

# Gender and Textile Culture: The Case of the French Knitting Industry

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## Résumé

*Troyes est le principal centre français de la bonneterie. Industrie artisanale régionale au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, le tricot s'est mécanisé au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et, avec l'avènement des machines à vapeur, après 1860, les bonnetiers ruraux sont venus s'installer à Troyes pour y travailler. Pourtant, le travail effectué à la maison, sous diverses formes, a continué de coexister avec le travail en manufacture jusqu'à assez récemment au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.*

*La recherche de l'auteur a surtout porté sur deux séries de questions : Comment et pourquoi le lieu de travail s'est-il féminisé de 1900 à aujourd'hui? De quelle manière s'est instaurée la division du travail entre les hommes et les femmes et comment la situation a-t-elle évolué? Comment le lien établi entre la technologie et le sexe d'une personne a-t-il aidé à déterminer quels travaux attribuer aux femmes? Quel rôle les définitions sexuelles des habiletés a-t-il joué dans ce processus? Comment les intérêts de classe et de sexe ainsi que les relations entre classes sociales et sexes ont-ils évolué, dans le contexte d'une culture de travail dominée par un puissant conflit de classes, dans cette ville manufacturière? Quel rôle le mouvement socialiste a-t-il joué dans le processus visant à déterminer la place des femmes dans les études sur le travail?*

*Les avenues futures de recherche pourraient d'abord inclure les termes dans lesquels ont été formulées les demandes des femmes d'un salaire égal pour un travail égal, le contexte dans lequel cela s'est fait et la façon dont la situation a évolué, puis l'établissement de la généalogie de familles, en remontant jusqu'à 1848, afin d'examiner les tendances familiales en matière de reproduction, «d'hérédité» des métiers et de migration.*

## Abstract

*Troyes is the major French centre for the production of knitted goods. A regional cottage industry during the eighteenth century, knitting became mechanized over the course of the nineteenth century, and with the introduction of steam power after 1860, rural stockings migrated to the mills in Troyes to work. However, homework in various forms coexisted with factory work, a pattern which subsisted well into the twentieth century.*

*The author's research has focused on two sets of questions: How and why did the feminization of the workplace occur during the period 1900 until the present? What was the way the sexual division of labour emerged and how did it change? How did the linkage of technology and gender help to determine women's jobs? What role did gender definitions of skill play in this process? And, how did class and gender interests and relations evolve within a work culture dominated by strong class conflict in this mill town? What was the role of the socialist movement in shaping women's place in labour studies?*

*Future directions for research include the terms in which women's demands for equal pay for equal work were formulated, in what context, and how the situation evolved; and secondly, the constitution of family genealogy back to 1848 to examine family patterns of reproduction, work-heredity and migration.*

Preliminary remarks are in order to explain some very basic differences between Anglo-American historical writing on "gender and textiles" and French studies on this question. French historiography on the textile industry has concentrated on regional monographs reflecting at once the geographic dispersion of textile production in France and its cultural

diversity. On another level, French historians have been more interested in seeking economic explanations for the slower pace of French industrial development in relation to England than in analyzing the social factors of the industrialization process.<sup>1</sup> Recent research by labour historians has sought to re-focus discussion on critical issues in the relations

between labour and capital in this process. The latest studies have dealt with the changing composition of the French working class, including women and immigrants, and have contributed to placing these changes within the broader framework of French social history. Such studies were partly inspired by E.P. Thompson's work on nineteenth century England.<sup>2</sup> The renewed interest in what is termed popular or working-class culture stresses the particular values, practices and forms of resistance to industrialization that have characterized the French working class during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The study of gender relations, however, has a very marginal status in French historiography in general, to the point that French women historians entitled a collection of essays published in 1984, "Is women's history possible?"<sup>3</sup> The term "gender" has not been generally adopted to define the notion of socially and culturally constructed sexual difference. The fact that several terms are used in French, originating in different intellectual and philosophical traditions of the social sciences, indicates to some extent the difficulty of establishing gender as a category of analysis in French sociology and history.<sup>4</sup> An important essay by a group of *historiennes* published in the *Annales* and written as a critique of the dominant French school of historiography and its "new history," is a case in point. The article is entitled "Women's Culture and Women's Power: An Attempt at Historiography" and nowhere is the term "gender" used. However, the concept exists, although worded in different formulations. The translation of this article, which appeared in the first issue of the *Journal of Women's History*, provoked hard criticism from American feminist historians working in their own field of United States History.<sup>5</sup> My own experience of France makes me feel that, in the debate over gender, culture and power, we are not yet ready for comparative historiography. While women historians might feel empowered by the concept of gender, they must struggle within the real constraints of their own cultural context and historiographic tradition.

