A Woman’s Place Was in the Home: Women’s Work in Renaissance Tuscany

Judith C. Brown

In her pioneering essay, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” the late Joan Kelly suggested that the very developments that opened up new possibilities for Renaissance men, namely the consolidation of the state and the emergence of capitalism, affected women so adversely that for them there was no renaissance. Although she was aware that “the state, early capitalism, and the social relations formed by them impinged on the lives of Renaissance women in different ways according to their different positions in society,” she argued that “women as a group, especially among the classes that dominated Italian urban life, experienced a contraction of social and personal options . . .” This contradiction could be measured in part by looking at changes in the economic and political roles of women, “the kind of work they performed as compared with men, and their access to property, political power, and the education or training necessary for work, property, and power.” The strengths of Kelly’s thesis are her willingness to consider a radically different periodization for women’s history and her clear outline of what we need to know to establish whether there was a “loss or gain with respect to the liberty of women.” But the weakness of her essay lies in the demonstration of her thesis, which rests on a comparison of literary sources from medieval France, such as Andreas Capellanus’s The Art of Courtly Love and Chretien de Troyes’s Lancelot, with those of Renaissance Italy, especially Baldassare Castiglione’s The Courtier and Leon Battista Alberti’s Book on the Family.

The difficulties with this approach are many. Quite aside from the problem of comparing literary traditions and genres from different parts of Europe, the insurmountable problem from the perspective of the works of women is that such comparison is incapable of demonstrating the constraints faced by women in the world of work and economic power. For one, as Kelly herself admits, literary sources can be prescriptive rather than descriptive. They tell us much about the attitudes of the literate groups that produced them and about the public that read them, but they may not correspond to social realities. Secondly, because she confined the demonstration of her thesis to the social conventions constraining upper-class women, she could not readily penetrate the web of economic relations that affected most women in their daily lives. The one possible area that might have bridged this gap would have been the rules governing access to property, which presumably applied to women of all classes. Yet, surprisingly, Kelly’s essay does not explore inheritance laws or the rules regarding the management of property. In short, while she sheds much light on male ideals about women’s economic roles, she does not show that women, patrician or lower class, faced increasing economic constraints.

In this essay, I hope to analyze the issue of women’s economic status from a different perspective. I will use a variety of sources—guild records, population surveys, and literary evidence—to explore the lives of working women in Renaissance Florence and their relation to paid employment. By looking at this one aspect of the lives of working women in one city, I hope to illuminate broader questions of women’s economic power, although obviously the plight of working-class women ought not to be equated with that of women of other classes, and the direction of change in one city does not preclude different developments in other areas of Europe. Furthermore, access to paid employment is not the only, or even the most important, determinant of economic power. As scholars continue to work on this subject, they will undoubtedly consider class, property rights, marriage relationships, and many other social and economic factors before they can arrive at any broad interpretations of the economic and social status of Renaissance women. Nonetheless, if we are to determine whether or not there was a renaissance for women in the economic realm, and by that, like Kelly, I mean an expansion of options available to them, then access to paid employment, the kinds of work women did, how and how much they were paid in comparison with men, all have to be given prominent consideration. Such an examination for Renaissance Florence may well reveal a different pattern from the one suggested by Kelly.

An exploration into the world of women’s work will perform make use of, but not limit itself to, economic theory. While economics is a necessary point of departure that can tell us a great deal about the economic implications and the effects of sexual discrimination, as the
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economist Kenneth Arrow has pointed out, it cannot explain its causes.³ To understand the full range of rules and constraints faced by working women in the Renaissance, we must turn not only to economic factors but also, albeit briefly, to the realm of culture and social values that affected the world of work.

Urban Women

Recent writings about women’s work in the cities of Renaissance Italy suggest that Joan Kelly’s observations about “the declining power of women of rank and the enforced domestication of middle-class women” also hold for those of the working class.⁴ Unlike the Northern European women described in recent years by Louise Tilly, Joan Scott, Natalie Davis, and Olwen Hufton, Italian city women allegedly had very limited economic functions.⁵ Because of their low participation rates in the urban economy, women were of little economic value. Indeed, it has been argued that the meagerness of their contribution to the productivity of households helped to bring about the decline of once flourishing urban centers.⁶

