

The Missing Half: Female employment in Victorian England and Wales

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1. Introduction

Three variables are normally used to measure economic growth and development: occupational structure, real wages and GDP per capita. To date, most research using these indicators has been based on male data. When female data has been used, it has significantly changed our understanding of the historical record. For instance, Broadberry et al suggest that the inclusion of female workers into the medieval workforce significantly changes the percentage of workers employed in agriculture, industry and services (Broadberry et al 2015). As the above example demonstrates, the ‘female lacuna’ is a major source of systematic error in economic and social history. Therefore, it is vitally important that researchers close this lacuna as quickly and fully as possible. To that end, this paper documents a study that has been designed specifically to enhance our understanding of the female employment of Britain in the Victorian era.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the trend of adult female labour force participation rate over time. Second, it presents an analysis of female occupational structure. Finally, a discussion on the regional diversity of female employment will be presented. Throughout this atlas only adult women, namely those aged fifteen and above, will be considered. A separate atlas for child labour is provided elsewhere on this website <[Link](#)>.

2. Occupational Structure and Economic Development

The importance of occupational structure to economic development was stressed by Kuznets when he emphasized the transition to modern economic growth (Kuznets 1966). Later, Wrigley made a seminal contribution to the field by devising the Primary, Secondary and Tertiary(PST) taxonomy of occupations. He argued that the types of occupation in an economy

and the relative importance of the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors are good indices of economic progression. Furthermore, it may be suggested that the level of female participation in the workforce is itself a prime index of economic and social development. The most advanced societies, it may be postulated, enable both sexes to maximise their potential in the workplace.

Occupational structure indices are valuable and can be complementary to other conventional indices of economic growth such as GDP per capita. For example, it can shed great light on structural changes within an economy that might have been obscured by other indices. Furthermore, as a major factor in the calculation of the indices of living standard, refining the estimates of occupational structure can improve the accuracy of the estimation of other indices.

A thorough review of research into occupational structure reveals that we know surprisingly little about Britain's (or any other country's) female workforce. For example, the female labour force participation rate, the occupational distribution of women workers and regional variations in female employment have been studied in Britain prior to the twentieth century but there is great scope for further research.

In the past, one reason for the female lacuna was the scarcity of empirical data. However, an initiative by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure (Campop) and another by the University of Essex mean this is no longer the case. Consequently, this paper uses digital data produced by the Campop and Essex initiatives to explore key indices of English and Welsh female occupational structure between 1851 and 1911. The data analysis suggests that several of the prevailing conceptions of female employment in Victorian England and Wales are not supported empirically and are, therefore, in need of reformulation. More generally, the paper reinforces the importance of ongoing research into female occupational structure in both Britain and the rest of the world.

3. Data collection and analysis

This paper is based on data collected and digitized from two sources. The first is a Campop project (The occupational structure of Britain, 1379-1911) that digitized the English and Welsh published census reports between 1801 and 1911. The published census reports started recording information on female occupations in 1841 and it was not until 1851 when the data on female occupations became of analytical value. Part of this paper uses the data on female

occupations recorded in the published census reports from 1851 onwards. These data were reported at different geographical levels with different age structures across different census years. A summary of the geographical levels and age structures by which they were recorded is presented in Table 1. The second data source is the 100 per cent sample of the 1881 Census Enumerators' Books (hereafter CEBs) in England and Wales. They have been transcribed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, and were subsequently enhanced by Kevin Schürer and Matthew Woollard at the University of Essex as well as Leigh Shaw-Taylor and Tony Wrigley et al at Campop. The 1881 CEBs contain c. 26 million individual level records of information on occupation, age, marital status and location of residence. They provide a large body of data to study women's occupations by age, marital status, residential situation and location in much greater details than the published census reports would ever allow. Whilst the 1881 CEBs have an unparalleled advantage over the published census reports in details, unlike the published census reports, they cannot offer time series to track changes in female employment over time. Except for of 1871, the Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) project has recently digitized all the British CEBs between 1851 and 1911. Whilst this paper was not able to use these data, they provide a promising field for future research into various the aspects of women's employment with a time dimension that have been mentioned above.

4. The participation rate of women in the English and Welsh labour force

Some scholars have maintained that the pre-industrial economy in Europe was a golden age for female employment (Clark 1919; Richards 1974). Households before the modern era were the basic social unit for both consumption and production, which, it has been thought, provided numerous employment opportunities for women. Above all, scholars consider the hand spinning of textile yarns to be the predominant female occupation in the pre-industrial era. For example, Muldrew has recently estimated that hand spinning provided employment for about 75 percent of all women in eighteenth century England (Muldrew 2012). In a similar vein, Shaw-Taylor and You suggest that English and Welsh textile spinning during the 1780's (i.e., well before the process was mechanized) had a female labour force participation rate above 80 percent.

Table 1: Age structure and geographical levels by which women’s occupations were reported in the published census reports between 1851 and 1911