My own research deals with women's work culture in Troyes, the major centre in France for the production of hosiery and knitwear.<sup>6</sup> I set out to examine women's wage work, reputed unskilled and low paid work, in an overall textile sector on the decline. I sought to question underlying assumptions in French historical writing about women's traditional place within the working-class family and

within a work culture. In Troyes, women knitters had traditionally worked alongside men in this regional cottage industry since the introduction of the knitting frame in the eighteenth century. Yet their identity as women workers remained largely undefined in the transition between the domestic and the factory system. It was the skilled male artisan, albeit a poor stockinger, who was portrayed in local history.<sup>7</sup> Women workers became visible actors as their numbers increased and as production became centred in the mills. Around 1900 the hosiery industry employed some 21,000 workers in the Département de l'Aube, more than half concentrated in the mills of Troyes. Women represented 51 per cent of the work force at that time, 62 per cent by 1921, and 76.4 per cent in 1975. This process of feminization came about without displacing men from their jobs and, according to all accounts, without overt competition between men and women. Many of these women were homeworkers at some point of their lives. A specific pattern for the organization and distribution of work between rural and urban workers, between women factory or homeworkers and more "skilled" male operatives and technicians came to characterize the industrial process in Troyes.

What did the study of gender as a historical category bring to this research? In this paper several ways are suggested in which introducing the notion of "gender" contributed to revising the history of the Troyes knitting mills, in particular by raising important, heretofore neglected questions. These questions may be grouped under two headings. First, how and why did the feminization of the work force take place during the twentieth century? What was the way the sexual division of labour emerged and in what ways did it change? Second, how did class and gender relations evolve within a work culture dominated by strong class conflict in an industrial town? Is there any evidence of a distinct women's work culture within the dominant male one?

### **Feminization and the Sexual Division of Labour**

Historians of the Troyes textile industry focused on the development of machine knitting on the Lee-type frame, recognized as a man's machine. According to the Statutes of the *Communauté des Bonnetiers d'Arcis-sur-Aube*, dating from 1750, women were forbidden to operate the stocking frame. However, in domestic production it is unlikely that such

limits to women knitting could have applied. Family workshops depended on the labour of all its members, and women and children shared productive tasks with men. In the mills men's and women's work was more sharply defined. Job segregation by sex became the rule. Cotton's Patent, a flat-bed knitter for mass production, was operated exclusively by men. Even with the introduction of small circular machines in the mills, which women operated from time to time, the tradition of male knitters predominated.

Women's tasks were largely a matter of convention or custom that had developed out of the domestic system. Women were traditionally responsible for preparing the raw materials, for spinning, bobbin-winding, seaming and hand-finishing. With the introduction of new seamers at the end of the nineteenth century, their work became rationalized. Certain operations could be put out to women working at home on specially designed small machines. Mechanization also resulted in the intensification of female hand labour in the finishing stage. The transformation of knitting technology, then, created more jobs for women. From 1900 on, their numbers increased steadily in the mills. There was little gender antagonism over jobs since seaming and finishing were unquestionably women's work. Employers encouraged married women with children to continue working while raising their children. Low wages made this a virtual necessity for most couples.

