FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL? WOMEN’S WORK IN PUBLIC SERVICES IN
EARLY MODERN DUTCH TOWNS

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This article analyzes the influence of professionalization and the broader process of bureaucratization on female labor participation in the public service sector in early modern towns in the Dutch province of Holland. Contrary to suggestions in other literature, women were found in a broad range of public offices, and developments in this sector did not lead to the exclusion of women in the course of the early modern period. Women were mainly employed in the lowest level jobs in the sector, and their work was barely affected by professionalization. Furthermore, the strong division of labor along gender lines prevented the exclusion of women. Specialization and diversification of work resulted, instead, in an expansion of employment opportunities, not only for men, but also for women.

Keywords: public services, women, professionalization, bureaucratization.

In her study of women’s work in German towns, Working Women in Renaissance Germany, Merry Wiesner describes how women in the early modern period could initially be found in different local public offices. Women in Germany, as was also the case in England, sometimes took a professional oath with their husbands. Some public offices required the collaboration of both spouses, in other cases the office was in a man’s name, but the wife actually did the work. Some public offices in the early modern period were seen as a form of possession that could be passed on to the next generation. This meant that widows could sometimes assume the office of their late husbands, as was customary for artisans. There were also women who held a public office in their own name.¹

Just as women are said to have lost their jobs in other sectors of the labor market, Wiesner claims they also disappeared from public offices in the course of the early modern period. Although Wiesner indicates that little research has been carried out into the exclusion of women from public services, she does give an explanation for this exclusion: work became increasingly heavily regulated and controlled, and women were denied access, because they did not possess the necessary specialized training. A university education increasingly became compulsory for higher level public servants who, therefore, could no longer be assisted by their wives. In time, the requirements were tightened for lower level public sector employees, and public offices, such as gatekeeper and tax collector, could no longer be held by married couples but were only open to men. Wives may have still been involved in the work, but they were no longer sworn in or considered a public servant. Female appraisers also lost out and, finally, the town council only appointed male appraisers.²

Wiesner’s conclusions about women in public offices in German towns are not unique but concur with conclusions drawn by other historians. The influence of professionalization on the exclusion of women from the labor market was already an important theme in Alice Clark’s Working life of women in the seventeenth century. By professionalization, Clark referred to the process in which employers set employees increasingly stricter training and education requirements. She chiefly referred to the public sector; namely, work for the authorities for the benefit of public health and population
development. Clark contended that women were important in these public duties such as midwife, nurse, and teacher, from time immemorial. She claimed that women were denied access to these positions when, from the seventeenth century, the authorities increasingly began to demand specialized training. The conclusions of Christina Vanja’s research into women’s work in German-speaking regions in the eighteenth century also concur with this. She claimed that women initially gained from the expansion of the civil service but that professionalization, the explicit expression of quality controls, and a different recognition and hierarchization of work ultimately made it more difficult for women to gain access to public offices. Historians agree that women continued to work in one public sector: social care institutions. This was “typical woman’s work” that was low status, badly paid, and required no special training or large scale capital investment. It is assumed that the influence of professionalization drove women from other public service sectors in the countries surrounding the Netherlands.

The historians cited above primarily studied the influence of professionalization on women’s access to work in the public sector and they use the term “professionalization” principally in the narrow sense: occupational groups that set specific training and admittance requirements and exclude people who cannot meet them. However, this process of professionalization is part of the long term process of bureaucratization that occurred from the late Middle Ages to in the modern period in Western Europe. Population growth, urbanization and market-oriented production caused expansion and specialization within the public sector. During the early modern period, these developments took place primarily at a local level, and town councils increasingly organized or coordinated public facilities. The expansion of the public sector led to an increase in and diversification of public offices: at a high and low level, paid and unpaid, and specialized and requiring little training. Max Weber linked the expansion of the public sector to what he called a “bureaucratization process”. In his view, the extent of bureaucratization could be measured by a number of characteristics of an organization: formal rules and procedures; permanent, specialized public offices; a hierarchical organizational structure; no right of ownership to a public office; written records; and reasonable discipline and control. Public servants received a fixed salary, were appointed on the basis of their expertise, were paid according to rank and position, and the public office was their main occupation.

Several historians have questioned the usefulness of Weber’s characteristics of bureaucratization in the analysis of early modern public servants and public offices. The approach is teleological and Weber’s ideal type eliminates all the factors that characterized the public sector in the late Middle Ages and early modern period. There was a blurred division of private and public finances; public offices were gained by means of co-option, leasing, or payment; training or education was rarely required and most public offices were not considered a main occupation. Political scientists and historians have, however, had reason to use Weber’s characteristics of bureaucratization. His list of characteristics provides a handle to study the expansion of the civil service and the changes in its organization. His ideal type also provides an opportunity to compare developments in public services in towns or regions with each other.

In this article we do not just want to look at the professionalization of work within the narrow process, but also within the wider process, of bureaucratization in towns. Our main question is: which local public offices did women assume in the towns in the province of Holland and which developments took place in the nature and scope of their duties? We want to verify if women’s career opportunities increased as a result of the expansion of public services. We also want to know if precisely the changes in the organization of public services, which possibly included the development of professional groups, led to the exclusion of women. In answering these questions, we want to verify if the province of
Holland deviated from the pattern in other Western European regions or if a similar process of exclusion took place here.