This conception of women’s work, based primarily on data from about 1350 to 1500, only partially describes the experience of urban working women. Florence, one of the most industrialized cities of Renaissance Italy, exhibited a more complex pattern. To begin with, as in all other premodern cities, women often worked as helpers to their husbands, fathers, and brothers in workshops located in their homes. Although their work was economically significant both to their households and to the economy as a whole, its value was reflected only indirectly in the income earned by the males they helped. Their contribution to the productivity of their households is impossible to measure because it left few traces in the historical record, but this is not to say that it had no value. As Natalie Davis has shown, in their wills and other bequests, husbands and fathers frequently alluded to the approximate cash value they placed on the unpaid work performed by the women of their households.⁷

Furthermore, in trying to estimate women’s contribution to the urban economy, we must realize that the trend of women’s participation in market related activities—that is, paid work—was neither unilinear over time nor was it monocausal. For different reasons Florentine women were engaged in paid work in varying numbers depending on the time period and the occupation examined. Employment data, to be sure, are not extensive until the late Renaissance, but scattered references in fiscal, legal, and literary records can help us reach plausible conclusions about changes in women’s participation in the workplace and the reasons for them.

In contrast to the large numbers of working women mentioned in documents of the late thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth centuries, the records of the next two centuries reveal very few. The principal Florentine industry, woolen cloth manufacturing, which until the last quarter of the fourteenth century relied primarily on female weavers, turned to males, many of them foreigners, in the subsequent period.⁸ The nascent silk industry also relied primarily on male workers.⁹ While women continued to exercise certain traditionally female occupations such as midwifery, wet nursing, and domestic service, the guild records, wills, property transfers, and other legal documents no longer mention the large variety of female occupations evident in the notarial records and literary sources of the pre-plague period. The absence of working women from the historical records of the early Renaissance may simply be an anomaly, but that is not very likely in view of the large numbers of documents for this period. An explanation for this shift in employment patterns is readily available in regard to the wool industry: female weavers were replaced by male weavers from Germany. The reasons for the absence of women in other occupations are more difficult to discern. One plausible argument, advanced by David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch, is that lower demographic pressures after 1348 enabled women to avoid the labor market and to enter the marriage market instead.¹⁰

The long absence of women from the ranks of wage labor ended in the late sixteenth century, when once again women began to appear as part of the urban labor force. The account books of silk and wool manufacturers indicate that they made up a rising percentage of workers in the textile sector, which from mid-sixteenth century to mid-seventeenth century still employed between one-half and one-third of the labor force.¹¹ By 1664, 63 percent of the weavers and approximately 40 percent of all wool workers were women, not counting the spinners who resided mostly in the outskirts of the city and who had always been female. Surveys of both the silk and the wool industries completed in 1662–63 show that female employment remained high in the seventeenth century. Women made up 38 percent of wool workers and 54 percent of workers in the silk industry (see tables 1 and 2).¹²

The causes for the increased participation of women in the labor market are rooted in changes in the Florentine economy that will be explored briefly below. We must be careful, however, not to be misled into thinking that women were as well represented outside the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wool merchants &amp; staff</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warehouse owners &amp; staff</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weavers-Camaldoli</td>
<td>84 (35)</td>
<td>157 (65)</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weavers-San Barnabas</td>
<td>13 (4)</td>
<td>290 (96)</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaters</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wool closers</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wapsers</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
<td>26 (96)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth sourcers</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenterers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyers</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shearers &amp; menders</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>763 (61)</td>
<td>473 (38)</td>
<td>1,242</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Numbers in parentheses are row percentages.
b. Includes six weavers of undetermined sex.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dyers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>20 (100)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprentices</td>
<td>71 (100)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children (under 15)</td>
<td>75 (48)</td>
<td>80 (52)</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weavers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>393 (22)</td>
<td>1,393 (78)</td>
<td>1,786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprentices</td>
<td>318 (41)</td>
<td>456 (59)</td>
<td>775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>1,078 (47)</td>
<td>1,238 (53)</td>
<td>2,316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throwers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>36 (35)</td>
<td>66 (65)</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprentices</td>
<td>104 (22)</td>
<td>376 (78)</td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>156 (48)</td>
<td>169 (52)</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4,716 (100)</td>
<td>4,716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3,288 (100)</td>
<td>3,288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2,252 (16)</td>
<td>11,782 (84)</td>
<td>14,034</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Numbers in parentheses are row percentages.


textile sector. Although their numbers are difficult to determine, women did not make up such a large percentage of the paid labor force in most other activities. A very rough indication of their participation can be obtained from the 1631 census, a household survey of the Florentine population. In addition to recording the number and sex of all household residents, the document sometimes includes the occupation of the head of the household and some of his or her dependents. Of the 2,504 females whose occupations were listed, only 20 percent were employed in nontextile related activities such as seamstressing (3.9 percent), prostitution (4 percent), domestic service (3 percent), food production, and a small range of other activities. Because many occupations required no specialized equipment, the census undoubtedly underrepresents the number of women outside of the wool and silk industries. Probably the most undercounted occupation was that of domestic servant. In the census of 1552, which was similar in most respects to that of 1631 but which identified the servants in each household, there were 8,890 servants, two-thirds of them women. From what we know about Florentine society in the seventeenth century, there is no reason to think that there would have been significant alterations in the intervening years.11

