics* vii (2001).

²⁸ Gary S. Becker, 'A Theory of the Allocation of Time' *Economic Journal* lxxv (1965), esp. p.512. See also de Vries's discussion of these ideas: *The Industrious Revolution*, 25-31.

from specialisation mean that ‘even if a husband and wife were intrinsically identical, they gain from a division of labor between market and household activities’. However, men and women are not identical, because of the ‘advantages of women in the birth and rearing of children’, which lead women to specialize in household activities. For Becker, women’s specialisation in unpaid household work leads to their low pay in the market economy. He states that ‘wage rates are lower for women at least partly because they invest less than men in market human capital’, while at the same time investing ‘more than men in household capital.’²⁹ In other words, small differences between men and women, such as women’s biological role in child-bearing, are magnified by the advantages of specialising in the two different types of work required to support the household and family, with profound consequences for women’s participation in the market economy.

Some of Becker’s ideas are useful, if not enormously original. He advocates costing time as well as the purchase of goods in household budgets and sees housework as a form of work.³⁰ However, Becker has been strongly criticised by feminists and others for his biological determinism, for suggesting that women’s low wages result from women’s own failings in developing their ‘market human capital’, for ignoring unequal power relationships within households that affect decision making, and for concluding that an arrangement in which married men earn an income and married women stay at home doing housework and care work, which historians refer to as the male-breadwinner household, is the most economically efficient and beneficial way for married couples to organise their lives.³¹

²⁹ Becker, *Treatise*, 3-4 and chapter 2, esp. p.42.

³⁰ Becker, ‘Theory’, 494, 496, 503-4.

³¹ See for instance Robert A. Pollak, ‘A Transaction Cost Approach to Families and Households’, *Journal of Economic Literature* xxiii (1985); Ester Boserup, ‘Inequality between the Sexes’ in *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, ed. John Eatwell, Murray Milgate and Peter Newman, (New

Quite apart from these difficulties, a major problem with Becker's approach is that it is ahistorical and mono-cultural. Becker assumes that his model is supported by the fact the male breadwinner family has dominated across history and in all societies. He notes that 'women have traditionally relied on men for the provision of food, shelter and protection, and men have traditionally relied on women for the bearing and rearing of children and the maintenance of the home'; and that 'married women, ... have traditionally devoted most of their time to childbearing and other domestic activities, and married men, ... have hunted, soldiered, farmed and engaged in other "market" activities'.³² These statements are simply not true: in almost all societies other than some sections of modern industrial society, women have contributed significantly to the production and marketing of goods, as well as undertaking housework and care work. Becker's revelation that useful production can take place in the home is hardly a revelation for those who study preindustrial or nonindustrial societies. Yet in Becker's scheme 'household activities' are always ill-defined housework and care work tasks, ignoring subsistence production and market work in the home; and 'productive consumption' is a special type of work set apart from the rest of the economy. This is not an adequate model for looking at forms of work in nonindustrial societies where the home was the main workplace or for explaining change over time.

York, 1987); Nancy Folbre and Heidi Hartmann, 'The Rhetoric of Self-Interest: Ideology and Gender in Economic Theory' in Arjo Klamer, Donald N. McCloskey and Robert M. Solow (eds.), *The Consequences of Economic Rhetoric*, ed., (Cambridge, 1988); Antonella Picchio, *Social Reproduction: The Political Economy of the Labour Market* (Cambridge, 1992), 106-10; Barbara Bergmann, 'Becker's Theory of the Family: Preposterous Conclusions', *Feminist Economics* i (1995); Francis Woolley, 'Getting the Better of Becker', *Feminist Economics* ii (1996); Elizabeth Katz, 'The Intra-Household Economics of Voice and Exit', *Feminist Economics* iii (1997).

³² Becker, *Treatise*, 30, 43.

At the other end of the ideological spectrum, the theorisation of women's unpaid housework and care work became one of the central intellectual projects of the second wave of feminism in the 1970s.³³ These debates developed largely in reaction to Marxist theory, which like other forms of classical economics neglected the issue of women's unpaid work in the home. Discussions revolved around two concepts, 'social reproduction' and 'domestic labour', both of which suffered from problems of definition. Social reproduction has three competing and overlapping definitions. The first is human or biological reproduction, including the cultural practices that surrounded the bearing and early care of children; the second refers to how a particular mode of production, as conceived in Marxist theory, was reproduced over time and thus continued in existence; and the third, which became the focus of feminist discussion, is the daily reproduction of the labour force – that is how workers were cared for at home in such a way that they were able to perform their paid work.³⁴ Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner note that by 'viewing social reproduction as work, feminists have argued that in capitalist societies, the unpaid work of women converts wages into means of subsistence'.³⁵ This form of work is also referred to as 'domestic labour', and defined in a similar manner. For instance, Meg Luxton describes women's domestic labour as how men's wages under capitalism are turned into men's 'capacity to work again'.³⁶

³³ Maxine Molyneux, 'Beyond the Domestic Labour Debate' *New Left Review* cxvi (1979); Wally Secombe, 'Reflections on the Domestic Labour Debate and Prospects for Marxist-Feminist Synthesis' in Roberta Hamilton and Michele Barrett (eds.), *The Politics of Diversity* (London, 1986).