Our data is based mainly on the financial administration records, the books of public offices and oaths, and lists of public offices from Leiden, Rotterdam, and Gouda. The oath books registered who had taken a professional oath, but this, of course, was only for sworn public offices. In the books of public offices the town council registered who was appointed for particular services. Instructions for public offices give an idea of what the work entailed. In 1749 and 1788, the States General of Holland (Staten van Holland) asked the towns to provide an overview of the public offices in those towns. As expansion and specialization caused the administrations to change during the period, and as the administrations differed from town to town, the data is not always comparable. However, by studying these combined sources, it was possible to gain a picture of women’s work in public services between 1500 and 1800.

The study of public services is, to a certain extent, problematic. There is not just a great difference between early modern and contemporary views of what defines public services, but the views about this also changed during the early modern period. Therefore, we will examine first the definitions of public services and local public offices. Then we will look at developments in public services and public offices in the towns that we studied. Finally, we will verify if changes in the organization and scope of public amenities in the towns influenced women’s work and their access to the public sector.

DEFINING PUBLIC FACILITIES AND PUBLIC SERVANTS

It is difficult to come to an unambiguous definition of public services and local public offices before the early modern period. This is because what the authorities consider a public duty relates to the changing functions of the city authorities in the course of the pre-industrial period. In the early modern period, nothing like all public services were organized by the authorities. Firstly, the church or private corporations, such as guilds, the civic militia, and community organizations, carried out many public duties for a long time. Church and private organizations assumed responsibility for military protection, economic regulation, social care, and population registration. Secondly, the distinction between public, private, and church initiatives was not always clear. The authorities, private citizens, and church organizations took responsibility for looking after the poor and sick; (private) community leaders, the civic militia, and guilds often worked in the service of the (public) town councils. Public offices were not advertised publicly but were allotted reciprocally, leased, or sometimes sold. Leading citizens combined their public duties with religious responsibilities and private interests. The private finances of citizens were often intertwined with the town’s public finances.

This changed in the course of the late Middle Ages. In Weber’s terms, a more rational way of organizing arose in the course of the early modern period which severed the link between town citizen and public community. The development was twofold. Firstly, amenities that had been (partially) organized by church organizations and private corporations came under the control of the authorities (town councils and, later, national government). Secondly, public offices were increasingly organized according to Weber’s bureaucratic characteristics. These developments were certainly not linear, and they differed from town to town. The tendency, however, was the same almost everywhere. Town councils expanded public services and, as a result, employed more and more people to perform public tasks.
In this article we use a broad definition of public services, and we will study the public facilities organized and commonly, but not necessarily, financed by the local authorities. We will examine all sectors of government: general administration, public order and safety, public works, trade and transport, health and social care, education, and the church.

This brings us to the second term that is difficult to define. That of “public office” or “public servant”. According to the strictest definition, a local public servant fulfils a public duty, takes instructions from the town council, and receives a regular salary from the authorities. All the town employees most certainly did not meet these conditions. Public offices were sometimes leased, and higher level public servants often only received an allowance for their clothes and expenses. Furthermore, there were authorized officials whose salary was not (or only partly) paid by the town but who were only allowed to carry out their duties with the authorization and on the instruction of the authorities, such as public works employees (road builders and street sweepers) or market workers (cheese carriers and peat ton fillers). Finally, there were public sector workers who were employed in rotation as a fixed supplier of goods or services (city carpenter or city pharmacist). The officials in these categories are not, in a strict sense, public servants, but they did belong to local government. We included them in our research because town and city councils regarded them as public servants, or semi-public servants. They were registered in the books of public offices, they (usually) had to be sworn to office, because they carried out official duties, their work was regulated by the authorities, and the town councils set the level of salary that they received. Finally, we can only confirm if there were developments in the running of public amenities and to what extent the developments influenced women’s access to the public sector by including all the public offices and posts listed in the financial administration records, books of public offices and oaths, and registers of public office permits.

DEVELOPMENTS IN PUBLIC SERVICES IN EARLY MODERN TOWNS

From the late Middle Ages, urbanization and population growth caused a considerable transformation of the nature and scope of public amenities, and numerous facilities were added: a legal system; fire prevention; further regulation of economic activities; care for the poor, sick and orphans; and education. The expansion of public facilities probably occurred in all Dutch towns, but the extent of it differed, of course, per town and per period and was strongly related to economic and population growth in the towns. The towns in the Southern Netherlands were first to obtain the privileges of a town, and their town councils adopted initiatives to regulate the sale of grain and bread and to set up a legal system from as early as the twelfth and thirteenth century. The authorities in the towns in the province of Holland only assumed more public tasks from the sixteenth century. Public services in towns such as Gouda, Rotterdam, and Leiden expanded at the time of the flowering Republic. In Gouda, for example, about twenty-nine percent of total expenditure was spent in 1501 on public services (see table 1). In 1800, that had risen to eighty-three percent. Fluctuations in expenditure on these amenities were clearly related to population growth (see figure 1).
Table 1: Expenditures on public services in Gouda according to the financial administration, 1501 - 1800.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Public services</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1501</td>
<td>£ 3,591</td>
<td>£ 1,055</td>
<td>(29.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600</td>
<td>60,536</td>
<td>32,681</td>
<td>(53.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1650</td>
<td>159,938</td>
<td>88,954</td>
<td>(55.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1726</td>
<td>111,303</td>
<td>90,004</td>
<td>(85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>117,607</td>
<td>97,330</td>
<td>(82.75%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: SAMH, OAG 1163, 1246, 1297, 1374, 1456.