The inadequacies of the 1631 census as a survey of employment are of course many. In addition to systematically underrepresenting certain occupations, it does not help us to identify the actual employment of many of the women who are identified as working women. A food vendor, for instance, might also do spinning, a servant might help her master with weaving. Moreover, the census, and for that matter the surveys of the silk and wool industries, do not tell us the number of hours that women worked. Both types of documents probably conceal chronic underemployment. Yet, despite these problems, the census and the industry surveys help to confirm that, by the end of the Renaissance, women were employed in very large numbers. If in order to make a worst case situation, we assume that 80 percent of all working women were employed by the wool and silk industries, as the 1631 census suggests, that all females between the ages of six and seventy-nine were employable, and that approximately half of the population of mid-seventeenth century Florence was female, then we can calculate from the number of female workers included in the 1663 surveys of the wool and silk guilds that at least 63 percent of all working age females in the city in 1631 were active in the workplace.14 This is surely a conservative estimate, because the 1631 census underreports the number of women in nontextile occupations and does not include either less visible activities performed by wives
or female servants in city workshops or the activities of the large number of female religious who often worked preparing wool and silk for production inside the convent walls. Moreover, the wool guild's survey of 1663 does not mention the spinners who resided in the city. Finally, my own assumptions about the productive ages of women may be stretching the biological limits. A different set of assumptions could yield a female work force of 73 percent of the working age women of Florence. The point, however, is clear, whatever set of assumptions one chooses. A large number of Florentine women were paid for their labor and their efforts added considerably to the urban economy.

The growth of paid employment for city women in late Renaissance Florence is related to structural changes that took place in the urban economy. In the last half of the sixteenth century the artisan sector flourished, as many of the old crafts expanded and a new set of luxury crafts developed in response to the growing demand by the European public for luxury products. Florentine workers eagerly set to accommodating the taste for ceramics, books, jewelry, furniture, coaches, and other objects with which the bourgeoisie and nobilities of Europe sought to enhance their prestige and their standards of material life. The emergence of a more diversified world of goods in the late sixteenth century created new employment opportunities for the Florentine population. Although few women found openings in the artisan sector, as men shifted from the production of textiles to that of luxury crafts, the women began to perform many of the previously male tasks in the wool and silk industries. This, more than anything else, probably explains the larger participation of women in the labor force.

Another reason may be the altered status of the guilds in the political economy of late Renaissance Florence. There is a small but growing body of evidence to indicate that throughout Europe there was an inverse relation between the ability of guilds to regulate economic activity and the extent of female participation in the labor force. Merry Weimer's work on women's occupations in Nuremberg suggests that as guilds consolidated their power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they passed regulations excluding women from traditional occupations and relegated them to the margins of the world of work. Similarly, evidence cited by Alice Clark for a variety of English towns suggests that starting in the sixteenth century guilds passed prohibitions against women weavers. In Florence, however, the guilds received a major setback as regulators of economic and political activity with the creation of the Medici principate in 1552.

During the first twenty years of their rule, the Medici abolished the most vital political functions of the guilds and reorganized them as eleven universities whose officers and economic policies were controlled by government officials. Since the early Medici dukes were particularly interested in promoting economic activity, they aimed in various ways to make the guilds less exclusive and more open to competition, whether from neighboring cities in the state or from within the ranks of Florentine labor. It is not surprising therefore to see women enter certain sectors of the labor force at a time when the guilds were at their weakest. This is not to argue that the Medici were champions of the economic emancipation of women or that women after the mid-sixteenth century had equal status in the guilds. Even in mid-seventeenth century, when there were many women masters in the wool and silk industries, very few appear in guild matriculation records and none became guild consuls. Still, the greater tolerance toward female workers in some types of work is revealed in the different ways that two guilds, one in the fourteenth century and the other in the sixteenth, reacted to the presence of women competitors.

In the late fourteenth century, the guild of used clothing dealers (rigattieri) for a time barred women as itinerant hawkers, claiming that they infiltrated people's houses and "persuaded the women to buy to the detriment of their men [that is, of the men of their household]." Two centuries later, the linen guild, which now included the rigattieri, faced with large numbers of female tailors, did not seek to prohibit them from practicing their trade but argued instead that if they were going to work as tailors and maintain shops, they should pay the modest fee to matriculate in the guild.