	Town	Registration district (RD)	Registration County	National (England and Wales)
1851	Persons aged under and over twenty years for 78 principal towns, no further age break down	Persons aged over twenty years in all 624 RDs, no further age break down	Persons at all ages in five-year bands for those aged below ninety-nine; single band for those aged over one hundred	Persons at all ages in five year bands for those aged below eighty-four; single band for those aged over eighty-five
1861	Same as above	Persons aged over twenty years in all 635 RDs, no further age break down	Persons at all ages in five-year bands for those aged below twenty-four; ten-year bands for those aged over twenty-five; single band for those aged over ninety-five	Persons at all ages in five-year bands for those aged below ninety-nine; single band for those aged over one hundred
1871	Persons aged over twenty year for 84 principal towns, no further age break down	N/A	Persons at all ages in five-year bands for those aged below twenty-four; ten-year bands for those aged over twenty-five; single band for those aged over seventy-five	Same as at county level
1881	N/A	N/A	Persons over five years of age, no further age break down	Persons at all ages in five-year band for those aged below twenty-four; twenty-year band for those aged over twenty-five; single band for those aged over sixty-five
1891	N/A	N/A	Persons over ten years of age, no further age break down	Persons over ten years of age in five-year band for those aged below twenty-four; ten-year band for those aged over twenty-five; single band for those aged over sixty-five
1901	N/A	N/A	Persons over ten years of age, no further age break down	Aged between ten and thirteen; single band for the age of fourteen; five-year band for those aged between fifteen and twenty-four; ten-year band for those aged between twenty-five and seventy-four; single band for those aged over seventy-five
1911	N/A	N/A	Persons over ten years of age, no further age break down	Persons over ten years of age in five-year band for those aged under twenty-four; ten-year band for those aged over twenty-five; single band for those aged over seventy-five

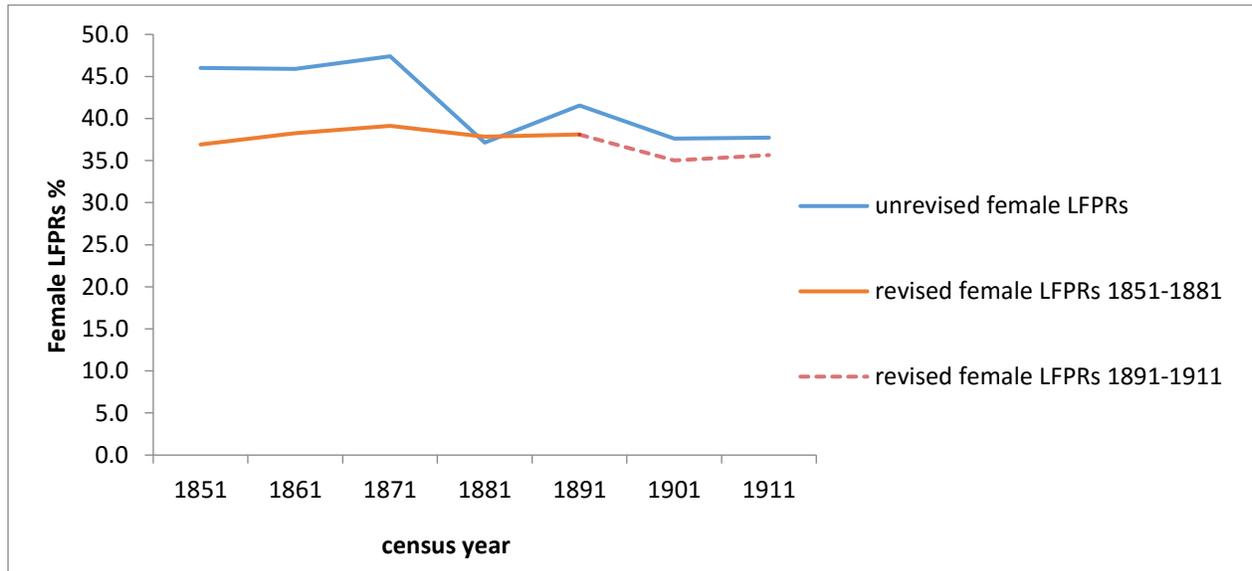
In contrast, historians have traditionally maintained a more pessimistic view about female employment over the period of British industrial revolution. Industrialization, it is argued, caused a separation of the workplace from the home and destroyed many opportunities for women in home-based occupations like spinning and farming. Nevertheless, some scholars hold a more optimistic view; they suggest the transition to modern economic growth between 1750 and 1850 created new industries (like cotton textiles) that provided novel jobs for women, which compensated for in the decline in established industries (Pinchbeck 1930).

After 1850, it is generally believed that female participation in the British labour force declined significantly and several explanations for this trend have been proposed. Hence, de Vries argues that increased male wages encouraged women to voluntarily withdraw from the labour force so they could perform household chores such as childcare, cooking and cleaning that would be costly if purchased from the market (de Vries 2008). Another explanation suggests that women worked less because popular Victorian, domestic ideologies like ‘separate spheres’ and ‘angels at home’ depicted the home as the only place suitable for women (Seecombe 1986, 1993). Meanwhile, it has been argued that labour legislation incorporated into the Mining Act of 1842, the Gangs Act of 1867, and various Factory Acts from 1833 onwards restricted female employment (Hudson and Lee 1990). Finally, Burnette argues that employers’ beliefs in women having lower productivity also contributed to the exclusion of women from heavy industries such as coal mining as well as iron and steel (Burnette 2008).

The trends and theories proposed for female participation in the British labour force during the post-industrial revolution period from 1851 to 1911 can be tested empirically by using the database assembled for this paper. Figure 1 presents the unrevised and revised adult female labour force participation rates for the period.

In accordance with prevailing theories, the unrevised series (in blue) indicates that from 1851 to 1911 there was a decline in the adult female labour force participation rate. On closer inspection, the data suggest a pronounced reduction in 1881 with a noticeable recovery in 1891 followed by another steady decline to 1911. This is the empirical basis which the aforementioned arguments are based on.

Figure 1: Unrevised and revised adult, female labour force participation rates 1851-1911



However, in-depth analysis reveals that the census data incorporates two sources of systematic error, which render the unrevised series inaccurate. The two error sources both cause inconsistent recording of respondent information across censuses as follows:

- i. Persons with certain occupational titles were regarded as employed in some census years but not in the others. For example, between 1851 and 1871, farmer's wives, daughters and other female relatives, gentlewomen, annuitants and women of independent means were all regarded as female occupations. Hence, persons with these occupational titles were regarded as employed. But in 1881, persons with these occupational titles were regarded as unemployed in the published census.
- ii. Between 1851 and 1871 the censuses included retired persons and these were allocated into their pre-retirement occupations. However, from 1881 onwards, all retired persons were regarded as unemployed.