As the population grew, the town and city councils set up new facilities to serve the public and to be able to control the consequences of such growth. A plague house and a prison were established in Gouda in 1613. At the beginning of the seventeenth century the town council of Gouda obtained the right to name the staff of the public weighing scales. From 1654 the town ran the Loans Bank. Economic growth in the course of the seventeenth century enabled the towns in the province of Holland to set up financial and economic institutions and expand the transport network.\(^{18}\)

Leiden and Rotterdam grew much faster than Gouda (figure 1). Large numbers of immigrants from the Southern Netherlands settled in Leiden. Rotterdam profited greatly from Dordrecht’s weakening position and expanded in the seventeenth century into a flourishing port.\(^{19}\) Significant population growth from the sixteenth century onwards led to a considerable expansion of social and financial services. The town council employed overseers for the orphan chambers and factories, set up exchange and loans banks, and employed more secretaries for the growing administration. In addition, there were numerous lower level public offices and posts, but it would be impossible to reproduce these lists.\(^{20}\)

The expansion of public services in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth century caused a great increase in the number of public offices. There was not just growth, however, there was also specialization. This is demonstrated by the medical staff serving the town of Rotterdam. In 1556, there were two midwives and two surgeons; in 1800, the medical staff consisted of midwives, surgeons, doctors, assistant midwives, male-midwives, plague masters, and bone-setters.\(^{21}\) The accountants’ books became more extensive and detailed because of expansion and specialization. Public servants were carefully registered in the books of public offices and oaths, and the instructions for their work were described in an increasingly clear fashion.
The way people were appointed and paid are good indicators of the extent of bureaucratization during the early modern period. According to political scientists, an absence of the right of ownership to a public office, fixed payment according to rank and position, and appointment on the basis of expertise are, after all, essential characteristics of advanced bureaucratization. For the discussion here, appointment and pay are also relevant, because historians connect the banishment of women with the development of occupational groups. Where expansion took place early, the local public officials in the social sector were also appointed earlier on the basis of expertise. That applied, for example, for the secretary, pensionary, and midwife in Leiden who received a fixed salary from the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century. From the sixteenth century there were, furthermore, exhaustive discussions about the performance and payment of public servants which show that town councils saw a fixed salary as a condition for a “better” interpretation of an office.

Around 1750, the appointment and payment of all local public servants was under debate. In 1747 and 1749, the States of Holland asked the towns for a list of all town employees in order to gain an insight into backdoor practices when appointing to office. This was in response to complaints from citizens of Rotterdam who pleaded for a public sale of offices. The inventory resulted in the abolishment of leasing indirect taxes. From then on city tax collectors worked according to fixed instructions and for a regular salary. In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, other public servants also received fixed allowances for their services instead of, as in the sixteenth century, clothing allowances, which meant that some high level public servants could view their office as a profession. In Gouda regulations also became tighter. From 1786, the town council stipulated that public offices would be reserved for a specific group of inhabitants of Gouda. Those who were born in the town or who had lived there for a certain amount of time, paid taxes and, had civil rights. Public offices with a salary of more than 600 guilders could no longer be held alongside other offices. In these stipulations women were explicitly recognized as public servants who held an office without their husband.

The period of 1500-1800, therefore, saw expansion, specialization, and a change in the organization of the public administration. In Weberian terms, bureaucratization occurred in some respects: formal rules and procedures were formulated; permanent and specialized public offices, and a hierarchical organizational structure developed; and written records, payment, and the appointment to office all changed. There were also some signs of professionalization in the sense of setting training and entrance requirements, but these were related mainly to higher public offices. Only a small group of public servants gained a public office on the basis of expertise and education. Up to the end of the eighteenth century, there was little relationship between training and holding a public office; the authorities did not engage in training their public servants. The one exception was the medical sector where midwives, surgeons and doctors worked. In the towns in the province of Holland the work of midwives was, from the end of the seventeenth century, increasingly strongly regulated. Midwife colleges were set up to train midwives. Midwives had to sit an exam and gain experience before they were allowed to follow their profession.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jaar</th>
<th>Midwives</th>
<th>Male midwives</th>
<th>Assistant midwives</th>
<th>Surgeons</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1556</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1644</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1700</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1750</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sources: OSA 3156, 3232, 3335; Unger en Bezemer, De oudste stadsrekeningen

At first sight (table 2) there appear to have been considerable consequences for women. Midwives now had competition from male midwives (the meaning varied: It could be a male midwife, but also a physician or surgeon who specialized in obstetrics). In Rotterdam and Amsterdam the arrival of male midwives led to a fall in the number of state registered midwives, but that does not mean there was a causal connection. It could just as easily have been caused by further specialization, because the position of assistant midwife developed alongside that of midwife. The arrival of male midwives equally did not mean that midwives were worse off. In Rotterdam professionalization led to a considerable improvement in midwives’ salaries. Their income rose faster in the seventeenth and eighteenth century than that of doctors and surgeons and, in 1800, midwives in Rotterdam, and in some other towns too, remarkably enough, were better paid than male midwives and surgeons. City midwives could live fairly comfortably from their income and they belonged to the middle class. Professionalization of the medical profession, additionally, did not lead to the exclusion of women who worked independently. In England and France the “midwife revolution” resulted in the medicalization of births. Midwives came under the supervision of male midwives and finally lost ground. In the Netherlands, midwifery hardly became medicalized, and midwives carried on working independently.

Only a small group of public servants had to contend with professionalization in the narrow sense. However, in the province of Holland, in contrast with abroad, this process had no influence on women’s professional opportunities. In the following, we will study the extent to which women’s work as public servants was influenced by the broader process of bureaucratization.