³⁴ Felicity Edholm, Olivia Harris and Kate Young, 'Conceptualising Women' *Critique of Anthropology* iii:9/10 (1977), 105-11.

³⁵ Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner, 'Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives', *Annual Review of Sociology*, xv (1989), 383. They also offer a helpful definition of social reproduction as housework and care work on 382-3.

³⁶ Meg Luxton, 'Feminist Political Economy in Canada and the Politics of Social Reproduction' in Kate Bezanson and Meg Luxton (eds.), *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges*

There are many strengths to this approach: the nature of women's unpaid work in modern industrial society is clearly articulated, the importance of that work to the wider economy is stressed, as well as the male wage-worker's dependence on it, and the significant consequences of unpaid work for women's lives and involvement in paid work are explored. But there are problems with applying this approach to the preindustrial economy. Social reproduction and unpaid domestic labour as discussed in the feminist literature are seen as specific to capitalism, and the critique of domestic labour is part of a wider critique of the capitalist system. It is the ubiquity of paid labour in the industrial economy that makes women's unpaid housework and care work seem special. What is perhaps most striking is that approaches from opposite ends of the ideological spectrum share common weaknesses. Becker's 'productive consumption' and the feminist concept of 'social reproduction' both set unpaid work within the home apart from other types of work and place it outside the economy; both offer an historically specific formulation that only makes sense in industrial economies where wage labour is the dominant form of making a living.

How did housework and care work come to be placed outside of the economy? Early economic thought, from Xenophon in ancient Greece, to the political arithmetic of William Petty and Gregory King in the late seventeenth century, perceived the economy as an agglomeration of households, each with its own wealth, economy and system of management. This formulation did not exclude unpaid work, or women's contribution. Yet the classical economists of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, all excluded unpaid housework and care

Neo-Liberalism (Montreal and Kingston, 2006), 33; see also the definitions offered by Susan Himmelweit and Simon Mohun in, 'Domestic Labor and Capital', *Cambridge Journal of Economics* i (1977), 18-19, 28.

work from their models of the economy.³⁷ In part, this was because of how they approached the service sector. Smith argued that only material goods produced, and not services, should form part of national accounting, an approach followed by Ricardo, Mill and Marx.³⁸

In the late nineteenth century, Alfred Marshall put the service sector back into the idea of the economy, and offered a capacious definition of economics as the study of ‘mankind in the ordinary business of life ... [which] examines that part of individual and social action which is most closely connected with the attainment and with the use of the material requisites of wellbeing’. This definition offers no logical exclusion of unpaid housework and care work. But Marshall explicitly excluded such work from the calculation of national income, stating that ‘the services which a person renders to himself, and those which he renders gratuitously to members of his family or friends’ were not to be included. Marshall recognised the contradiction this created with regard to the work of domestic servants and unpaid housework. He concluded that the ‘work of domestic servants is always classed as “labour” in the technical sense’, and noted that ‘there is some inconsistency in omitting the heavy domestic work which is done by women and other members of the household, where no servants are kept’, but went no further in exploring this.³⁹

Marshall’s follower, A. C. Pigou did, however, comment on this issue. In a chapter exploring the nature of national income, Pigou noted a number of ‘violent paradoxes’ caused by measuring only those goods and services that were sold for money. He observes that ‘the

³⁷ Michèle A. Pujol, *Feminism and Anti-Feminism in Early Economic Thought* (Cheltenham, 1992); Katrine Marçal, *Who Cooked Adam Smith’s Dinner? A Story about Women and Economics* (London, 2015).

³⁸ J. W. Kendrick, ‘The Historical Development of National Accounts’, *History of Political Economy*, ii (1970), esp.287-8.

³⁹ Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics: An Introductory Volume* (8th edn, London, 1920), (1st edn 1890), 1, 79-80, 524, 564, 685; Pujol, *Feminism*, 122, 126, 133-4.

bought and unbought kinds do not differ from one another in any fundamental respect'; for instance, the food produced by a farmer and sold on the market was the same as food a farmer produced and used for his family's own consumption. Likewise, he notes that while women's paid work is included, that which is 'rendered by mothers and wives gratuitously to their own families' is not: as a result 'if a man marries his housekeeper or his cook, the national dividend is diminished.' Nonetheless Pigou argued that unpaid services could not be measured, and therefore it was necessary to exclude them for practical reasons. After the Second World War, this form of national income accounting was adopted by the United Nations. Part of the early UN remit was to provide 'technical assistance to member countries for the development of economic accounts', allowing countries across the globe to produce similar, comparable accounts measuring GDP.⁴⁰ As a result the exclusion of unpaid housework and care work from the economy effectively became a global ideology.

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that the treatment of unpaid housework and care work as 'non-work' has been promulgated in modern economic theory from the writings of Adam Smith onwards, while our examination of approaches in women's history and economic history shows the degree to which these assumptions have gone unquestioned amongst historians. Yet alternative perspectives within economics, especially from development economics, do exist, and are explored in the next section.