While such structural factors may account for the increased participation of women in the labor force of late Renaissance Florence, they do not explain why Florentine males worked in luxury crafts while women were employed in the textile industries and a smaller number of other occupations. What determined the sexual segregation of labor in Florentine society? For an understanding of such problems, economists have relied in part on the very useful theory of human capital. According to this theory, investment in human capital, that is, in the acquisition of skills either through education, on-the-job training, or general training, has generally paid individuals a substantial rate of return because it has enabled them to learn difficult skills or to engage in a wide variety of well-paid occupations. Women are generally found in poorly paid, low-skilled occupations because they accumulate less human capital through their work experience. Women's function in the household economy as childbearers, providers of
childcare, and domestic labor results in their more limited and discontinuous presence in the job market, making it harder for them to acquire the training necessary for highly skilled work. Barriers to skill acquisition, moreover, could be higher in premodern economies in which training often took place in the home. There was little incentive for parents to teach their daughters complex and hard to learn skills that they would hardly put to use before they married and left the paternal house. In Italy, where urban women married when they were still in their teens, this would have been a particularly important consideration. While some parents may have counted this training as part of their daughters' dowry, as was the case in some parts of Northern Europe, such an indirect return on their investment was far from certain as it might be difficult to find a husband whose trade could make use of the specialized skills previously acquired by his bride. Evidence from sixteenth-century Lyon and Venice suggests that very few women married men in the same occupations as their fathers. If the same were true in Florence, and preliminary analysis of the 1631 census and of guild records suggests that it was, then it would be better for young girls to work on less skilled tasks where there were immediate returns and where the minimal skills acquired could be easily transferred to their new households. Once there, the young wives of Florentine artisans would be in no position to acquire sophisticated new training. The cares of childrearing and domestic work would ensure that they would simply maintain their previous skills or acquire only those new ones that were easily learned.

The distribution of labor in late Renaissance Florence in large measure accords with the pattern predicted by the human capital approach. Highly skilled artisans were men, and women were relegated to textile work where there were fewer skill requirements. In this regard, it is revealing that in the early Renaissance, when Florence produced a small quantity of simple woolen cloths alongside the more elaborate woolens and silks for which the city became famous, a small number of women appear in the account books of Florentine wool manufacturers as weavers of the plainer and coarser cloths. None worked as weavers in the silk industry, which was entirely devoted to the production of luxury cloths requiring a high degree of skill. In the late Renaissance, however, when both wool and silk production shifted to cheaper, coarser, and simpler cloths, women formed the majority of weavers in the two industries. But, significantly, the silk manufacturers who continued to produce elaborate patterned silks generally turned to male weavers for those cloths while retaining women to work on the rest. A Woman's Place Was in the Home

The accumulation of human capital then is clearly one of the determinants in the distribution of labor in the Florentine economy. But how are we to explain the high concentration of women in certain relatively low-skill jobs and their absence in others? Why are most women wool workers engaged in weaving, warping, and spinning, but not in cleaning, combing, or carding wool? Consistent with the human capital approach is the notion that women have had first and foremost a reproductive responsibility in the home. This would limit employment outside. Textile manufacturing was organized according to a putting-out system in which the merchant consigned the raw silk or wool to workers who did much of the processing of the raw material into cloth in their own homes. Occupations such as weaving, which were carried out in the home, could fit around childrearing and household tasks. The compatibility of these different types of work is illustrated by the fact that in the early seventeenth century, roughly 800 of the 1,025 female weavers surveyed by the Florentine wool guild had children. Other occupations in the textile sector, such as cleaning or carding, were done in central workshops and would have required women to give up their productive roles within the household. It is not surprising then to find that there were no women engaged in those types of jobs. Yet much more than the physical requirements of production were involved in the locational barriers to women's work. If an occupation such as itinerant vendor, for instance, placed a woman outside the home, even though the hours might be flexible and could be accommodated around household chores, it would include few women. The exclusion of women from publicly visible roles was so thorough that in 1610 Grangier de Liverdes commented, "in Florence women are more enclosed than in any other part of Italy; they see the world only from the small openings in their windows."