Table 3: Annual salaries of city midwives, Gouda, Rotterdam and Leiden (in guilders, unless indicated otherwise).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>1st midwife (n)</th>
<th>2nd midwife</th>
<th>3rd midwife</th>
<th>4th midwife</th>
<th>5th midwife/ other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gouda 1572</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gouda 1650</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gouda 1756</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gouda &gt; 1777</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotterdam 1556</td>
<td>28 (1)</td>
<td>12 (1)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotterdam 1644</td>
<td>30£ (7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotterdam 1750</td>
<td>140 (3)</td>
<td>30 (5)</td>
<td>200 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotterdam 1800</td>
<td>140 (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>35 (4) (assistants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ordinary midwives Extraordinary midwives Plague midwife

Leiden 1547 £ 55 (3)            Leiden 1650 60(11) 31-33 (3) 200 (1)
Leiden 1749 60 (5) 30 (5) -

 Sources: Gaemers, ‘Stadsvroedvrouwen’: J.G.W.F. Bik, Vijf eeuwen medisch leven in een Hollandse stad (Assen1955) 348; OAG 1246, 1297; Unger en Bezemer, De oudste stadsrekeningen; OSA 3156, 3232, 3335; SAII 7581, 7687; Van Steensel, ‘Het personeel’, 245.

WOMEN IN SERVICE OF THE TOWN

Although a lot of research has been carried out into (city) midwives, a lot less is known about women’s work in other public services.
books of public offices from Rotterdam and the lists of public offices from Gouda for the States of Holland (good data for Leiden is not available) two things are noticeable (table 3). A large number of services were carried out by women and, across the board at least, there was no question of women being banished. In Rotterdam the percentage of women increased. In 1680 about sixteen percent of the lower level offices were held by women, whereas their share had increased in 1727 to a third. This development is confirmed by figures from the town’s financial administration records and registers with decisions concerning public offices. There appears to have been a decrease in Gouda. The list of officials in Gouda who took a professional oath in 1788 is much longer, because a much wider definition was employed. Sixteen percent of the offices were held by women. This appears to be a considerable decrease compared to 1749, when women made up a quarter of the total. The decrease, however, is relative and was caused by an increase in the numerous firemen, community officers and men who towed barges (who were not registered in 1749) and the large number of men in the transport sector.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rotterdam 1680</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotterdam 1700</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotterdam 1727</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gouda 1749</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gouda 1788/9</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>1639</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: GAR, OSA NO839; SAMH, OAG 440, 444.

The question now is in which sectors women worked and if they were excluded from certain public positions with the authorities. Research in Germany and England showed that women mainly worked in the caring professions. The province of Holland’s financial administration records and its books of public offices and oaths show, however, that women in the early modern period worked in almost all sectors of government activity: general administration, public order and safety, public works, trade and transport, health and social care, education and the church. We will first describe women’s work in these sectors before then going into more detail in the following paragraphs into women’s access to local public offices and their status in comparison to men.

Women’s access to certain sectors was, by definition, limited. This was the case primarily for administrative duties and so-called citizen public offices (a duty for citizens to carry out unpaid work for the community). Women were not completely excluded from administrative duties or legal or financial offices. Women were occasionally involved in tax or toll collection. Thus, Maria Jacobs Koele took over the toll collection lease from her late husband in 1713 in Gouda and passed the office on to her daughter. The private character of this kind of office led, moreover, to widows sometimes assuming responsibility for financial transactions. Typical citizen offices in the sector of public order and safety, such as the night watch, the civic militia, and the fire brigade duty were also reserved for men. The female equivalents were the regents who acted as prison governors. Women also worked in prisons as warders and occasionally as seamstress. The tax collectors, warders and regents were the exceptions in the sector: in general, public order and safety provided little employment for women.

Women actually found employment in another, less obvious, field. The general view that women mainly worked in the caring professions, preferably indoors, did not apply for the public offices that they held. Women were remarkably active in the construction and
maintenance of public works, and this was work outdoors and under physically hard conditions. There were stoneworkers and stone-carriers, paving stone-carriers, slate-carriers, roof tile-carriers and roof tilers, road builders, and grave diggers to be found among the admitted officials. What is more, in the course of the seventeenth century, brick making (stacking the kiln, firing and cleaning) was entirely in female control in Rotterdam. Men were present as quality controllers who controlled production. Suppliers of paving stones, roof tiles, bricks, and related products were not, it is true, public servants in the strict sense, but they certainly did contribute to public works in the town. In 1644, at least sixty percent of wages for ironwork in Rotterdam went to women. Finally, women in all the towns worked as overseers of public property, doorkeepers, or chamberlains. Women did not dominate the public works sector, but they certainly cannot be ignored.

The trade and transport sector was much more important for women. There were not just more women working in this sector, but they worked in more diverse positions. In 1700, for example, according to the Rotterdam book of public offices, seventy-five percent of the women were appointed for trade activities in the port or at the market. The increase in specialized markets in the province of Holland resulted in an increase in the number of supervisors, market workers, and casual workers — work that the towns in the province of Holland registered in the book of public offices and charity books. Women worked (in large numbers) in: fish stall rental; (less often) the fruit and vegetable trade; carrying and auctioning fish; carrying fruit, cabbage and tubers; hauling merchandise; and (occasionally) chopping meat — work that was under the strict supervision of the town council. Part of the work was alongside male colleagues, such as quality inspection and control over manufactured and traded goods. A number of female assistants worked alongside the weighman at the public weighing scales in Gouda. Women were employed mainly as caretakers at the fish market, for filling tons or sacks with peat, and for counting bricks of peat. Men were mainly responsible for transporting peat through the town. Controls of this work became stricter as the peat trade grew in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. There was clear specialization here: where men gained particularly from the growing transport sector, women could seize on the growing demand for peat ton fillers. The town councils occasionally employed women for transport work, although their numbers bore no relation to the huge army of male bargemen. They were employed as bridge operators, a female shipping commissioner, a postwoman and some hire-coach drivers. Some women took over the office of their late husband, for example, Aeltgen Henricx from Leiden who made a living as a messenger to Antwerp and travelled there with colleagues from other towns.