IV: Alternative conceptual approaches

There is no logical reason for excluding unpaid housework and care work from our conception of work or the economy. Such work is necessary to the rest of the economy, and does not differ substantially from other forms of work. Contrary to Pigou's assertions, it can

⁴⁰ A. C. Pigou, *The Economics of Welfare* (2nd edn, London, 1924) (1st edn 1920), 31-2, 34; Pujol, *Feminism*, 169-70; Kendrick, 'Historical Development', 304-5, 310.

be measured and assigned a monetary value. These are the conclusions of a growing critique of the UN's definition of the economy that has emerged since the 1970s. This is not simply a matter of academic debate; the failure to consider the nature of this work has been shown to prejudice economic policy against women's interests. As historians, we should also consider the consequences of the way we understand women's work, as it has significant implications for how 'traditional' gender roles are understood. This section briefly surveys the criticisms levelled at the UN's system of national accounts (SNA), before examining how the UN has responded to these concerns. It then explores the alternative conceptual approaches and methodologies, looking in particular at the ideas of the economist Margaret Reid and the use of time-use surveys to collect data.

Ester Boserup in *Women's Role in Economic Development* notes that 'the subsistence activities usually omitted from statistics of production and incomes are largely women's work'. Barbara Rogers convincingly argues that development agencies such as the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) and World Bank imposed western ideas about women's exclusion from the economy on the developing world. Another development economist, Lourdes Beneria, shows how the exclusion of women's unpaid work from the UN's definition of production (and thus GDP) made women invisible to planners; while Marilyn Waring demonstrates how the failure to assign monetary value to women's housework and care work in industrial societies has led to a parallel failure to create policies addressing women's burden of unpaid work. These publications are powerful, often angry, but carefully argued and evidenced pieces of research

with far-reaching implications.⁴¹ Other than Boserup, who largely skirted the issue of unpaid housework and care work, they are largely unknown to historians of women's work.

What is striking about these studies is the similarity between the issues they raise, and those observed in this article with regard to the history of the preindustrial economy. They note the lack of curiosity by development planners and governments about the nature of women's unpaid work; the assumption that women are primarily (or should primarily be) engaged in unpaid housework and care work for their families, combined with assumptions that such work changes little over time, and is extraneous to the economy; they observe the running together of women's housework and care work with their home production activities for subsistence and for the market, so as to ignore all three types of work when they are conducted by women; and the parallel assumption that men's work, whether for subsistence or the market is important and should be measured and valued.

The UN has gradually reacted to these criticisms.⁴² The global system of national accounts (SNA) first introduced in 1953, has undergone major revisions in 1968, 1993 and 2008. The issue of the 'production boundary', which determines which activities fall within the remit of the national accounts and therefore 'the economy', was considered in the

⁴¹ Boserup, *Women's Role*, 163; Barbara Rogers, *The Domestication of Women: Discrimination in Developing Societies* (London, 1980); Lourdes Benería, 'Conceptualizing the Labor Force: The Underestimation of Women's Economic Activities', *Journal of Development Studies*, xvii:3 (1981); Marilyn Waring, *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth* (Toronto, 1999), (1st edn 1988).

⁴² Lourdes Benería, 'Accounting for Women's Work: The Progress of Two Decades', *World Development* xx (1992); Marilyn Waring, 'Introduction to the Second Edition', in Waring, *Counting for Nothing*, pp.xix-li; Rania Antonopoulos and Indira Hirway, *Unpaid Work and the Economy: Gender, Time Use and Poverty in Developing Countries* (Basingstoke, 2010); Caroline Saunders and Paul Dalziel, 'Twenty-Five Years of Counting for Nothing: Waring's Critique of National Accounts', *Feminist Economics* xxiii (2017).

discussions leading up to the 1993 and 2008 revisions. It is important to note that the contention here is not the market/non market divide, as subsistence agriculture has always been acknowledged within the SNA, and its value estimated.⁴³ However, coverage of other forms of subsistence production commonly undertaken by women, such as textile manufacture and food processing has been less consistent.⁴⁴ For the first time, the revised 1993 SNA offered a clear definition of ‘productive activities’ which included unpaid household and care work. These were logically understood as the production of services by households for own use (or subsistence services). Nonetheless, while unpaid services were acknowledged as productive, they were still excluded from the calculation of GDP. The SNA included all production of goods for own use within the production boundary but continued to exclude ‘all production of services for own final consumption within households (except for the services produced by employing paid domestic staff...).’ This position was described as ‘a compromise, but a deliberate one that takes into account the needs of most of our users.’⁴⁵ The 2008 SNA retained this position, but suggested that supplementary satellite accounts could be compiled using time-use surveys to measure unpaid household activity, including housework and care work.⁴⁶

So while the UN has continued to exclude unpaid housework and care work from the SNA, it has acknowledged that unpaid housework and care work are ‘productive in an economic sense’. This requires a clear definition that separates such work from other types of activities. The relevant paragraph in the 1993 SNA states:

⁴³ UN, *A System of National Accounts and Supporting Tables* (New York, 1953), 4-5.

