

Women's Work in Early Modern

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Training and knowledge transfer, high and low

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Factors affecting training and occupational opportunities

Ideological context: all women were understood as married or to be married

Political context: self-sustaining household in which the man provided and the woman nurtured

Presence of siblings

Nature of training

Formal

Normally outside the natal household – apprenticeships regulated by law;
1 year domestic and agricultural service positions

Informal

Likely to be in the natal household, but also possible outside of it –
servants filling in during periods of absence or illness.

Occupations to which women apprentices were bound, Bristol 1532-52, 1617-28

Source: I.K. Ben Amos, 'Women apprentices in the trades and crafts in early modern Bristol', *Continuity and Change*, 6 (1991), 229

Formal training

Few female apprentices – Bristol only 3.3% of the total number of apprentices were women between 1542 and 52; between 1600 and 1645 this fell to 2.2%.

Even in early 16th century Bristol, female apprenticeships were already quite different from male, and from 1600 they were clearly marked off. Pattern of high demand for urban apprenticeships from landed and agricultural status groups at end of 16th and into the 17th century, as landholders increased their wealth and population numbers rose. Women pushed out of the market [cost and availability]; 17th century decline in craft apprenticeships for women, replaced by apprenticeships in the traditional female sector.

Informal training

In Bristol - clear that widows were in a range of occupations almost as wide as men in the period 1600-45, so informal training clearly more widely available than formal, and became more important as period progressed and women were squeezed out of the formal market. [Except pauper apprenticeship, where poor girls were generally bound to housewifery or other female trade]

Informal trainers

Father

Master [servants may have been asked to stand in for apprentice when absent/ill; maids assisted in shops; so intermittent training available for young girls outside of their service training]

Husband

Mother

Other householders [upper status girls sent to high status households as companions to learn management]

Role v. occupation

Women trained primarily for social role, not job – this was clearly status dependent, so middling and upper status groups more likely to be taught how to manage a household with necessary staff; lower status and poorer groups taught to do chores necessary to support household.

Women were the custodians of the commonwealth: produce household members; socialise, educate and care for household members; facilitate production of the household for the benefit of its members. Other paid work often emerged out of this social role.

Women's occupations

Midwives – generally trained informally under a licensed midwife for several years. Needed bishop's license to operate, but this was generally granted on character and religious [Anglican] status rather than skill.

Teachers – no special training, learn on the job, although license again required from bishop. Unlicensed female teachers appear to have been accepted and numbers expanded as demand for education expanded.

Wet nurse – hospitals and higher status mothers wanted respectable women of good character. No training although skill required to keep child alive.

All these occupations either combined work with childrearing and household management, or drew on those skills, so blurred social/occupational identity.

Royal, civic and institutional employments [office holders]. Court ladies; matrons of hospitals and houses of correction; nurses; cooks. Again all drew on upper/middling skills in household management, and jobs were generally obtained

Occupational identities

Social status differences:

Upper status ranks were married younger and produced more children – training was in the management of the household, but little direct engagement in housewifery.

Middling ranks more likely to have occupational identity – midwifery, schoolteacher, innkeeper, shopkeeper, variety of crafts and trades.

Middling and upper status girls probably had more options – better education, more likely to be trained for an occupation, fathers in crafts or married crafts and tradesmen.

Lower status ranks received training in service for range of female occupations, often textile based, but dairying also female occupation in rural areas. Masterless women under the Statute of Artificers of 1563 could be bound to service until 30.

Occupational identities

Marital status differences:

Feme sole

Unmarried and widows had additional occupational rights to trade alone.

Problems of informal training

Intermittent

Unrecognized

Skill levels cannot be measured

Skill levels cannot be demonstrated

No end point at which subject becomes 'trained' and hence no occupational identity achievable

Social role and occupational role almost always blurred

Consequence: remuneration can be low and women can be excluded

Problems of training for researchers

Much training is informal

Nature and extent of training is difficult to recover, although most was geared towards social role

Evidence and success of training is measured largely by outcome

Ideas: women's work

Women were not trained in a formal occupation for two reasons:

Role was to 'produce' people/reproduce the household

As dependents they did not need to be self-supporting [cf. different rules for female sole]

Need to consider 'domestic' and 'market': economic growth through purchase of services and shifting notions of dependency