What about the sectors that were, what the literature describes as, typical female activities, health care and education? It is indisputable that women played an important role in medical care. According to the financial administration records from Rotterdam, from 1644 twenty-six women were paid a salary, thirty-one percent of whom worked in the medical sector. The institutionalization of medical care, the differentiation of care in categories of those requiring help (such as the sick, orphans, the elderly, lepers, and plague sufferers) and the centralization of the organization under the supervision of the town council increased employment opportunities for women. The workforce in the new institutions (hospitals, orphanages, plague houses, and asylums) expanded and an important, clearly defined part of the work was carried out by women, who were appointed as house mothers, dormitory mothers, maids and seamstresses. These lower level offices usually did not fall under the direct supervision of the town council. This did apply for regents who, increasingly, from the seventeenth century, were appointed by boards. This is almost the only field in which Dutch women in the early modern period held administrative positions, and they were renowned for this abroad. Women did not just profit from the more professional care sector but also from the differentiation that took place in education, where
they worked as schoolmistresses (alongside schoolmasters), as proprietresses of small primary schools and boarding schools, and as pre-school schoolmistresses. There were still a large proportion of women in relation to men. Around 1800, the schoolmasters’ guild in Gouda registered yearly an average of eight schoolmasters, ten schoolmistresses and twelve pre-school schoolmistresses.48

Church facilities constituted a last field, because the public duties of the reformed church were closely connected to the local administration in the early modern period. The church and the town council were closely interwoven. Town councils or burgomasters had the right to appoint a number of church posts to which women were sometimes appointed.59 Along with women who put out the chairs and braziers in the church, were a female verger, and a female bidder, whose duties varied but probably included ringing the “passing bell” and saying prayers at a funeral. Finally, women worked as caretakers and cleaners of churches and church libraries, and they were in charge of the candlesticks.

Therefore, women enjoyed, generally speaking, greater rather than fewer opportunities in local public offices in the course of the early modern period. A comparison of the Rotterdam financial administration records between 1566 and 1800 shows that women increasingly offered their services to the town in more differentiated jobs. In 1566 they were employed mainly in the medical sector and as producers of candles, mats or brushes for council buildings, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth century they performed a whole range of work for the town: as lamp fillers, bridge operators, seamstresses working with different kinds of textiles, cleaners of council buildings, and numerous other jobs. The increased differentiation was a part of the increase in the number of facilities and jobs that the town council organized and financed. These were jobs that previously either did not exist, or existed only on a small scale, and were unregulated or had not yet been organized by the council.

The same development can be seen in Gouda between 1749 and 1788. The growth of the transport sector and of the number of fire watches, community masters, and men who towed barges caused the employment opportunities for men to increase, but women gained in other fields, primarily in that of trade. Women also did not lose out in other respects, because only three jobs that were done by women were found to have disappeared in 1788 (peat roller, water gate cleaner and caretaker for the community master). The 1788 register notes, instead, a female caretaker at the fruit market. Only the mussel and prawn inspection, and auctioning fish had been transferred from female to male ownership.50 The growth of the towns, therefore, did not just mean that the employment opportunities for women increased and became more diverse, but that the development was combined with more far-reaching specialization between men and women.

ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES

The question is to what extent the change in the organization of public services and how they were carried out had consequences for women’s access to local public offices. In contrast with men, women rarely carried out unpaid work for the town, because they had limited access to administrative functions and citizen offices. The same criteria applied for these citizen offices as for the political administration: good descent, financial health, and free time.51 As a rule, only male citizens could lay claim to these positions. Generally accepted gender standards hindered women’s access to this work.52 The professionalization of public office in the administrative and legal fields in the late eighteenth century, therefore, had no influence on women’s position – they were already excluded from these professions.
In practice, women’s access was greater than it seems at first sight. The general requirements for citizenship, for example, show this. Citizenship, which was gained at birth, through marriage or by payment, conferred rights and duties. Citizenship was a general condition for carrying out a public service. Remarkably enough, this rule, however, did not prove to always hold true for women. Night watchmen, male carriers, and overseers of mortar were generally town citizens when they took their professional oath, but this was not the case for the female peat ton fillers, bridge operators, and stone workers in Rotterdam.53 There is no official documentation in which the town council differentiated between women and men with regards to the requirement for citizenship, but it is noticeable that it was rare that men did not hold citizenship, whereas for women the opposite was the case. This also applied to lower level positions because the male and female jobs mentioned above were similar lower level services. This possibly changed with the increase in bureaucratization. In Gouda, like in other towns, citizenship was compulsory for women.54