Women had not always been so restricted. Their confinement to domestic spaces had started much earlier, growing gradually over the course of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth centuries, until then they were barred even from attending the funerals of their kinsmen. Explanations for this shift are complex and partly rooted in changes in inheritance systems and family structures too involved to explore in a brief essay; but one contributing factor was that women were seen, not merely as the caretakers of the material welfare of their home, but also as the guardians of its religious and moral values. From the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries, moralists like St. Bernardino of Siena and Lodovico Dolce advised women to become proficient in two areas: household management and religion.
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The importance of the latter, is made clear in St. Bernardino’s early fifteenth-century description of the religious function of women in the family:

Just as the sun is the most beautiful work in the sky and the world, so a graceful, virtuous, and honest woman, who is fearful of God, is a sun; who like the sun gives life to all things, so does she give life to her husband and to all her family. And if her husband has no faith, she will comfort him and bring him into the faith and into good morals, honest words and honest ways and deeds. And so with her sons and daughters.20

Because these were the tasks of women, it was important that their lives and reputations be unblemished by any hint of scandal. “Shun every sort of dishonor,” Giannozzo Alberti admonished his wife in Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise on the family. “Use every means to appear to all people as a highly respectable woman. To seem less so would be to offend God, me, our children, and yourself.”21 Men thought that the best way to avoid such scandal was to limit women’s exposure to the public world, because for all their moral responsibility women were considered mentally weak and easily led into immoral behavior. In Castiglione’s The Courtier, Gasparo Pallavicino articulates the views of most sixteenth-century men when he states that “women . . . due to the frailty of their sex, give in to their appetites much more than men . . . Therefore men have instilled in women the fear of infancy as a bridle to bind them as by force to this virtue . . . ”22 Indeed, their very faith and credulity, which made them the repositories of religious instruction in their homes, also made women particularly vulnerable to vice in the outside world.23 And one of the most effective conduits of vice was female garrulosity, which having once beguiled Adam, now persuaded others to fall into temptation.24

These attitudes had far-reaching implications for women’s lives and women’s employment in particular. In effect, they worked to keep women out of occupations that required mobility and public exposure. This may explain the reasons given by the second-hand clothing dealers in prohibiting female street hawkers. They attributed women’s sales abilities to their “seduction” of weak-willed female customers who succumbed to their sales pitch.25 Surely, the guild took a different view of the male members of the trade who displayed similar skills.

Since women were considered flighty and incapable of complex reasoning, it also followed that they were meant to obey orders, not give them. Most Renaissance commentators subscribed to the Aristotelian notion that women are subject to the authority of males.26 “They are madmen,” says Giannozzo Alberti, “if they think true prudence or good counsel lies in the female brain.” He adds, “all wives are thus obedient, if their husbands know how to be husbands.”27 A century later, Orazio Lombardelli, had this kind of admonition in mind when he instructed his new bride to be happy that God had granted her a husband such as he who would govern her in place of all others. Just as “the head adorns the body, the prince the city, the gem the ring, so the husband adorns the wife, and she should obey not only when he commands but when he doesn’t.”28

Because the subjection of women to men was seen as part of the natural order, men probably resented employment situations that placed women in superior positions. This worked to keep women out of occupations in which there were distinct workshop hierarchies. Undoubtedly, master’s wives and female domestics helped out by cleaning the workshops, feeding the workers, stoking furnaces, and engaging in other secondary operations. They probably engaged in these tasks in greater numbers than appears from the written records. But although such work facilitated the functioning of their husband’s or father’s establishments, it also kept them apart from the ladder of advancement occupied by apprentices, journeymen, and masters in many of the crafts. Women’s industrial and service occupations generally did not require them to have the extensive numbers of helpers required by workers in leather, stone, or metal crafts, among others. Theirs tended to be solitary jobs, and if help could be used, as was the case with silk throwsters, it was usually provided by other women.29

Yet another reason for the sexual segregation of labor in Florentine society was the large initial outlay of capital required for certain industries such as dye shops, foundries, or wood workshops. By the twelfth century, in Florence as in most of Mediterranean Europe, women were not granted equal shares of their patrimony with their brothers but were provided instead with a dowry that was usually much smaller. During their married years, their dowry was managed by their husbands and only upon becoming widows did they regain legal control over it, if the money had not been spent already. For most women, however, the amount of the dowry was not likely to suffice for both their daily maintenance and investment in trade and industry. Widowhood and poverty normally went hand in hand, and given women’s lack of skills, they were not able through their own work to save enough to acquire the necessary equipment to launch themselves in a new occupation.30
This raises the issue of levels of wealth and pay differentials between men and women—a much neglected and particularly thorny subject among scholars concerned with premodern economies, because the wage data for this period are scarce and qualitatively different from those of modern times. According to the human capital theory, women should earn less because they did not attain the same skill level as men. Indeed, this is confirmed by the account books of Florentine textile manufacturers. While the piece rates paid weavers of both sexes did not vary for equal work, women were less well paid because they were employed more frequently in weaving cheaper, coarser cloths. A female weaver could make ten *bracca* of tafetta, a plain type of silk, in a week. For this she was paid approximately 70 soldi in the decade between 1610 and 1620. A skilled weaver, usually male, could weave three to four *bracce* of voided satin velvet a week, for which he received between 210 and 280 soldi. In short, a skilled male weaver could expect to earn three to four times more than an unskilled female. There were, however, other differences in pay scales that cannot be explained on the basis of human capital. For example, while tafetta weavers (mostly female), whose job required a certain amount of skill, made 70 soldi a week, totally unskilled male workers in the construction industry received an average daily wage of 20 soldi, which comes to 100 soldi in a five–day work week.