⁴⁴ Derek W. Blades, ‘Subsistence Activities in the National Accounts of Developing Countries with Special Reference to Latin America’, *Review of Income and Wealth* xxi (1975), esp. 393-5.

⁴⁵ UN, *System of National Accounts 1993* (Brussels/Luxembourg, New York, Paris, Washington D.C., 1993), 5-6, 148-51.

⁴⁶ UN, *System of National Accounts 2008* (New York, 2009), 461-7, 542.

While production processes that produce goods can be identified without difficulty, it is not always so easy to distinguish the production of services from other activities that may be both important and beneficial. Activities that are not productive in an economic sense include basic human activities such as eating, drinking, sleeping, taking exercise, etc., that it is impossible for one person to obtain another person to perform instead.... On the other hand, activities such as washing, preparing meals, caring for children, the sick or aged are all activities that can be provided by other units and, therefore, fall within the general production boundary. Many households employ paid domestic staff to carry out these activities for them.⁴⁷

This definition of productive activities can be traced back to the work of economist Margaret Reid in her book *Economics of Household Production* published in 1934.⁴⁸ Reid was troubled by the exclusion of women's unpaid work in the home from definitions of the economy and sought to stress both the importance of households to the economy and the significance of women's work, paid and unpaid. In order to identify and measure unpaid work within the household she formulated a rule known as the 'third party criterion'. She argued that any unpaid work that could be replaced with purchased goods or services provided by a third party should be considered 'productive' and thus part of the economy.

⁴⁷ UN, System of National Accounts 1993, 149.

⁴⁸ Yun-Ae Yi, 'Margaret G. Reid: Life and Achievements', *Feminist Economics*, ii (1996).

Reid also suggested how the monetary value of this work could be calculated, using time-use studies and various means of costing domestic labour. Such approaches had already been tried out. Reid quotes research by the National Bureau of Economic Research in America which estimated ‘the value of a housewife’s service was placed at \$750 per year and the total contribution in 1918 at \$15.3 billions’; this compared to a national monetary income of \$61 billion at that date.⁴⁹

Modern time-use surveys reveal some startling facts about gendered work patterns.⁵⁰ A UNDP *Human Development Report* of 1995 focuses on gender inequality and summarises a range of studies. It finds that ‘women work longer hours than men in nearly every country’, carrying out 53 per cent of all work in developing countries, and 55 per cent in rural areas of those countries (this total includes all work, using the third party criterion). The analysis divides work into ‘SNA work’ recorded in national accounts, and ‘non-SNA work’ which includes housework, care work, voluntary work and education. Because the studies used predate the 1993 SNA, some production for home use and informal paid work is also included in the ‘non-SNA work’.⁵¹ Table 1 summarises the findings, comparing them with Broadberry et al.’s estimates for preindustrial England, and Xiao-Yuan Dong and Xinli An’s more recent findings for rural China.⁵² Highland Nepal and the rural Philippines represent the two extremes of proportions of women’s time taken up with non SNA work in rural regions of developing countries from the UNDP report.

⁴⁹ Margaret G. Reid, *Economics of Household Production* (New York, 1934). 11, 161, 166-7.

⁵⁰ On the methodology behind these measures, see Antonopoulos and Hirway, *Unpaid Work*, 1-21.

⁵¹ UNDP, *Human Development Report* (1995), 88-9, 93.

⁵² Xiao Yuan Dong and Xinli An, ‘Gender Patterns and Value of Unpaid Care Work: Findings from China’s First Large-Scale Time Use Survey’ *Review of Income and Wealth* lxi (2015).

Table 1: The percentage of women's and men's work falling inside and outside the UN SNA production boundary (paid and income generating work (SNA) compared with unpaid housework, care work and voluntary work (non-SNA))

	Women		Men		Women	Men
	% SNA work	% non SNA work	% SNA work	% non SNA work	% of SNA work	% of SNA work
Estimate England 1381-1851 (1)	43	57	97	3	30	70
Industrial countries 1970-95 (2)	34	66	66	34	34	66
Developing countries 1970-95 (2)	34	66	76	24	31	69
Rural regions of developing countries 1970-95 (2)	38	62	76	24	33	67
Highlands of Nepal 1978 (2)	52	48	66	34	46	56
Rural Philippines 1975-77 (2)	29	71	84	16	26	74
Rural China 2008 (3)	58	42	86	14	40	60

Sources: (1) England 1381-1851 from Broadberry, *British economic growth*, 328; (2) UNDP, *Human development report 1995*, 89, 91; (3) rural China 2008 from Dong and An, 'Gender Patterns', 544..

Table 1 demonstrates the significant variations that exist in time-use for non-SNA work: as the report comments 'time use varies by region and historical period'.⁵³ While Broadberry et al.'s estimates for women's time-use in preindustrial England do not look wildly out of line with global averages, their analysis does not explain why women's participation in SNA work should be so much higher than in the rural Philippines and so much lower than in rural China. On the other hand, the estimates for English men's time-use look seriously out of line: did men really exclude themselves almost entirely from non-SNA in preindustrial England? More fundamentally, table 1 shows that a whole range of work activities, including housework and care work can be measured and analysed comparatively.