Did increased bureaucratization also mean that women were less able to make use of patronage and family networks when acquiring an office? Vanja’s research into German towns showed that bureaucratization in the eighteenth century frustrated the advantages of network relationships. Changed labor relations, stricter quality controls and stricter regulations meant that women were less able to take over offices via family networks. This did not apply so much for the care institutions where it was usual to appoint a woman alongside a man. Vanja argued that, in a broad sense, the professionalization of activities led to women having less access to jobs.55 We did not find any signs of this in our material. For the duration of the eighteenth century, widows were appointed in the position of their late husbands. In contrast with men, it was possible for women to gain access to a public office through marriage. Some offices were held in the name of the husband, but required, in practice, the collaboration of a married couple. Town councils sometimes required both spouses to take an oath, because they carried out the work together and both held responsibility.56 Women sometimes remained invisible in urban administrations but they were expected to assist their husbands. The office of prison warder, for example, was held in name by men, but, in practice, the collaboration of a married couple was required. It was not unusual for a woman to carry on with her husband’s work after he died. In Leiden, for example, the office of prison warder was held several times in succession by widows (1601-1606, 1612-1622, 1698-1727, and 1748-1764).57 Public services such as caretaker, grave digger, town pharmacist, or coachperson were carried on by widows. Families would often carry out certain public tasks for decades on end, because a widow and her children took over the work of the husband.58 Geertruijt van der Werff from Leiden, for example, took over the public office of her husband, Claes van Tol, in 1653, and her family kept the job for more than forty years; Crijntje Dircks from Gouda ended a “family career” of as long as sixty-seven years when she resigned in 1623 from the office of caretaker.59

In closing, there was one last possibility for women to earn money in the service of a town: as a temporary worker who, for a small fee, stood in for another worker who was ill or inconvenienced and did the work for her. The position of temporary worker could be a leg up to a permanent post for female appraisers, midwives, and some market women.60 The temporary worker system was strongly anchored in the professional organizational structure of the early modern period and it institutionalized somewhat in the course of time. Being a stand-in was, apparently, so attractive that in 1752 only thirty-seven of the 120 sworn peat ton fillers in Rotterdam actually worked.61 Around 1700 it was usual in Rotterdam for female depositors, who brought the collateral for a loan from private citizens to the Loans Bank, to rent out their post for forty guilders per year to third parties. In Gouda, where temporary workers earned more than normal female depositors, these arrangements were also common property. In 1675 the town council banned peat ton fillers from working as the
A more important complaint was that the temporary workers were often older women who could shift less work than the peat ton fillers who had originally been employed. Around the middle of the eighteenth century the peat inspector in Rotterdam complained, unsurprisingly, about the lack of workers and in the decades after the town council did indeed mainly appoint young healthy women when there were vacancies. As seen earlier, this policy went together with greater control from the authorities, because in the nineteenth century the stand-in system was completely abolished. This meant that older and sick woman, particularly, lost their access to these jobs. In Gouda the town also increasingly took more control of appointments: in the list of public offices from 1749 numerous temporary workers are registered, but in the 1788 list they have disappeared.

THE STATUS OF FEMALE PUBLIC SERVANTS

During the whole early modern period women were employed for a large spectrum of public services, but they worked principally in lower level public offices and services. They had little access to administrative jobs or the more prestigious civilian offices. The same was, however, the case for most of the male population of the towns. Only small elite managed to reach the rank of officer, principal or secretary of the town. Despite this, women worked in the lowest ranks in the lower level jobs for the authorities as well. Their pay corresponded to the low status of their work. It is true that they were appointed by the authorities and the town councilors defined their salary, but some of them were paid mainly by clients. Their salaries were often so low that many offices only provided a supplement to their income. Wood counters, women who put out the chairs in churches, and bridge operators could not live on the salary that they were ranked at, according to the register from 1749. Women, therefore, held several offices at the same time. About a sixth of the officials in Gouda were registered twice.

The salary of the lower level public sector employees sometimes stayed at the same level for decades. The peat ton fillers in Gouda earned three cents per ton from 1649. Along with this they received a few clods of peat or a tip from clients or town citizens right into the eighteenth century. This was banned, however, (once again) by the town council in 1787. From the seventeenth century, the authorities in Rotterdam took strict action against receiving tips, bribes, and extras, mainly because peat ton fillers received them in exchange for a false tax return. Requests for a salary raise were often dismissed. When the peat ton fillers in Gouda requested a better salary because the authorities had taken away their extras, the town councilors reasoned that the salary of a peat ton filler really was sufficient to live from. The estate of Grietje van der Does from Rotterdam shows that this peat ton filler lived simply, but she certainly was not poverty-stricken. Alongside her household effects and clothes, she left almost 115 guilders and her possessions and house showed that she was well dressed and lived modestly, but “reasonably.” Most peat ton fillers probably got by on their income, but it certainly was not a fortune.

The 1749 register shows that the best paid women were in the categories where the authorities paid a regular wage. To begin with these were, of course, the city midwives. They supplemented their regular salary, which the authorities paid for aiding poor women in childbirth, with assistance at deliveries to paying clients, and in Gouda this earned them further amounts ranging from fifty to one hundred guilders per year. Financial positions also paid well. The female card-holder and female allowance collector had a salary of about 114 guilders per year. Female appraisers and (some) female depositors at the Loans Bank had the highest rank, with salaries of between 140 and 300 guilders per year. However,
depositors did not belong to the top officials in the town. With the exception of one depositor, women were absent from the higher pay scales, in which, amongst others, male undertakers, meat sellers, messengers, drivers, an organist (200-300), the town printer, several commissioners (300-400), bargemen, grave diggers, messengers, the weighman (400-500), bargemen, the harbor master, and different town secretaries (>500) were ranked.