The wage differences observed in these two low-skill occupations stem from the sexual segregation of labor itself. As women were restricted to a limited number of occupations, there was a relatively large supply of workers in the fields that were open to them. This “overcrowding,” as some economists have called it, resulted in women’s receiving lower wages and men’s receiving higher wages than if sexual constraints to occupational mobility had not existed. If then the economic value of urban women, as measured by cash wages, was low compared with that of men, it was not because they did not participate in the market economy but rather because they had fewer skills and because they were crowded into a smaller number of activities that were less well rewarded than those of men.

**Rural Women**

The restrictions on work faced by urban women were performed different from those faced by women living in the country. For one, in rural Tuscany the agricultural family was to a large extent both the unit of production and of consumption. Wage labor was not very common. Secondly, because household tasks and the tasks of the farm could not be so easily separated, women naturally had provided a considerable portion of the labor force from time immemorial.

Yet, although female labor had always been important, we should nonetheless keep in mind that the extent of rural women’s productive labor was closely related to the requirements of specific agricultural systems. In Tuscany, as elsewhere in Europe, these varied tremendously over short distances, as mountains, plains, rivers, and other geographic features helped determine the agricultural output. Some parts of Tuscany were almost entirely devoted to sheep raising, some to cereal cultivation or to mixed cropping that included viticulture and olive trees, and others added different crops ranging from flax to saffron. Institutional arrangements also differed widely. Some areas relied primarily on sharecropping, others on fixed rent tenancies, and still others on the family owned and operated farm. All of these factors had a bearing on how women were integrated into the agricultural work force, so that a valid generalization covering all these situations cannot be made. Neither is it possible to give a detailed account of the labor of country women throughout Tuscany because of the limitations of space as well as the obscurity that still shrouds the rural world of the Renaissance, the world in which the vast majority of people lived. Given these limitations, to what extent can one find in the countryside a parallel to the growing economic function of urban women in the late Renaissance? Despite obvious geographic differences among agricultural landscapes, we can observe similarities in agricultural developments that helped engender a new role for women. In some areas of the Florentine state, there was a growth of *agricultural promiscua*, multicropping farming that aimed, among other things, to give landlords a larger share of commercial crops and to make a more profitable use of available land and labor. Gradually less land was devoted to cereals and a larger share was planted with vines, olives, and mulberry trees for sericulture. The spread of these crops was related to a growth in demand for Tuscan wines, a change in tastes, as consumers switched from eating animal fats to olive oil, and to the growth of the Florentine silk industry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These new forms of land use, and especially those related to sericulture, had a profound impact on the role of women in the agricultural economy. Tuscan agriculture had always made use of labor-intensive techniques. But not all hands could be used for many of the time-consuming and important tasks. Most peasants, for example, did not own ploughs, so the cultivation of cereals depended on the use of the hoe (*vanga*)—a back-breaking, slow, and labor-intensive method that was done most effectively by strong men. It has
been estimated that a 25-acre farm devoted primarily to cereal cultivation, as was the case in much of Tuscany in the early Renaissance, required at least four to five men capable of using a *vange*. For each of them, however, the rural population contained approximately five women, children, and elderly men, most of whom were idle or underemployed much of the agricultural cycle. Because such a large proportion of the land was devoted to cereals, both the amount of land that could be farmed and the total agricultural output of the early Renaissance were very limited.