In summary, a strand of feminist scholarship, drawn largely but not exclusively from development economics, has offered a blistering attack on the conceptualisation of housework and care work as outside the economy, and on the way other productive activities carried out by women are often ignored by economists and policy-makers. This has resulted in a clearer definition of the economy based on the work of the economist Margaret Reid, which includes unpaid housework and care work, being adopted by the UN. It has also led to the active promotion of time-use studies as a means of measuring this work. Existing time-use studies show that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries the amount of time women spend on unpaid housework and care work varies considerably across the globe.

V The new approach applied to preindustrial England

⁵³ UNDP, *Human Development Report* (1995), 96.

It would be wrong to assume the economy of preindustrial England was equivalent to that of a modern developing country. Nonetheless it is also wrong to assume that housework and care work are unchanging over time, and have always consumed the same proportion of women's work time, and that men had no involvement in this work, as some historians and economists have done. Modern data and methodologies are thought provoking. What happens if we apply Reid's third party criterion to preindustrial England? Can we assign a monetary value to historical housework and care work? In the absence of time-use data, can we measure women's and men's involvement in different work tasks in the preindustrial economy?

While there are continuities over time: evidence suggests women have always worked long hours, and housework and care work were considered to be mainly women's responsibility in preindustrial European societies; there have also been striking changes. Two should be stressed: first, the idea of 'housewifery' in early modern England, as a married woman's vocation, was not restricted to housework and care work but included a number of skilled production activities. Secondly, housework and care work in preindustrial England were not separate from the market economy, but highly commercialised. Thus the assumption that housework and care work should be unpaid and carried out by family members is a modern one. This section examines some of the implications of the preceding discussion for our understanding of women's work in preindustrial England, and of housework and care work in particular. It begins by considering evidence of time-use, focusing on new methods for studying women's work activities in early modern Europe. This demonstrates that although women did most housework and care work, this work was performed alongside important contributions to agriculture, commerce and craft production. It then examines the relationship of women's housework and care work to the market, and finds that such work was surprisingly commercialised in the preindustrial period.

To measure the full range of paid and unpaid work activities carried out by women and men, sociologists and development economists recommend time-use studies.⁵⁴ Collecting evidence of time-use is not an easy proposition for historians of the preindustrial economy. There is scattered anecdotal evidence that in preindustrial England, as in modern societies, women worked longer hours than men. In the late-fifteenth century ‘ballad of the tyrannical husband’, the wife complains that her ‘sleep is but small’, as she lies awake at night with their child, but still milks the cows before her husband gets up in the morning.⁵⁵ Thomas Tusser’s *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* (1573) begins his advice to farming housewives by noting, ‘Though husbandrie seemeth to bring in the gaines,/ Yet huswiferie labours seeme equall in paines. /Some respite to husbands the weather may send,/But huswives affairs have never an end.’⁵⁶ Such sources hint at women’s busy work patterns, but more systematic evidence is needed.

While it is virtually impossible to reconstruct the full daily routine of historical subjects before the nineteenth century,⁵⁷ it is possible to imitate a time-use data collection method known as the spot check survey.⁵⁸ While a present-day spot check survey would be conducted by visiting or telephoning selected participants at regular intervals over a survey period, historical spot check surveys can be simulated by using incidental and contextual

⁵⁴ Jonathan Gershuny, ‘Time-Use Surveys and the Measurement of National Well-Being’ (2011): https://www.timeuse.org/sites/ctur/files/public/ctur_report/4486/timeusesurveysandwellbein_tcm77-232153.pdf accessed 3/5/18; Antonopoulos and Hirway, *Unpaid Work*.

⁵⁵ P.J. P. Goldberg ed., *Women in England c.1275-1525* (Manchester, 1995), 169.

⁵⁶ Thomas Tusser, *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*, ed. Geoffrey Grigson (Oxford, 1984), 157.

⁵⁷ For one attempt using diaries, see Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760* (London, 1988), 142-5.

⁵⁸ UN, *Guide to Producing Statistics on Time Use: Measuring Paid and Unpaid work* (New York, 2005), 16. Also described as the ‘experience sampling method’, see Gershuny, ‘Time-use surveys’, 5.

evidence from court records. Statements given by witnesses or the accused in relation to court cases survive in significant quantities from the mid sixteenth century onwards. These provide information about work activities carried out by a range of people. Thus a witness statement from disputed marriage contract from Devon in the 1560s describes a female servant collecting water, another young woman doing the laundry by the village well while negotiating her own marriage, and a tailor's wife watching and listening while sewing in the doorway of her husband's shop.⁵⁹ When collected in large numbers, such instances of work activities allow something like a historical time-use survey to be constructed.