As Figure 1 shows, the picture looks very different when adjustments are made to correct for systematic error. The revised line in red shows that the adult female labour force participation rate remained remarkably stable during the second half of the nineteenth century. Only at the

turn of the century, did a minute decrease occur. Admittedly, a participation rate around 35 per cent appears low by modern standards. However, it must be borne in mind that this statistic does not mean 65 per cent of women were non-participating. British censuses in the nineteenth century only tried to capture women's *regular* employment. As large fraction of women's work in this period was irregular and casual it was not captured by the censuses. Consequently, Figure 1 almost certainly understates the full, overall level of female employment.

The data presented above strongly indicate that, in England and Wales after 1850, women were not forced out of, or voluntarily withdrew from, employment. Evidently, the occupationally inactive Victorian women that are depicted in many historical dramas, TV series and novels are only representative of a small, sub-section of society - the middle and upper class elite. Most Victorian women, it appears, were occupationally active and many places in Victorian England and Wales, as we shall see below, had virtually full female employment.

5. The female occupational structure of England and Wales

In the pre-census era, the data available on the participation of women in different occupations can be characterized as partial, sporadic and error-laden. As a result, historians using different data sources often propose dissimilar occupational structures for women. For example, church court records indicate that making clothes and laundry were the most important female occupations the eighteenth century (Earle 1989) whereas criminal court records suggest shop keeping and the selling of food & drink dominated women's work (Erickson 2008). Despite these divergent findings, most historians agree that, in general, women were unable to work in 'male' trades during the pre-census period. Instead, female employment was confined to a narrow range of occupations that were, "An extension into the public arena ... of tasks carried out in the household." (Earle 1994). As such, 'women's work' included domestic service, washing & laundry, needlework and retailing. Further research is required to establish how accurately these conceptions portray the pre-census period.

The advent of national censuses in England and Wales puts the female occupational structure on a much more secure footing. Table 1 presents this study's findings on the English and Welsh female occupational structure from 1851 to 1911. The results are based on Wrigley's

PST taxonomy and show female employment as a percentage of the total workforce. The PST system allocates occupations into three sectors: primary, secondary and tertiary. The primary sector includes all extractive economic activities (such as agriculture, fishing and mining) that involve the production of raw materials. The secondary sector includes economic activities (like food or textile manufacturing) that transform the raw materials produced by the primary sector into marketable products. The tertiary sector includes all service activities within an economy (such as selling, communications and the professions).

Table 1 makes seven key trends in the female occupational structure apparent:

- i. Only a small proportion of working women were employed in the primary sector and this proportion declined between 1851 and 1911. Thus, in 1851 more than 8 per cent of working women were employed in the primary sector, mainly in agriculture; by 1911, only 2 per cent of the female workforce were employed in the primary sector. The reduced significance of primary sector female employment is largely due to changes in agriculture. The ongoing rise of large, capitalistic farms that were highly mechanised and the concomitant decline of small family farms severely limited employment opportunities for women. However, one caveat to bear in mind is that these results may underestimate female participation in agriculture. Various farm accounts (Burnette 1997, 1999, 2004, 2013; Verdon 2004, 2007) show women being employed irregularly during the harvest season and, most probably, the censuses did not record this important contribution. Nevertheless, the declining trend in female agricultural employment shown by Table I appears to be beyond reasonable dispute.
- ii. Table 1 also shows the near absence of women in mining. The prodigious expansion of London, the growth of factories dependent on coal power and the proliferation of steam-powered ships and railway locomotives made Britain the first country in the world to use mineral fuels intensively. In parallel, the nation's mining industry expanded significantly; for example, mining's share of the male workforce almost doubled after 1851 to reach 9 per cent by 1911. Women's employment benefited little from this expansion in the primary sector for two reasons. First, the 1842 Mining Act prohibited

women from working underground and; second, it was thought women lacked the upper body strength required to excavate minerals.

Table 1: The female occupational structure 1851-1911

Women as a percentage of the total workforce

	1851 %	1861 %	1871 %	1881 %	1891 %	1901 %	1911 %
Primary sector	2.8	1.7	1.2	0.8	0.6	0.4	0.3
Agriculture	2.7	1.7	1.1	0.7	0.5	0.3	0.3
Mining	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Rest of primary	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Secondary sector	15.1	15.8	15.4	14.9	14.6	13.0	13.0
Textiles	6.4	6.3	6.0	5.6	4.9	4.3	4.2
Clothing	6.8	7.1	6.3	6.6	6.3	5.6	5.2
Building and construction	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Food industries	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.5
Footwear	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.3
Iron and steel	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2
Wood industries	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Machine and tools	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.1
Rest of secondary	1.0	1.3	1.9	1.6	2.0	2.2	2.5
Tertiary sector	18.9	20.7	22.4	21.4	22.2	21.0	21.6
Dealers and sellers	1.1	1.3	1.5	1.5	1.8	2.4	3.1
Services and professions	17.6	19.3	20.9	19.8	20.3	18.4	18.1
(domestic service)	12.5	12.1	13.6	14.3	14.1	11.6	10.4
Transport	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.4
Sectorally unspecified	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
Female LFPR	36.9	38.2	39.1	37.1	37.4	34.4	35.1

- iii. Across the entire period from 1851 to 1911, the tertiary sector was the largest source of female employment; with some small fluctuations, around half of the female workforce were employed there. Domestic service jobs (such as housemaid, charring and washing) account for a disproportionately large share of women's employment in the tertiary sector. For example, in 1891 domestic service accounted for nearly 40 per cent of women's total employment and more than 60 per cent of women's employment in the

tertiary sector. Nonetheless, by the turn of the nineteenth century, Britain was experiencing a 'servant problem'. Discouraged by long working hours, limited freedom and subordinate status, women became increasingly reluctant to work as servants (Horn 1975). This meant middle and upper-class employers often found female servants to be in short supply. Despite these issues, domestic service remained by far the single most important employment destination for women throughout the period.

