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Special issue: **Gender in Economic History**

Gender in Economic History
Work, Institutions, and Inequality in International Perspective

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Introduction

The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel awarded to Professor Claudia Goldin in 2023 highlighted the importance of understanding the evolution and drivers of gender differences in our societies. Goldin's work has advanced our knowledge of women's labor force participation, the determinants of the gender wage gap, and the interplay of education, family, and institutions in conditioning opportunities across time. Her research demonstrates that gender is not a peripheral dimension of economic history, but a structuring force in the evolution of labor markets, households, and welfare systems (Perrin, 2024).

This special issue of *Investigaciones de Historia Económica – Economic History Research* (IHE-EHR) honors Professor Goldin's work while presenting new historical research on the causes and consequences of gender disparities across diverse contexts. It builds on a growing number of gender-focused contributions published in *IHE-EHR* in recent years, which includes studies related to migration (Yamamichi and Solà Parera, 2024), living standards (Olguín and Bragoni, 2023; Meisel-Roca, Ramírez-Giraldo and Lasso-Jaramillo, 2023), inequality (Mas-Ferrer, 2023), and discrimination (Catalán Martínez, 2023). The five articles included in this special issue explore the dynamics of women's work, earnings, and agency from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, in Europe and Asia. Collectively, they show that gender influenced the organization of production, the distribution of resources within households, and the ability of women to carve out spaces of autonomy. They also highlight the persistence of barriers – legal, cultural, and institutional – that constrained women's economic roles, even as new opportunities emerged.

The issue opens with the article by **Elise Nederveen Meerkerk and Wenju Yu**, who examine women's earnings and economic roles in the Yangtze Delta between 1756 and 1930.

Using newly reconstructed wage series from archival and secondary sources, they track the contribution of women's textile labor – whether in hand spinning, weaving with imported yarn, or factory work – to household incomes and living standards. Their findings reveal that women's labor often raised families well above subsistence and, at certain moments, strengthened women's bargaining power and decision-making within households. Yet these gains were fragile: industrialization and global competition generated both opportunities and losses, with married women in handicraft production particularly vulnerable. By connecting women's work in China within global debates on industrialization and the Great Divergence, the article demonstrates that women's contributions were both significant and transformative.

A European perspective is offered by **Suvi Heikkuri, Svante Prado, and Yoshihiro Sato**, who study mechanization and its impact on female and child labor in late nineteenth-century Sweden. Drawing on cross-sectional plant-level data from the 1879 manufacturing survey, they show that larger establishments were more likely to employ women and children, as the division of labor in big factories created repetitive tasks that were easier to learn, shifting demand away from skilled male workers. Mechanization itself, however, shows no independent association with women or children employment once establishment size is taken into account. Sectoral variation also mattered: in textiles, women had long been involved in spinning and weaving under the putting-out system, explaining their predominance in textile factories. Overall, the study challenges the simple deskilling narrative of industrialization, showing that the rise of female and child labor was driven more by establishment size, industrial traditions, and wage structures than by mechanization alone.

The theme of institutional barriers is further developed in **Johanne Arnfred's** study of legal reforms in mid-nineteenth-century Sweden. She investigates whether the liberalization of artisan trades increased women's access to workshop ownership. Using establishment censuses across four southern towns, Arnfred shows that the share of female owners did not rise systematically after the reforms. The persistence of constraints – whether in social norms, capital requirements, or marital restrictions – suggests that formal legal changes were insufficient to alter entrenched gendered inequalities in economic life. While the sources do not allow for a consistent assessment of married women's activity or of those registered as self-employed, the evidence overall supports a pessimistic interpretation of the consequences of artisan trade liberalization for women. Her work demonstrates the importance of looking beyond legislation to the deeper structures conditioning women's opportunities.

Turning to Southern Europe, two articles examine female labor market outcomes. **Luisa Muñoz and Mónica Carballal** analyze women's employment in the fish processing sector in Vigo during the first half of the twentieth century. Using records from two major companies in the sector, they document a strongly feminized but highly segmented labor market, in which women were employed seasonally and faced a substantial gender wage gap of 50–60% for comparable occupations. This gap narrowed only gradually, falling to about 20% by the 1950s. By reconstructing family budgets, the authors show that women workers contributed close to 15% of household income (even more if including self-consumption), challenging the male-breadwinner model often assumed for the period. Their results resonate with broader

debates on the insufficiency of male wages in industrializing economies and the indispensable role of women's earnings in sustaining families.

The second article on Southern Europe, by **Paula Barbero**, considers female labor participation rates and occupational structure in Tenerife. The author leverages a local population register containing detailed individual-level information on women's occupation, age and civil status. She finds comparatively high levels of employment in the region, even greater than those of their male counterparts in the youngest age categories. The high rates of economic activity by women, however, were mostly present in low-paid textile jobs (e.g., spinner) in line with a traditional gendered division of labor. This was the result of marked male regional migration and the need to find a non-seasonal source of income that could ensure the subsistence of the household.

Together, the articles in this issue highlight both continuity and change in women's economic roles. They demonstrate how women's work contributed to household survival, industrial transformation, and community well-being, while also revealing the structural barriers that limited equality. By covering regions as diverse as China, Sweden, and Spain, the contributions illustrate the global relevance of a gendered perspective in economic history.

Several articles speak directly to Claudia Goldin's central theme of **labor force participation**, showing how women's work – whether in China's textile sector, Swedish factories, or Spanish fish processing – was crucial yet influenced by sectoral and institutional contexts. The persistent and evolving **gender wage gap** is evident not only in Vigo but also in the broader dynamics of industrial and handicraft production. Finally, the role of **institutions and social norms** emerges forcefully: reforms in artisan trades failed to open real opportunities for women, and mechanization reorganized labor markets in gender-segmented ways. Collectively, these articles pay tribute to Goldin's contributions by extending her research agenda into new geographies, sectors, and time periods, reaffirming the importance of gender as a fundamental dimension for the study of economic history and long-run development.

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