This approach was pioneered by Sheilagh Ogilvie in a study of women's work in two communities in early modern south-west Germany. She found that housework made up 19 per cent of the work activities carried out by women, and care work 11 per cent, compared to agriculture which made up 26 per cent and craft work which made up 20 per cent.⁶⁰ The technique has been further developed by the Swedish 'Gender and work' project into the 'verb orientated approach'. This demonstrates that in preindustrial Sweden care work made up 6 per cent of the work activities carried out by women, while provision of food and accommodation also made up 6 per cent. In contrast agriculture made up 10 per cent, trade 15 per cent, and crafts and construction 3 per cent.⁶¹ A similar study has now been carried out for south-west England between 1500 and 1700. Its results shows that housework made up 21

⁵⁹ Devon Record Office, Bishop of Exeter consistory court depositions: Chanter 855 (1556-61), 65r-67v.

⁶⁰ Sheilagh Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living: Women, Markets and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford, 2003), figures taken from 31-2. A total of 2828 work activities undertaken by women and men were observed (p.25)

⁶¹ Maria Ågren ed., *Making a Living, Making a Difference: Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society* (Oxford, 2017), figures taken from table 1.3 on p.32, out of a total of 2433 activities undertaken by women recorded in court documents. The smaller proportions recorded are partly a consequence of the system of categorisation.

per cent of the work activities carried out by women, while care work made up 11 per cent. In comparison agriculture accounted for 21 per cent, commerce 18 per cent, and crafts and construction 9 per cent of women's work tasks.⁶² Thus, in none of these pre-industrial economies was housework and care work the majority of the work tasks carried out by women, although women did carry out the majority of housework and care work in all three countries, as table 2 shows. Nonetheless female workers also carried out a significant proportion of the work tasks in other areas of the economy, making up 50 per cent of those carrying out tasks related to agriculture and forestry in Germany, and over 50 per cent of those involved in buying and selling (trade and commerce) in Sweden and England. In all three countries they accounted for over 40 per cent of those carrying out craft work (manufacturing production).

Table 2: The percentage of work tasks carried out by women in comparison to men⁶³

	SW Germany 1646-1800	Sweden 1550-1800	SW England 1500-1700
Housework	80	63 (1)	82
Care work	76	76	82
Agriculture & forestry	50	45	37

⁶² Leverhulme Trust RPG-2014-313: 'Women's work in rural England 1500-1700: a new methodological approach'. These findings are explained in more detail in Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood, 'The gender division of labour in early modern England: a new approach', forthcoming: the figures are taken from table 6, incidental and related evidence only. A total of 4300 work activities undertaken by women and men were collected from quarter sessions, church courts and coroners' reports.

⁶³ This table was prepared jointly with Mark Hailwood. I would like to thank Sheilagh Ogilvie and Maria Ågren (and team) for sharing their time, data and detailed methodologies with me and Mark.

Trade/Commerce	32	51	53
Crafts & construction	44	41	43

Note: the data used was taken from the three projects described above, but reworked into similar categories to allow direct comparison. (1) The housework figure for Sweden relates to provision of food and accommodation only.

The multiple roles of adult female workers were expected to perform are also indicated by other types of sources. In early modern England the married woman was commonly described as a housewife (or ‘huswif’) and her work as housewifery (or ‘huswifery’). The word ‘huswif’ is first documented in the early eleventh century and has no connection with the term ‘housework’ which appeared only in the seventeenth century and took on its modern meaning in the nineteenth century.⁶⁴ Instead the housewife was the mistress of a household and farm, and the female marriage partner of the male husbandman, who was a farmer and household head. Farming advice books of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries describe the skills and duties of the housewife: these include management of the dairy, poultry, and vegetable garden, distilling, brewing and baking, providing medical care (including preparation of medicines) and cooking meals, and spinning and weaving.⁶⁵ Early modern marriage advice books did assign housework (‘the decking and trimming of the house’) and care work (‘bring up children when they are young’) to the housewife, but they also noted her duty to provide income or goods for the family.⁶⁶ As

⁶⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, entries for ‘housewife’ and ‘housework’, accessed 24/4/18.

⁶⁵ John Fitzherbert, *The Boke of Husbandry* (London 1533, STC (2nd ed.) 10995.5); Tusser, *Five Hundred Points*; Markham, *English Housewife*.

⁶⁶ William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (London, 1622, STC (2nd ed.) 21119), p.367.

William Gouge puts it: ‘because the wife is by Gods providence appointed a joint governor with the husband of the family, and in that respect ought to be an help in providing such a sufficiency of the goods of this world’.⁶⁷ Common understandings of the work of the housewife changed significantly over time to reach the modern meaning.⁶⁸

Nor should we assume that the housework and care work done by early modern women was necessarily unpaid work carried out for their own families. Court cases do not consistently record if work was paid or unpaid. However, the study of women’s work in south-west England collected evidence about whether work tasks were carried out ‘for another’. If work was carried out for a close family member or no relationship was specified it may well have been unpaid work. However, when it was undertaken for more distant kin or neighbours, or for pay, or by servant, it can be considered work ‘for another’. This creates a conservative estimate, given that work where no relationship is given is assumed to be unpaid work within the family. Remarkably, of the work tasks surveyed, 54 per cent of housework tasks carried out by women, and 84 per cent of women’s care work tasks was carried out ‘for another’.⁶⁹ This suggests quite a different organisation of housework and care work to that found in twentieth-century British society.