"Sexual divisions of labor," as Joan Scott has argued, "are neither natural nor fixed."<sup>8</sup> They are a matter of custom and are defended as such. If women workers in the Troyes mills did not challenge the existing gender hierarchy which attributed skill and mastery to male knitters, it was because certain female occupations were clearly recognized as skilled work in which women excelled. Nevertheless, conflicting interests between men and women workers arose in the Troyes mills on questions of factory discipline and wage increases. Such questions tended to bring out converging interests between employers and male workers. In the long run, the overwhelming feminization of the work force occurred because employers successfully maintained job segregation by sex, strengthened the authority of male overseers and played on gender divisions.

The structure of the local labour market was also an important factor in increasing women's employment. The knitting industry completely dominated the local economy. Textile workers and their families had little choice: it was hosiery mill employment or emigration. During the economic crisis of the 1930s skilled knitters eventually did emigrate to the nearby Paris region. Employers could also recruit from a labour pool in the countryside and continued to furnish outwork to rural homeworkers. Labour unrest, including three major strikes in 1900, 1921 and 1936 under the Popular Front, also encouraged employers in their strategy of hiring unorganized, young, rural female labour.

► **Fig. 1**

Advertisement for a home knitting machine from a manufacturer in Mulhouse about 1926. Many women in Troyes were homeworkers at some point in their lives.



The existence of a revolutionary tradition within the working class provided the political context for analyzing gender divisions. By the turn of the century the local socialist movement, led by the followers of Jules Guesde, had mobilized a majority of male and female workers in the mills. Despite the strength of the initial movement, unions remained weak. They failed to renew their appeal to women and paid little attention to their specific demands. Male leaders ran the unions according to a male corporate tradition which served class interests in the long run but explicitly assigned women to secondary domestic roles. Rather than be men's rivals in the mills, women's place was in the home. "...rester à la maison pour soigner les marmots et le pot-au-feu," advised national textile union leader Victor Renard in 1908.<sup>9</sup> It is no wonder that employers played on divisions within the working class.

Historians writing about the Troyes mills failed to explain the process of feminization in any other terms than local custom. Seaming and finishing were women's work, and thus

indicator of change and interaction. If we examine the term *bonnetière*, used to designate women knitters in the local work culture, we notice a significant change in women's position in the Troyes knitting mills during the twentieth century. Around 1900, *bonnetière* conveyed the idea of an independent and skilled woman worker in the knitting mills, the proud local symbol of Troyes work culture. By mid-century, *bonnetière* connoted the factory girl, tarnished by vulgarity and by her association with men in the workplace.<sup>10</sup> Behind the language of the workplace lies an elaborate cultural system of gender representation.

### Gender Relations and Women's Work Culture

Class interests largely determined women workers' behaviour in the Troyes mills. Women felt they belonged, as workers, wives and mothers, to a mill-town community which recognized their social roles and affirmed their work identity. Such recognition within the



◀  
**Fig. 2**  
Women winders and bobbin doffers about 1910. (Courtesy of the Écomusée, Fourmies, France)

more women were hired to keep pace with the increased productivity of knitting machinery. In the same way, they failed to identify gender divisions and conflicting interests within the working class. It was argued that one of the strengths of the Troyes industry was the maintenance of high employment for generations of workers, despite periods of economic recession. Such analyses belied the loss of skilled jobs for male knitters and the deteriorating working conditions for women. Language serves here as an important social

Troyes work culture, even when largely symbolic, reduced possible gender conflict. Two examples will illustrate the ways in which gender differences were constructed in this textile culture.

Historical studies have paid little attention to skill as a "class political weapon"<sup>11</sup> in the social relations of capitalist production. The gender dimensions of skill, and the role it has played in power relationships between men and women, have been largely overlooked. Women's occupations in general have hardly

been synonymous with skill. In the Troyes mills, however, the social value attached to certain female occupations, or *métiers*, revealed a technical textile culture shared with male knitters and valued by employers and coworkers alike.<sup>12</sup> Strike records in 1900 show that women workers signed separate strike declarations from men, in the name of their female co-workers and their own profession. Such evidence suggests that women borrowed

from the corporate or craft tradition along the male model.