- iv. Like mining in the primary sector, transport and communication in the tertiary sector also expanded significantly during the nineteenth century. This was particularly associated with the creation and growth of Britain's railway system, which played a key role in integrating the economy and raising productivity. **<Link>** As in mining, women gained little employment from the growth in transportation; whereas this industry's share of the male workforce doubled to nearly 13 per cent from 1851 to 1911, it consistently employed only about 1 per cent of the female workforce.

- v. After tertiary employment, the secondary sector was the next most important source of female employment in our period. Although women's employment in the secondary sector increased slightly in 1861, it generally decreased between 1851 and 1911. However, the decrease was so small that the importance of the secondary sector was still apparent in 1911. Women's employment in the secondary sector was concentrated into two sub-sectors: textiles and clothing. Textiles mainly involved factory-based employment in cotton, woollen and worsted manufacturing whilst clothing spanned prototype industries such as straw plaiting or hat, lace and dress making. The data indicates that the less technologically advanced clothing industry employed a bigger percentage of women than the textile industry. Clothing industries like dressmaking, lace making and hosiery manufacturing were relatively advantageous for women because they offered greater employment flexibility and demanded lower entry qualifications. Moreover, unlike textiles employment, which was highly concentrated geographically into Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire, clothing employment was available in

a wide range of locations. These results echo Clapham's assertion that, even in 1850, half of the British workforce remained untouched by industrialization (Clapham 1938).

- vi. Both textiles and clothing witnessed a decreasing share of female employment and, most probably, this was largely due to technological improvements. In textiles, macro technological improvement occurred as Cartwright's power loom mechanised weaving whilst micro improvements occurred continuously across the industry. Although the clothing industry was less advanced than cotton, technological improvement did happen. For instance, the invention of the sewing machine in 1859 increased productivity and reduced labour inputs. Apart from technology, external shocks to specific industries impacted female employment. For example, both the Cotton Famine of the 1860s and the collapse of straw plaiting (due to cheap imports from the Far East) are likely to have decreased female employment in textiles and clothing. If the male and female occupational structures during this period are compared, then it is evident that male employment in textiles and clothing fell the most. In consequence, the workforce of these industries became increasingly feminized from 1850 to 1911.

- vii. Another notable feature of women's employment in the secondary sector was their near absence from modern, heavy industries based on iron and steel. Apart from those employed as nail or needle makers in the workshops of the Black Country, women were pretty much excluded from this industry.

In summary, a variety of factors affected the participation of English and Welsh women in the economy from 1850 to 1911; these include the job types available, the skill sets required, the legislative environment, the perceived suitability of women for certain roles and, more generally, the values and norms embodied into Victorian ideology. The domestic service, textile and clothing industries predominantly employed women whilst the primary sector and heavy industry in the secondary sector employed few women. If we look backwards in time to previous periods, the results of this study suggest that the female occupational structure has displayed considerable long-term continuity

6. The regional diversity of female employment in England and Wales

6.2 Introduction

From 1851 to 1911, there were clear regional and local differences in the employment of women. As Hudson and Lee have argued (Hudson and Lee 1990):

“The process of industrialization needs to be examined as a highly diverse regional phenomenon, involving a variegated pattern of sectoral balance and attendant levels of technological development. This, in turn, generated regionally divergent gender-specific labour markets and local configurations of female employment opportunities in both formal and non-formal activities.”