Again, other approaches back up this conclusion. For instance, forms of work that we no longer consider marketable, such as breast-feeding combined with infant-care, existed as

⁶⁷ Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, p.253. See also Jane Whittle and Elizabeth Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender in the Early Seventeenth-Century Household: The World of Alice Le Strange* (Oxford, 2012), 36-43; Ariadne Schmidt, ‘Labour Ideologies and Women in the Northern Netherlands, c.1500-1800’, *International Review of Social History*, lvi (2011).

⁶⁸ On the modern housewife, see Ann Oakley, *Housewife* (London, 1974).

⁶⁹ Whittle and Hailwood, ‘Gender division of labour’, table 10.

routine paid tasks in the early modern economy.⁷⁰ Almost all gentry and aristocratic mothers, as well as wealthy mothers in London, assigned their new-born children to wet-nurses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for their first years of life.⁷¹ In localities where women's work was plentiful, working women also employed wet-nurses in some cases.⁷² Infants typically lived in the wet-nurse's own household, and thus the arrangement provided the intensive child-care needed, as well as breast-milk.

The most common way in which housework and care work was commercialised, however, was via the employment of servants. Servants were ubiquitous in early modern north-west Europe.⁷³ Using household listings from 1574 to 1821, Ann Kussmaul found that 13.4 per cent of the English population were servants, and 46.4 per cent of farmers employed servants.⁷⁴ Men and women were employed as servants in roughly equal numbers.⁷⁵ The institution of service allowed householders to employ a paid worker to fulfil the work-role of husband or wife. A wage assessment from the East Riding of Yorkshire in 1593 describes the highest paid female servant as 'a woman servant that taketh charge of brewing, baking, kitching, milkehouse, or malting, and that is hired by a gentleman, or rich yeoman, whose wife does not take the pains and charge upon her'. The highest paid male servant, the bailiff of husbandry, is described in similar terms as one 'that is hired with a gentleman, or rich

⁷⁰ Valerie Fildes, 'The English Wet-Nurse and her Role in Infant Care', *Medical History*, xxxii (1988).

⁷¹ Linda Campbell, 'Wet-Nurses in Early Modern England: Evidence from the Townshend Archive', *Medical History*, xxxiii (1989); Whittle and Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender*, 170-2.

⁷² Pamela Sharpe, *Population and Society in an East Devon Parish: Reproducing Colyton, 1540-1840* (Exeter, 2002), 244-56.

⁷³ Jane Whittle (ed.), *Servants in Rural Europe, 1400-1900* (Woodbridge, 2017).

⁷⁴ Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1981), 3, 11.

⁷⁵ Whittle, 'Housewives and Servants', .53-61; Kussmaul, *Servants*, 4.

yeoman that doeth not labour himselfe, but putteth his whole charge to his servants'.⁷⁶ This meant that most people in early modern society were well aware of the monetary value of their spouse's work, and such evaluations are easily available to historians.⁷⁷

Female servants did not only perform housework and care work: as this and many other documents make clear, they did the same type of work as other women, including agriculture. But they did *also* do housework and care work, as occasionally did male servants too. As the household was a site of employment, such work was performed not just for the employer's family, but for other workers who were paid partly with board and lodging.⁷⁸ Table 3 compares the work tasks undertaken by female servants with those undertaken by wives and male servants. As a proportion of their overall work repertoire, female servants did the largest proportion of housework, but they also did more agricultural work than wives. Wives retained the more responsible tasks of commerce and management (mostly financial management). Male servants were predominantly employed to undertake agricultural work and transport tasks, as well as food processing which here includes butchering sheep and threshing.⁷⁹ But they did do some housework (mostly odd jobs around the home) and care work (mostly childcare).

⁷⁶ Frederic M. Eden, *The State of the Poor*, 3 vols. (London, 1966), (first published 1797), iii, pp.xc-xci.

⁷⁷ On servants' wages see Jane Humphries and Jacob Weisdorf, 'The Wages of Women in England, 1260-1850', *Journal of Economic History*, lxxv (2015); Jane Whittle, 'A Different Pattern of Employment: Servants in Rural England, c.1500-1660' in Whittle (ed.), *Servants*, 70-5.

⁷⁸ Jane Whittle, 'Servants in Rural England c.1450-1650: Hired Work as a Means of Accumulating Wealth and Skills before Marriage', in Maria Ågren and Amy Erickson (eds.), *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain, 1400-1900*, (Aldershot, 2005), 91-4.

⁷⁹ The large number of sheep-stealing cases in the quarter sessions courts results in a disproportionate amount of work connected to sheep being recorded: discussed in more detail in Whittle and Hailwood, 'Gender Division of Labour'.