Underlying this behaviour was a growing sense of professionalism, consistent with two contradictory trends developing for women's jobs within the industry. Hosiery occupations had their own system of internal ranks. On the one hand mechanization brought women seamers their own machines, explicitly recognized as being for females, with which to

► **Fig. 3**

Program from 1937  
"Fête de la bonneterie"  
in Troyes, printed by  
the local newspaper, Le  
Petit Troyen. Between  
1909 and 1937 eight  
queens were elected by  
their women co-workers  
as symbols of virtue  
through work. (Courtesy  
of Archives départe-  
mentales de l'Aube)



demonstrate their special skills. Their job description even borrowed the title of the machine they operated, similar to male knitters' jobs. On the other hand increased social recognition was given to the manual skills exercised by women menders whose embroidery-like needlework enhanced the silk stockings so prized during the *Belle Époque* period. Prizes were awarded to young menders at a local competition organized by Troyes mill owners in 1930. The local newspaper account played upon time-worn stereotypes of femininity by qualifying the menders as "Penelope's little girls, menders with magic fingers."<sup>13</sup>

A second cultural example is provided by the corporate festival which served to link the workplace and the Troyes community and to bridge class differences between employers, artisans and workers. The annual *Fête de la bonneterie*, held in September since the days of the guild, took on a new dimension in 1909 with the crowning of a woman worker as "queen" for the day. Between 1909 and 1937 eight queens were elected by their women co-workers as symbols of virtue through work. These queens came to symbolize the feminization of the work force in the midst of changing work values and the modernization of the Troyes knitting industry. Here, the representations of work, both men's and women's, provide the symbolic aspects of work culture, and demonstrate how sexual difference operates in a textile culture and in a political system.

In general the shared techniques and traditions of textile culture served to cement class and social identity in Troyes. Women workers acquired a positive sense of themselves, which meant having a profession in most cases, not just a job, deriving satisfaction from fashioning beautiful clothes, but also earning a living, feeding the family, and working, outside their homes. These were all values which contributed to women workers' sense of their own worth within the dominant male culture.

### Future Directions for Research

If this paper has taken a somewhat defensive stance with regard to gender, it is because of the context of French historiography indicated in the opening remarks. When writing up my research last year, I discovered the work of Sonya Rose and Joy Parr on the English and Canadian hosiery industries.<sup>14</sup> The fact that

work had progressed independently in different national contexts and had come to converging conclusions in some respects, underscored the importance of comparative research. Several themes that might be promising for comparison can be suggested.

Little seems to have been written about women's apprenticeship for hosiery work. Men's more formal training acquired through a guild apprenticeship, mill workshop or professional school has been documented or has at least left its trace for posterity. Women knitters, seamers and menders often learned their skills from other women, handing down a body of technical know-how from one generation to the next in the oral tradition. Much of this knowledge will disappear with the last practitioners of specific female hosiery occupations. In Troyes I interviewed the two prize-winning menders from the 1930 competition and tried to analyze patterns of work-heredity in their families. Not surprisingly, both these women learned their skills from other women in their families, although work discipline and their particular work ethic were partly transmitted through their fathers. Male dominance in the field of technical knowledge and men's monopoly over the more productive knitting machines did not stop these women from resisting attempts to de-skill them and from seeking opportunities to improve their skills in the workplace. Analyzing the cross patterns of apprenticeship or training with different family structures within a permanent factory population might provide new insights on the linkage of gender and jobs and its relation to sexual identity.

It would also be worthwhile knowing more about wage systems, especially how the piecework system operated with regard to men and women. At the very least it would be possible to begin to document the complex set of factors which have contributed to wage discrimination against women. One could also begin to deconstruct the "breadwinner" ideology. How does the notion of a family wage work against women's interests? What happens to job composition when men and women are said to be doing the same tasks? In what political context is the demand for equal pay for equal work formulated by women workers, and what are the problems it raises? All these questions are highly pertinent for the political present.