Women mainly were employed in the poorer-paid jobs, even in the sectors where the most money was earned. Depositors at the Loans Bank were the best-paid women. They had to be able to read and add up, and they belonged to the upper middle classes in the towns. In Leiden they were described as the “moneyed class”. They did, however, earn less than their male colleagues at the bank who, as secretary, accountant, and cashier, earned amounts between 267 (secretary) and 820 guilders (cashier). Furthermore, their relationship with the employer was different. Depositors often worked from home and acted as the intermediary between the client and the bank. In Rotterdam and Gouda the depositors themselves lent advances to clients, probably from their own funds. Depositors in both Leiden and Gouda were paid per invested guarantee, which explains the difference in earnings.

That depositors earned less than the rest of the male staff illustrates the division of work according to gender and sector. Women could mainly be found in the lower ranks of public services. Women’s access to regularly paid jobs was primarily more limited than men’s. The majority of women performed services for which they did not receive regular salaries but for which they either received a small amount of extras or were directly paid by clients. Considering the low pay, work in the public service sector was for many women mainly an additional job and they often combined the work with other paid activities. This is the reason why many female officials held more than one office or offered more than one service. Finally, it is true that some women were employed for public tasks on a regular basis and for higher salaries by the authorities, but they rarely gained access to the higher ranks. There were, of course, exceptions, but that does not detract from general gender inequality in public sector pay. Women were frequently employed in many sectors but categorically in the lower sectors with lower pay than men.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article we questioned whether the growth of public services and the expansion of the civil service in early modern towns in the province of Holland increased employment opportunities for women or actually resulted in the professional exclusion of women. In other Western European countries, historians concluded, namely, that women were excluded from local government positions in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century because of the development of professional groups. We did not just want to know if the professionalization of work in this limited sense had an influence on women’s opportunities but also what the effects were of bureaucratization, as described by Max Weber. In our research we included all public offices that counted as civic offices and services according to the early modern town councils.

From the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the number of public services that fell under the responsibility of the authorities in the towns we studied (Rotterdam, Leiden and Gouda) increased greatly. This development was accompanied by a certain bureaucratization of the civil service. The number of positions increased, the differentiation and hierarchization of offices increased, formal rules and procedures were implemented, and written performance records were increasingly kept. This meant, primarily, bureaucratization in the wide sense. There was only a limited development of professional groups.
These developments were not negative for women’s employment opportunities. Their opportunities increased with the growth of public services and the increased specialization and differentiation. The expansion of social, medical, and societal care led to the development between 1500 and 1800 of new professions in the civil service in which women were employed. The flourishing Republic brought about, in addition, a large increase in jobs in the administrative sectors of public works, trade, and transport. The growth of the towns meant that the amount of public sector work for women increased and became more differentiated, but this development was accompanied by a more widespread specialization between men and women. Whilst men primarily found work in the transport sector, women were employed in trade and market jobs. The gender division was apparently widespread, because we saw similar work divisions in Rotterdam, Leiden, and Gouda. In other aspects, women’s access to public functions also did not decrease. During the early modern period wives took over their husbands’ work after their death. It was to be expected that bureaucratization frustrated the old family networks causing women to lose their access to these careers, but we were unable to find any evidence of this.

The professionalization of careers in the sense of setting stricter training requirements did not have any disadvantageous consequences for female officials. This form of professionalization only occurred to a limited extent, primarily in administrative and legal offices, and women were already denied access to these. Midwives were an exception. Professionalization did occur in their profession, but in their case professionalization did not prove to be disadvantageous. Women’s opportunities grew and their salary in the course of the period increased considerably.

The reason that women in the towns of the province of Holland were not excluded from civic services until well into the eighteenth century was, primarily, linked to the nature of their work. Women were mainly employed in lower level jobs, the salaries of which private clients partly paid. Additionally, they had never had access to the higher level posts in which staff faced stricter professional requirements. In other words, in the professions in which women worked there was not professionalization in the strict sense and, therefore, there was no exclusion under the influence of the professionalization of work. Finally women can hardly be said to have been shut out, because jobs in the towns had been divided already according to gender in earlier periods.

A question that is much more difficult to answer is whether the province of Holland differed from other urbanized Western European areas. Research in Germany, England, and France has concluded, at least, that professionalization and widespread regulation led to the exclusion of women. To begin with, it needs to be noted that the historians who carried out the research abroad generally do not state precisely which professions women disappeared from and, furthermore, do not always make a clear distinction between the professionalization and the bureaucratization of work, and that makes a comparison difficult. There are definitely a number of notable differences between the situation in the towns in the province of Holland and the (reasonably well documented) situation in the German towns. In the eighteenth century, women in the Republic were still working as independent city midwives with considerable status, as appraiser and depositors at the Loans Bank, and in low level offices, such as doorkeepers, bridge operators, weighing assistant at the public scales, carriers, or measurers. Women are assumed to have disappeared from these kinds of jobs in German towns. Wiesner ascertained that higher training requirements shut women out of offices that they held together with their husbands. Whether this development really applied for all the low level public offices is not clear, but, according to Wiesner, it certainly was the case for a number of positions that remained accessible for women in the Netherlands. It also is not clear in which form professionalization occurred within such professions – these were,
after all, professions that could not all be labeled as “educated” or for which strict admission and education requirements could be expected.

Research at the level of professions must reveal if the exclusion of women from (lower level) offices in the countries surrounding us actually was as general as supposed in the literature. Furthermore, not only should broad definitions of public services be employed but also a wide range of sources. The financial administration records did not prove enough to be able to gain a full insight into the development of public offices. For a better understanding of early modern public offices and services it is necessary to use the books of public offices and oats, and other town registers. Then it soon would become clear that many town servants cannot easily be put into “modern” categories of public sector employees.