Table 3: The work tasks undertaken by wives, female servants and male servants (evidence from court records, south-west England 1500-1700)

Category	Wife (%)	Female servant (%)	Male servant (%)
Agriculture & land	15.3	21.9	29.7
Care work	7.3	5.1	2.7
Commerce	29.1	15.3	13.7
Crafts & construction	10.1	8.8	8.4
Food processing	6.4	8.8	20.9
Housework	18.1	30.7	5.7
Management	6.5	0.7	3.0
Transport	6.7	7.2	15.6
Other	0.4	1.4	0.4
TOTAL	99.9	99.9	100.1
Total number of tasks recorded	535	137	263

Source: data from the 'women's work in rural England 1500-1700' project. For more details see Whittle and Hailwood, 'Gender division of labour'.

By mimicking, as far as possible, the techniques of time-use surveys, historians are now getting closer to revealing the actual work patterns of women and men in the preindustrial period. This shows that although women did do the great majority of housework and care work, this was not the majority of the work they undertook. Women also played a very significant role in the other main areas of the economy: agriculture, craft production and commerce. What is more, housework and care work were not treated as special areas excluded from the market, or the particular vocation of married women, but in the

preindustrial economy were commercialised and given a monetary value, particularly via the commonplace employment of servants.

VI Conclusions

This article began by suggesting historians needed to think more carefully about what ‘work’ and the ‘economy’ mean. These seemingly neutral terms are loaded with gendered and historically specific assumptions introduced by classical economic thought in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and perpetuated by modern economics. As a result historians, as well as economists, have undervalued women’s contribution to the economy. Exclusion of housework and care work from definitions of work and the economy depict a situation in which women consistently work longer hours than men as one in which women work less and contribute less to the economy. These issues are particularly acute for the preindustrial economy, just as they are for developing countries in the modern world. The use of vague terms such as ‘domestic work’ allows women’s work producing goods for consumption in the household or sale to be elided with housework, so as to make that work disappear from view as well. Despite the fact the home was the main centre of production and the location of the economy in the preindustrial period, men’s work is very rarely described as ‘domestic’.⁸⁰

To provide a more accurate description of preindustrial economic development we need not just more knowledge about work activities but also more conceptual clarity about the nature of work. The current UN SNA guidelines suggest a scheme in which work and the

⁸⁰ See fn 15 above. Although the majority of work did not take place within the domestic house, the home was headquarters of most work activity: most men as well as women did not have a separate workplace where they went to work, as is normal in modern industrial economies.

economy involves producing either goods or services, either for own use within households or for the market. Thus unpaid housework and care work can be seen as services produced for own use or subsistence services. This is depicted in figure 1. The shaded area shows the economy; unpaid housework and care work located in the bottom left-hand box labelled 'A'.

	Own use or subsistence	For the market
Goods		
Services	A	

Figure 1: The economy

The women and men in the preindustrial household were involved in the production of goods and services for own use and for the market, and so we can show their involvement in the economy with the darker shaded area in figure 2.

	Own use or subsistence	For the market
Goods		
Services		

Figure 2: The economy of the preindustrial household

The economy of the male breadwinner household in which men engage in paid work in industry and women remain at home doing unpaid housework and care work looks quite different, as shown by figure 3:

	Own use or subsistence	For the market
Goods		Men's Work
Services	Women's work	

Figure 3: The economy of the male breadwinner household

The extent to which the male breadwinner household has ever existed is an issue for nineteenth and twentieth century historians.⁸¹ However, the problems created of trying to apply the simplified scheme shown in figure 3, to a preindustrial household economy shown in figure 2 are evident. It results in ignoring women's work producing goods for subsistence and the market, and producing paid services; and in ignoring men's subsistence activities and work in the service sector more generally. It is impossible to track economic development effectively while selectively ignoring significant parts of the economy.

⁸¹ Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, 'The Origins and Expansion of the Male Breadwinner Family: The Case of Nineteenth-Century Britain', *International Review of Social History*, xlii S5 (1997).

Current approaches have overlooked the fact that housework and care work were highly commercialised in the preindustrial economy, and easily assigned a monetary value along with other work tasks carried out in the household. To suggest that women's housework and care work was the same in this period as it was in the nineteenth or twentieth century is to artificially 'domesticate' women's work, applying the idea of a male breadwinner household to a period in which that model was not dominant, in a manner similar to that demonstrated by Rogers with regard to twentieth-century development policies in the non-western world.⁸²

We still need to know more about men's and women's work producing goods for the market economy and subsistence in the preindustrial era. But the most serious gap in our knowledge relates to the nature of housework and care work and how this work changed over time.⁸³ The continuity of such work remaining predominantly the responsibility of women should not blind us to substantial transformations in this work over time as a result of changes in domestic material culture, technology and cultural attitudes. Why did such work become less commercialised over time in opposition to the general trends of economic development? Housework and care work are an essential part of the economy and should become serious objects of study, so that we can discern who did this type of work, how it was done, and how much time it took. Only once this is understood will we be able to predict the impact such work had on women's (and men's) other work activities and describe fully women's (and men's) contribution to the economy and how it changed over time.

⁸² Rogers, *Domestication of Women*.

⁸³ For housework, a starting point is Stevi Jackson, 'Towards a Historical Sociology of Housework: A Materialist Feminist Analysis', *Womens Studies International Forum*, xv (1992).