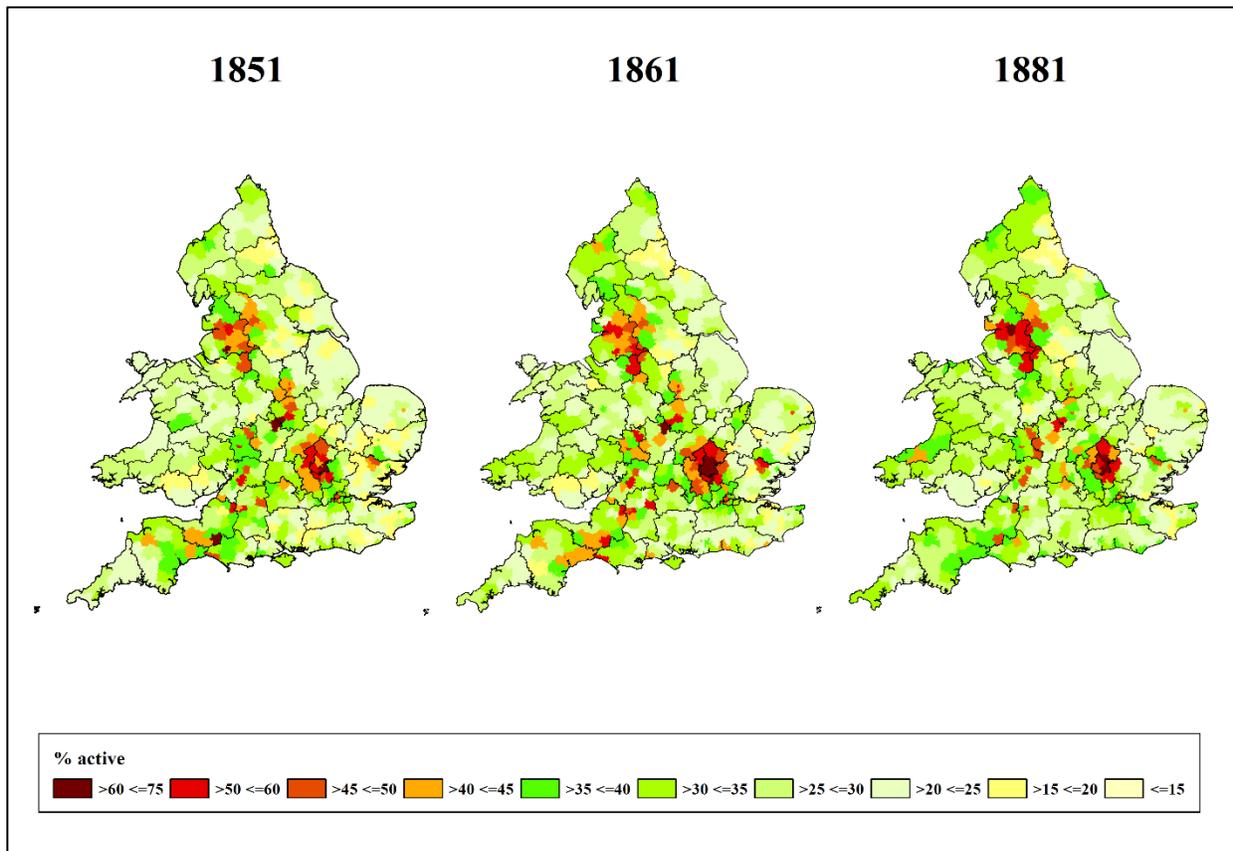
Several scholars have described broad-brush, regional patterns of female employment. For example, Shaw-Taylor found the female labour force participation rate to be high in Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire and to be low in Durham (Shaw-Taylor 2007). However, to understand fully the regional diversity of female employment, we need data that, on the one hand, can be disaggregated into counties, districts and parishes and that, on the other hand, spans all of England and Wales. The data collected by this study from the Campop and Essex initiatives fulfills these requirements. Consequently, this section begins by exploring spacial trends in the female labour force participation rate across the entire economy and it then explores spacial trends within each of the three economic sectors.

6.2 Spatial trends across the entire economy

Figure 2 maps English and Welsh female labour force participation rates for the entire economy in 1851, 1861 and 1881. Three spacial trends are apparent in Figure 2.

- i. The most distinctive feature of the three maps in Figure 1 is the huge variation in the female labour force participation rate between districts. For instance, in 1851 the lowest rate was 10% (as at Easington in Durham) whilst the highest rate was over 75% (at Luton in Bedfordshire).

Figure 2: Female labour force participation rates for the entire economy



- ii. Figure 2 also highlights significant town and country differences. Whilst, female labour force participation rates in the country were typically around 20 to 30 per cent, the urban rate could exceed 50 per cent - especially when industries amenable to female employment were present in concentration.

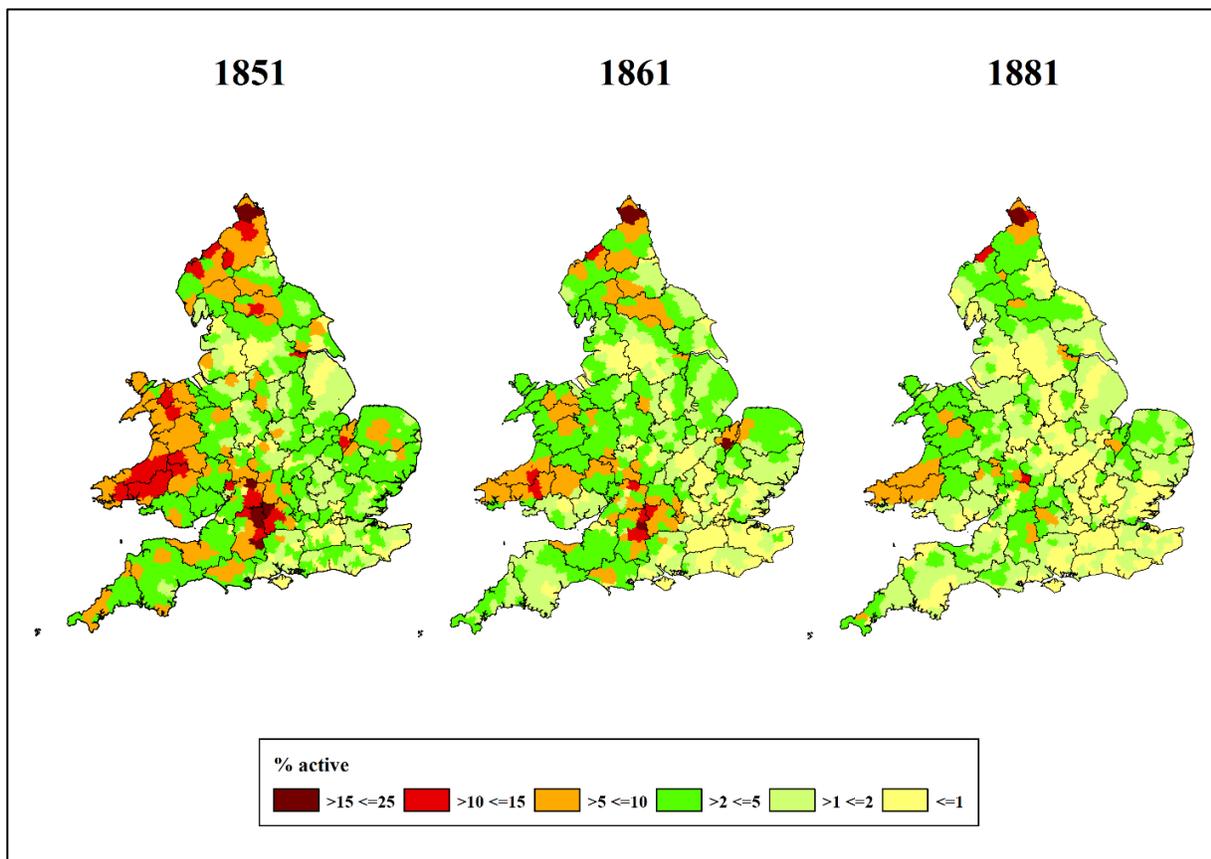
- iii. The three maps in Figure 1 clearly illustrate sectoral/industrial differences in the demand for female labour during our period. Areas dedicated to mining or heavy industry had the lowest female labour force participation rates. Coal mining had the lowest rates of all; for instance, in Easington, Houghton-le-Spring, Auckland, and Chester-le-Street in Durham the rate was less than 15 per cent. Not only were women considered unsuitable for mining but also the industry imposed much more demanding domestic duties (like cooking and washing) on wives. In contrast, areas with light industry had the highest female labour force participation rates; two geographical concentrations of light industry