NOTES

5 Max Weber, Gezag en bureaucratie (Rotterdam, 1972), with an introduction by A. van Braam.
8 The research for this article is part of two NWO-funded research projects: Women’s Work in the Netherlands, ca. 1500-1815, project of Ariadne Schmidt (www.iisg.nl/research/womenswork.php) and Civil Services and Urban Communities, the Netherlands 1500-1800, project of Manon van der Heijden (www.let.leidenuniv.nl/history/esuc).

Ibid., 16.


Ibid., 16.

12 Oud-stadsarchief Rotterdam (OSA Rotterdam) nr. 839.


16 Van der Schoor, *Stad in aanwas*, 149-190.


18 J.H. Unger en W. Bezemer, eds, *De oudste stadsrekeningen van Rotterdam. Bronnen voor de geschiedenis van Rotterdam III* (Rotterdam, 1899), 280; OSA Rotterdam, ordinair rekening 1800, nr. 3335, fol. 222-221.


21 See for corruption of bailiffs Wagenaar and Van der Meij, “Een schout in de fout?”, 22-46; J.H.W. Unger, *De regering van Rotterdam 1328-1892. Bronnen voor de geschiedenis van Rotterdam I* (Rotterdam, 1892), 34.


24 Unger, *De regering van Rotterdam*.

25 Streekarchief Midden Holland (SAMH), Oud Archief Gouda (OAG) nr. 76, 16-1-1786, nr. 77, 17-10-1786, nr.4216, folio 13verso-15.


28 GAR, OSA, nr. 3335, fol. 222-225; Van der Borg, *Vroedvrouwen*, 124.


30 Nieuwenhuis, *Vroedmeesters*, 68, 82; Van der Borg, *Vroedvrouwen*, 145.


32 OSA Rotterdam, nr. 839, 1 mei 1680 – 30 april 1727; nr. 807, 1693-1717; nr.808, 1716-1730.

33 Members of the guilds and ‘admissianten’ were left out here.


35 Raadschelders, *Lokale bestuursgeschiedenis*, 33. The following overview of the work of women in service of the city is based on: Gouda: SAMH, OAG, nrs. OAG 195-219 en 274-278; 440, 444, 1163, 1246, 1297, 1374, 1444, 1456, 5038. Rotterdam: OSA nrs. 851, 808, Unger, *Bronnen*; Unger en Bezemer, *De oudste stadsrekeningen*; OSA 3156; 3232, 3335, 839, 807, 808, Lijst van ampten en beneficien dependerende van ‘t College van de Vroedschap (inv nr??); Leiden: (Regionaal Archief Leiden (RAL), Stadsarchief II (SALII) nrs. 934, 961, 968, 970-973, 996-998, 1008-1010.

36 An interesting exception was the female burgomaster of Namen (Belgium), who succeeded her husband from 1734 to 1748. Her appointment was probably related to her financial support of the town, see R. Boumans, “De ambtenaren. Wethouders en stedelijke functionarissen in de 16e, 17e en 18e eeuw”, in J.L.

40 SAMH, OAG nrs. 203, 27-12-1713, 205, 23-12-1734, 210, 5-1-1756. See for example RAL, SAII nr. 53, 28-8-1620; nr. 55, 11-11-1623.

41 Raadschelders, Lokale bestuurgeschiedenis, 20.

42 Unger en Bezemer, De oudste stadsrekeningen, 285-225; nr. 807-808, 839.

43 Unger en Bezemer, De oudste stadsrekeningen, 280-230.

44 OSA Rotterdam, nr. 839, 1700.

45 SAMH, OAG nr. 194a, nr.23, z.d. (ca. 1630); GiA nr. 48 (1688/89); OSA nr. 808, 29-9-1729, p. 497; RAL, SAII, nr.57, 4-10-1629.


48 SAMH, GiA nr. 115 (1795-1804).

49 Raadschelders, Lokale bestuurgeschiedenis, 34.

50 Raadschelders, Plaatselijke bestuursontwikkelingen, 115-119.


52 SAMH, OAG nr. 76 16-1-1786; nr. 4216; Myriam Everard and Mieke Aerts, “De burgeres: geschiedenis van een politiek begrip” in Joost Kloek and Karin Tilmans, eds, Burger. Een geschiedenis van het begrip ‘burger’ in de Nederlanden van de Middeleeuwen tot de 21ste eeuw (Amsterdam, 2002), 173-229, 179.


54 Wiesner, Working women, 75-79, 189; Hufton, The prospect before her, 236.

55 For example: OSA, nr. 808, 5-2-1717, fol. 10; 7-5-1729, fol. 475; 30-9-1729, fol. 498.

56 RAL, SAII nr. 971, 8-5-1653; GAL, OAG nr. 197, 20-1-1623.

57 For example: RAL, SAII nr. 59, 9-11-1634; nr. 69, 17-2-1650.


59 SAMH, OAG nr. 106, 1-7-1675.

60 Manneke, “Vrouwenarbeid”, 204-207.

61 Maassen, Tussen commercieel en sociaal krediet, 36; SAMH, OAG nr. 106, 1-7-1675; OAG nrs. 440, 444.


63 SAMH, OAG nr. 440.

64 SAMH, OAG nr. 218, 11-12-1787.


66 SAMH, OAG nr. 133, 1788; SAMH, OAG nr. 274, 3-12-1793 en 12-2-1796.


68 See for this overview SAMH, OAG nr 440.

69 Gaemers, “Stadsvoedvrouwen”.

70 Maassen, Tussen commercieel en sociaal krediet, 34-35; SAMH, OAG nr. 5056 nr.33; RAL, SAII nr. 985, 18-2-1727.