The extension of viticulture and olive trees created new opportunities for the previously underemployed workers in the farm. Women could tie the vines and harvest the grapes as easily as men. In some tasks, however, such as pruning olive trees and terracing hillsides, men still had a competitive advantage. Thus, by the 16th century, establishing a more productive system of agricultural labor finally came with the introduction of mulberry trees and sericulture. Mulberry trees were raised first in the Valdinievole and the territory of Pisa and Pistoia after the mid-fifteenth century and, in response to market demands and government efforts, spread rapidly to other parts of the state, including the Valdelsa and the Arno valley. Tuscan sericulture increased by three-quarters from 1,440 to 1,576, more than doubled in the following twenty-five years, and increased by two and one-half times between 1610 and the mid-seventeenth century. In the last half of the 1600s, sericulture was a major agricultural activity in the Val di Nievole, Valle di Bisenzo, the Tuscan Romagna, the Val di Chiana, the Pratognano, and parts of the Val d’Arno, with production reaching an average of 110,000 *libbre* of silk annually.

If silk cultivation was male-intensive, then sericulture was female-intensive, with mature and child intensive. Women and children gathered the leaves from the mulberry trees, which in many areas were kept suitably pruned to a small size. Women also raised the silk cocoons, as the English traveler Robert Dallingon remarked during his Tuscan travels, when he saw peasant women hatching the silkworm eggs in their bosoms to supplement with their own bodies the insufficient warmth provided by the sun. Raising silk worms was a very labor-intensive process, but it took only a few weeks and, in contrast to the labor inputs for other agricultural tasks, it required no special physical attributes, only constant vigilance. Practically all members of a household could be utilized. Women and children therefore performed these tasks while the men engaged in other forms of labor on the farm. The next stage of silk preparation, processing cocoons into raw silk by reeling and spinning, was also in the hands of women, assisted by children or otherwise unoccupied members of the household. Probably planting and pruning mulberry trees and cutting wood for the fires required in reeling were the only tasks performed by able-bodied men.

Sericulture thus constituted an important source of additional employment for Tuscan women and helped to link the household economy to the market place. The introduction of this activity into the rural economy of the late Renaissance resulted in a more intensive use of society’s labor resources. Just how intensive may be estimated from late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century production figures. In 1590, when Florence produced about 10,000 silk cloths annually, 12.5 percent of the raw silk came from Tuscan. To produce this amount required the full-time labor equivalent of approximately 1,560 workers to raise the cocoons over a 45-day season. 120 reevers over a 100-day season, and 70 spinners over a 200-day season. By the 1650s, when the Florentine silk cloth industry continued to produce the same number of cloths but got 75 percent of silk from Tuscan, sericulture provided full-time employment for approximately 9,360 cocoon raisers, 740 reevers, and 420 spinners over similar work seasons. In reality, a much larger number of women undoubtedly engaged in these occupations, as most did not work full days at making silk but rather added these tasks to their other chores. Sericulture thus had a profound impact on the lives of women as productive members of rural society. When we consider the low level of output of premodern agricultural systems, when one out of every three or four years could bring famine, we can appreciate the importance of the integration of female labor into the agricultural world. Every person who could work to enlarge the agricultural output, every person who was not dependent on the meager output of others, helped to keep rural society from the brink of catastrophe. By contributing to the rising agricultural output of the early modern period, the work of women helped to improve people’s material life and their chances for survival.

**Renaissance for Women**

To conclude, both in the cities and in the countryside, women were gradually integrated into the workforce of Renaissance Tuscany. Despite formidable barriers related to the lack of skills and capital, to prejudice about where women could work without losing their honor, and to resentment on the part of male artisans, women became very active participants in the economy of the Renaissance city and its countryside. Indeed, one is tempted to reverse recently advanced
arguments that the limited economic function of women helped bring an end to Tuscan economic growth by mid-sixteenth century and to argue instead that the failure of the economy to modernize in the early modern period was related to the very success with which women gained access to paid employment and to productive labor in the family farm.54 If women had had more limited economic functions, perhaps there would have been greater incentive for the economy to turn to new industries that were more conducive to modernization. Too much importance having been attached already to the first notion, however, it would be equally wrong to attribute to the labor of women the major blame for the economic turn of events in post-Renaissance Tuscany. To understand the course of the Tuscan economy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many other aspects of economic life, about which we know all too little, need to be examined. Nevertheless, there is not much doubt, on the basis of the available evidence, that the participation of women in the labor force became increasingly significant in the late sixteenth century and continued to be so in the next century.