stand out. The first is the northern textiles concentration of cotton and wool manufacturing in Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. The second is the south-east Midlands clothing concentration, which spanned parts of Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire and conducted straw plaiting and lace making. In areas of light industry, the female labour force participation rate could exceed 50 per cent.

6.3 Spatial trends in the primary sector

If we analyse the female labour force participation rate by economic sector, clear spatial trends also appear; Figure 3 maps the rate for the primary sector. As discussed above, only a small proportion of women (2 to 5 per cent) were employed in the primary sector and this was mainly in agriculture). Nevertheless, in 1851 some geographical concentrations of female employment do stand out. Most obvious are those in the North Yorkshire Moors, the Cheviots, the Pennines, the intersection of the Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Berkshire, the

Figure 3: Primary sector female labour force participation rates for 1851, 1861 & 1881

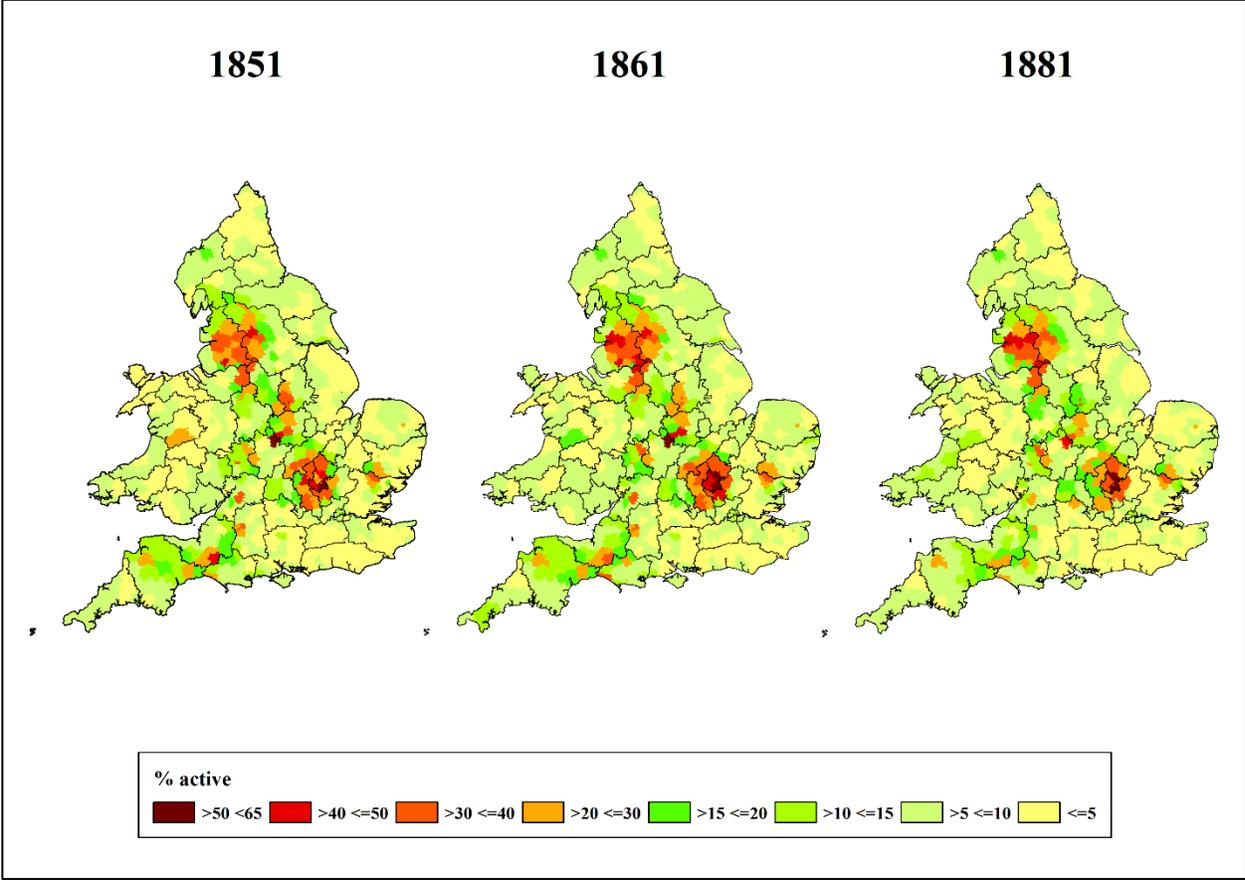


Welsh borders and large parts of Wales. In 1851, these areas had heavy concentrations of small family farms or dairy farms, which offered female household members more opportunities to be engaged in farming activities. However, as the century progressed, mechanised farming intensified and small family farming declined. This temporal trend is clearly shown in the three maps. Thus, by the end of our period, the female labour participation rate in the primary sector is low virtually everywhere in England and Wales.