## NOTES

1. François Caron, *Histoire économique de la France : XIX<sup>ème</sup>-XX<sup>ème</sup> siècles* (Paris: A. Colin, 1981), and Claude Fohlen, *L'industrie textile au temps du Second Empire* (Paris: Plon, 1956).
  2. Articles by Alain Cottureau, "The Distinctiveness of Working-Class Cultures in France, 1848-1900," and Michelle Perrot, "On the Formation of the French Working-Class," in *Working-Class Formation, Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, ed. I. Katznelson and A. Zolberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 111-154. For a broad social history, see Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française, XIX<sup>ème</sup>-XX<sup>ème</sup> siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), and his *Le creuset français : histoire de l'immigration, XIX<sup>ème</sup>-XX<sup>ème</sup> siècles*. (Paris: Seuil, 1986).
  3. Michelle Perrot, ed., *Une histoire des femmes est-elle possible?* (Paris: Éditions Rivages, 1984).
  4. For history see Cecile Dauphin et al., "Culture et pouvoir des femmes : essai d'historiographie" in *Les Annales*, no. 2 (March-April 1986): 271-293; Christine Planté, Michelle Riot-Sarcey et Eleni Varikas, *Le genre de l'histoire*, Les Cahiers du Grif, no. 37/38 (Éditions Tierce, Spring 1988); and Michelle Perrot, "Sur l'histoire des femmes en France" in *Revue du Nord*, no. 250 (July-September 1981): 569-579. For sociology, see Barrère-Maurisson, M.A. et al., *Le sexe du travail : structures familiales et système reproductif* (Grenoble : Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1984).
  5. See the articles on the theoretical and methodological dialogue on the writing of women's history in the *Journal of Women's History* 1, no. 1, (Spring 1989): 63-107, and in particular the comments of Karen Offen.
  6. Helen Harden Chenut, "Formation d'une culture ouvrière féminine : les bonnetières troyennes, 1880-1939" (Doctorate thesis at Université de Paris VII, 1988).
  7. The classic history of the industry is Julien Ricommand, *La bonneterie à Troyes et dans le Département de l'Aube : origines, évolution, caractères actuels* (Paris: Hachette, 1934).
- Contemporary studies have continued this same focus: Jean Darbot, "Industrialisation à domicile : les métiers à bonneterie dans les foyers troyens," in *Culture technique*, no. 3 (September 1980): 205-210, and Jacques Poisat, *Les origines de la bonneterie en France et dans le Roannais*, Groupe de Recherches archéologiques et historiques du Roannais, Dossiers no. 8-9 (1982).
8. Joan Scott, "On Language, Gender and Working-Class History," in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 65.
  9. *L'ouvrier textile* (1 octobre 1908), 4. Renard was speaking before the Fédération nationale du textile at their Congress held in Troyes.
  10. Helen Chenut, "Formation d'une culture," 274-278. An interesting linguistic study of present day terminology in the hosiery industry only partially raises this question. See Françoise Perdriset, *Recherches sur le vocabulaire de la Bonneterie*. (Doctorate thesis in linguistics, Université de Paris, 1980).
  11. Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers, Male Dominance and Technological Change* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 116. See also Ann Phillips and Barbara Taylor, "Sex and Skill: Notes Towards a Feminist Economics," in *Feminist Review*, no. 6, (1980).
  12. For an analysis of the social construction of skill in the Troyes mills, see Helen Chenut, *La construction sociale des métiers masculins et féminins dans la bonneterie troyenne, 1900-1939*, Final report on research, GEDISST-CNRS (December 1987), 119.
  13. Helen Chenut, "Formation d'une culture" Chap. 5, "«Il importe que chacun soit à sa place» : le travail sexué", 273-316.
  14. Sonya Rose, "Gender Segregation in the Transition to the Factory: the English Hosiery Industry, 1850-1910," in *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 163-184, and Joy Parr, "Disaggregating the Sexual Division of Labor: A Transatlantic Case Study," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1988).

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