

Corinne Boter & Sarah Carmichael (Utrecht)

‘Wage rates and the majority gender share: An example of the British textile industry, 1886’

Occupational segregation is one of the most important explanations for contemporary as well as historical gender wage gaps (Minoletti 2013; Groshen 1991; Goldin 1990). Women tend to crowd into lower-paid occupations while men can move up the occupational ladder more easily. Moreover, it has been shown that the majority gender share of occupations is not a static situation, but instead can shift gender as economies develop, which affects the prestige and the wage rates of this type of work. Occupational segregation has been proposed as one of the most important explanations for the gender wage gap in the British textile industry too, which widened during the initial stages of industrialization (Humphries and Weisdorf 2015; Horrell and Humphries 1995) and narrowed from the 1840s until 1906, with a small relapse around 1880 (Boot and Maindonald 2008). However, in most existing studies on the gender wage gap in the textile industry the relationship between majority gender shares and wage rates has remained understudied. Furthermore, the gender wage gap has principally been analysed at an aggregate level or at the level of only one specific textile occupation, which has clouded our understanding of the complicated interaction of forces that have shaped it.

This paper examines the relationship between the majority gender share and male and female wage rates in 192 textile occupations, which we classify in 32 different groups using the HISCO classification scheme. We use the 1886 British cotton and woollen textile manufacturing industries as a case study. We find that, logically, there was a strong correlation between the share of adult males in a certain occupation and the average wage. However, there was only a weak relationship between the share of adult males and female wage rates, which means the ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’ of an occupation did not affect men’s and women’s wages equally. Thus, also the gender wage gap did not show a clear correlation with the majority gender share. Furthermore, we show that the majority of the textile occupations was either male-dominated or female/child-dominated. It seems that, as has been shown for current-day economies, there was a ‘tipping point’ (Pan 2015) at which the share of male labourers rapidly decreased. These results indicate that, next to the much-researched productivity differences, gender-based discrimination was an important force in shaping women’s position in the textile labour market as well.