This raises a number of important issues for scholars working on the history of women in Renaissance times. The first is that of the relationship between ideology and behavior. From the mid-fourteenth through much of the seventeenth century, the rules governing the lives of Tuscan women were not significantly relaxed. Despite some tentative starts toward a reassessment of the notion of woman and her role in society, Renaissance thought continued to be tied to what Ian Maclean has called the "scholastic synthesis," which relegated women to a subordinate and dependent status. Yet, despite this relatively static ideology and the rules of behavior that they engendered, women managed to assert themselves in growing numbers in realms of economic activity from which they had been absent in the early Renaissance. How are we to explain this discrepancy? Surely, the importance of ideology cannot be denied. Renaissance women had to contend with it and to develop strategies, conscious or unconscious, for dealing with it. But if the rules that constrained their behavior closed off many options, they still left others open, and, as many of the essays in this volume reveal, women were very inventive in carving out for themselves meaningful, productive, and creative roles. We need, therefore, to look not only at the rules of society but also at how men and women understood them, implemented them, and often circumvented them.

Another question that arises from our study of Tuscan women is to what extent were they exceptional? Were they the only ones to

surmount some of the economic constraints imposed on them or did women elsewhere in Renaissance and early modern Europe also increase their participation in the labor market? A precise answer is still premature because the economic life of women in Renaissance times is still largely uncharted territory. Some of the evidence presented by Richard Rapp on Venice suggests that while women may have found increasing employment in the sixteenth century because of the growth in that city's industrial base, they lost ground in the seventeenth century when some industries moved to the countryside.55 The work of Merry Wiesner on women in Nuremberg suggests that in that city women were increasingly relegated to the margins of the labor force. And Alice Clark in her survey of the working life of English women argues that the development of capitalism in seventeenth-century England led to the exclusion of women from the skilled trades and from most forms of wage earning.

On the other hand, not all the evidence points in this direction. Rapp also suggests that in industries other than textiles the absence of women wage earners in Venice may be "a fiction of documentation . . . in a city where more than one of every ten households was headed by a woman it would be imprudent to discount their presence in the work force."56 Equally important, evidence gathered in the last half century about the early forms of capitalism suggest that it is no longer possible to subscribe to Alice Clark's account of the usurpation of small-scale household production by merchants who organized large workshops separating work from the home and thereby turning independent ateliers into wage earners and women into idle dependents.57 Until the advent of the factory system, at a much later date, most work continued to be done in the home, even in England, the birthplace of the industrial revolution. There was therefore nothing inherent in the economic system that kept women from full participation in the labor force, as Clark and then Joan Kelly have previously argued. That large numbers of women in many parts of Europe in fact continued to participate is ample evidence that there is no simple link between the advent of capitalism and the declining role of women in the labor market. Clark's evidence itself subverts her argument. Notwithstanding guild restrictions and other constraints, her sketch reveals women actively engaged in many aspects of textile production, including weaving, as well as in the retail trades and in various crafts such as printing and chandlery.58 Recent work on London's working women by Nancy Adamson reinforces this impression. Women were butchers, bakers, dressmakers, and feltmakers, doing virtually all kinds of work alongside their husbands and fathers.
Moreover, widows often continued in these occupations and took on apprentices and journeymen. Legally, women could belong to the guilds, and although few did so independently, many London widows took advantage of the guild privileges accorded them and freely practiced their craft or trade within the city.57

On the Continent, women also appear frequently in the ranks of wage laborers and artisans, as can be seen in the work of Natalie Davis for Lyon and Martha Howell for Leiden.58 They usually adjusted their labor to the workshop needs of fathers, brothers, or husbands, but independent artisans were by no means rare. Whether this was true for most European cities or whether such participation in market-related employment was more or less common in the Renaissance than in medieval times will have to await further research. It is worth remembering, however, that if in some places women were barred from certain occupations either because of the altered organization of production or because of guild restrictions, the impact of this was partly counterbalanced by the creation of new occupations and the growth in the total number of jobs linked to the market by the spread of a capitalist economy.59

Finally, there is the question of whether the availability of paid employment opportunities increased women's economic power. Here again our assessment must be very cautious. The wages of female workers were usually very meager. Most were fortunate if they could earn enough to keep themselves, let alone their children, above the margins of subsistence. Women, more often than men, were dependent on the handouts of charity institutions to supplement their wages. Yet, however limited the options and the rewards, would not the young wife augmenting the income of her artisan husband and aware of the importance of her contribution, assert herself more boldly in the management of her household than would the totally dependent wife? And wouldn't the husbands, fathers, and brothers of such women grant them a greater say in the important decisions affecting the family, knowing that its very survival depended on the additional income generated either directly or indirectly by the work of the female members of the household? To the extent that increased employment opportunities contributed to greater financial independence, women undoubtedly gained a small measure of economic power.60 If we limit our assessment, then, to this one area of economic life, without implying that it covers all facets of women's economic experience or even all classes of women, then we can argue that in Florence, and perhaps in other cities as well, there was in the Renaissance, a renaissance for women.