6.4 Spatial trends in the secondary sector

Spatial patterns in the secondary sector’s female labour force participation are also striking in during our period as Figure 4 demonstrates. In most parts of the country, the rate

Figure 4: Secondary sector female labour force participation rates for 1851, 1861 & 1881



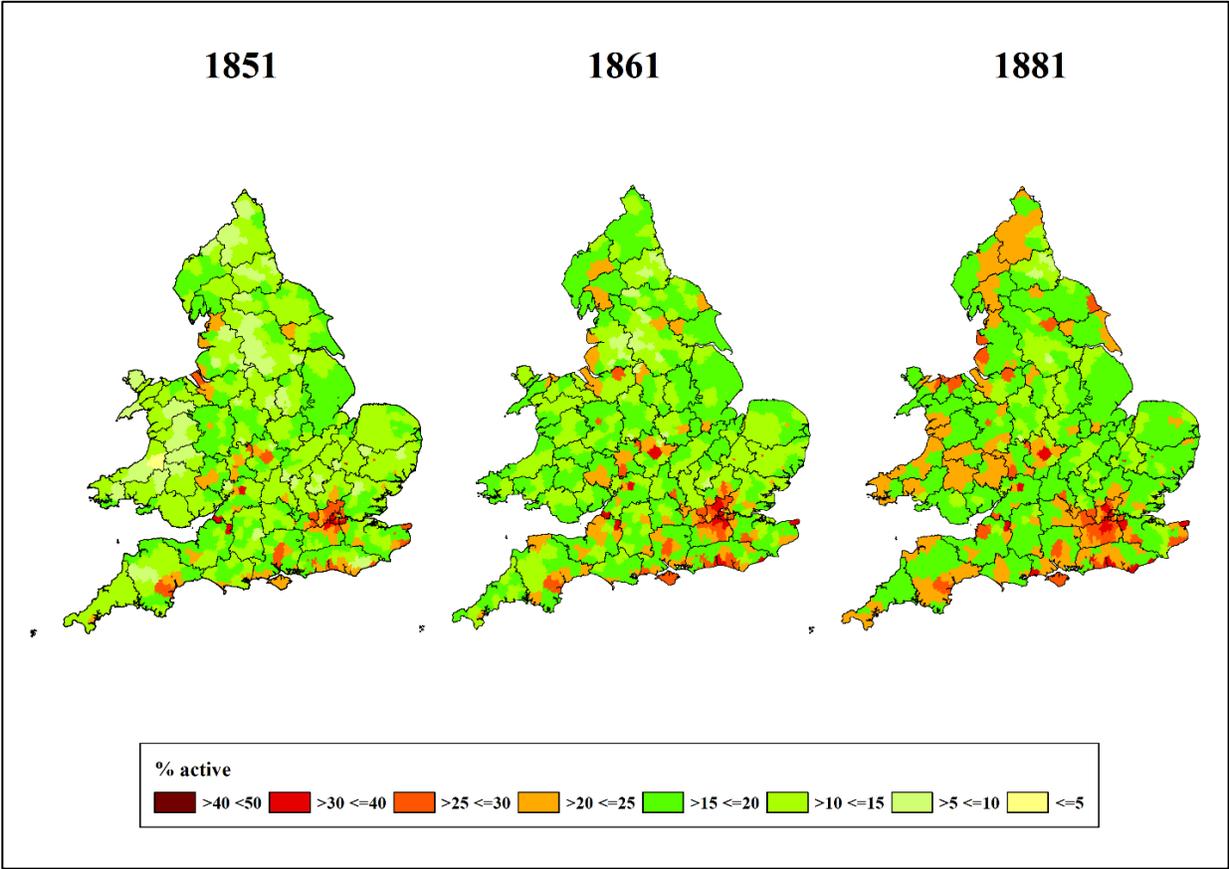
was low (less than 10 per cent) despite the sector’s importance to female employment. However, some districts had extremely high rates due to the geographical concentration of female

employment. The light industry, textile and clothing concentrations in northern England and in the south-east Midlands have been discussed above. In addition, female employment was high in the hosiery manufacturing districts of Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire, the silk manufacturing districts of Coventry, Essex and Suffolk, and, lastly, the lace and clothes making districts in the south-west of England.

6.5 Spatial trends in the tertiary sector

In most parts of England and Wales, the tertiary sector was the major employer of women and few districts had a female labour force participation rate lower than 10 per cent in this sector. Furthermore, concentrations of female employment are less obvious than in the primary and secondary sectors - as Figure 5 shows.

Figure 5: Tertiary sector female labour force participation rates for 1851, 1861 & 1881

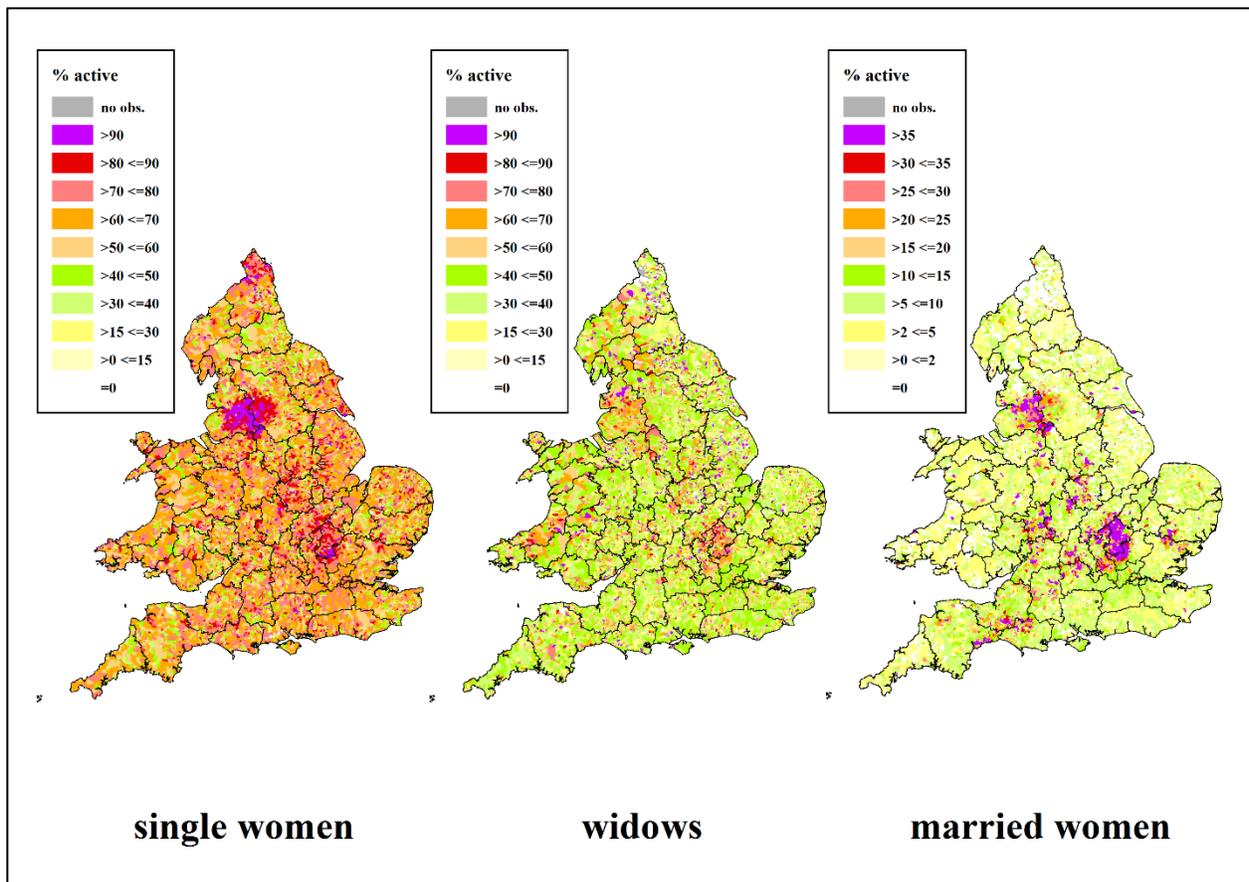


From 1851 to 1881, the number of districts with high (above 20 per cent) female participation rates doubled; in 1851, there were 104 registration with high rates, in 1861 it was 144 and, by 1881, the number had increased to 208. Furthermore, by 1881, the tertiary sector was the largest employer of women in 516 out of the 624 registration districts.

6.6 Spatial trends in female employment by marital status

Female employment in our period also varied by marital status. Figure 6 presents data for 1881, which is representative of the entire period.

Figure 6: Female labour force participation rates for 1881 by marital status



Single women had a high female labour force participation rate almost everywhere. In most parishes over 50 per cent of single women were active in the labour market; parishes with

almost full employment for single women were not rare. Most single women were employed in domestic service. This occupation had a living-in requirement, which made it domain suited to single women. Single female servants were conventionally labelled ‘life-stage servants’ because they left their parental home in their late teens to become domestic servants in other households and they stayed in these until they married. A few parish clusters had extremely high (above 90 per cent) participation rates for single women. These clusters are found in the areas of intense light industrial concentration described in the previous sections.

Widows had a somewhat lower labour force participation rate (between 40 and 50 per cent) than single women in most parts of the country, although their pattern of participation was broadly similar.

Married women’s labour force participation rates were much lower (below 5 per cent) than those of single women or widows across England and Wales. Most probably, this was because married women were heavily involved in domestic duties at home especially when their husband’s income made this possible. Nevertheless, as with single women and widows, the participation rate of married women peaked (above 50 per cent) in areas of intense light industrial concentration. This finding casts considerable doubt over the popular depiction of Victorian married women as passive agents in the labour market who shied away from employment outside the home. Although the social conventions of the time may have assumed home to be the only rightful place for married women, they did participate in the labour market on a large scale when employment opportunities allowed.

7. Conclusions

This paper seeks to fill important gaps in our understanding of female employment in England and Wales during the Victorian era. It uses two substantial bodies of data: the published census reports between 1851 and 1911 as well as the 100 percent sample of 1881 CEBs. It investigates three aspects of women’s employment in England and Wales between 1851 and 1911: female labour force participation rates, female occupational structure, and the regional diversity of female employment.

It reveals that women were neither forced out of nor withdrew voluntarily from the labour market from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The female labour force participation rates in England and Wales remained remarkably stable during the second half of the nineteenth century. The tertiary sector accounts for the largest share of the female workforce, followed by the secondary and then the primary sector. At the sub-sectoral level, the female workforce was concentrated in three industries: textiles, clothing, and domestic service. In contrast, the near absence of female employment in agriculture, mining, and heavy industry is also apparent throughout this period. Regional diversity in the female labour force participation rate across the economy as a whole and within different sectors is also clear. The geographical pattern of diversity suggests that the level of demand for female workers played the foremost role in determining female labour force participation. Women's marital status also affected their ability to participate. On one hand, married women, on whom domestic chores placed the greatest restrictions, had the lowest average participation rate. On the other hand, the average participation rate of single women was substantially higher. However, despite the different levels of their participation rates, the relative geographical patterns are not radically different for women in different marital groups. This again indicates the important effect that the demand for female workers had on female labour force participation.