European Women and Preindustrial Craft

Hafer, Daryl M.

Published by Indiana University Press

Hafer, Daryl M.
European Women and Preindustrial Craft.
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Working Women, Gender, and Industrialization in Nineteenth-Century France: The Case of Lorraine Embroidery Manufacturing

Deploring the misery of female embroiderers at the hands of unscrupulous manufacturers and intermediaries, a public health crusader in 1856 described in melodramatic terms these martyrs to capitalist greed and consumer vanity:

Enter with me into this mean-looking house on the outskirts of Epinal. . . . Five or six girls huddle around a feeble lamp that gives off a thick, fetid smoke. They are embroiderers.

Their thin, pale faces and reddened, watery eyes are as much due to their overwhelming fatigue as to their poor diet. They work from four in the morning to eleven in the evening, their eyes fixed on this blackened and creased rag that they cover with arabesques, stars, and blossoms, and surround with jaunty scallops. The completion of the work will yield for each of them 60 or 80 centimes, up to 1 franc, or, very rarely, 1.50 francs for a workday of eighteen to nineteen hours.1

While Dr. J. Haxo was absolutely right about the long hours, low pay, and general poverty that embroidery workers endured, his treatise on embroiderers was very much a polemic against the physical and moral degradation of women of the department of the Vosges in France's eastern region of Lorraine. Haxo did not object to the embroidery industry as such; to the contrary, he considered it an economic boon to an impoverished area. What really bothered him was the array of abuses in the manufacture of embroidery that "prevent[ed] working-class girls from becoming complete women, healthy mothers."2

The character and condition of working-class women were at the heart of a debate over the merits and failings of the Lorraine embroidery industry to which Haxo
contributed in the middle of the nineteenth century. Ostensibly, this debate concerned French economic policy: should the government maintain the prohibition against importing foreign embroidery into France, or should it lift the trade barrier and force the Lorraine industry to compete against its German, English, and especially Swiss rivals? While issues of balance of trade, regional employment, and national industry entered into the controversy, the recurring theme that embroidery manufacturers, retailers, and administrators evoked was whether Lorraine women could or should embroider for a living, and if so, under what circumstances to promote family and social stability. In other words, gender—in this case, the popular belief that women belonged in the home and under male authority—was integral to the discussion of national economic policy.

This study will analyze both the arguments surrounding embroidering as an occupation for women, and the actual experience of female embroiderers in Lorraine. It will argue that working women and gender were crucial influences on the development of the Lorraine embroidery industry, contributing to the persistence of hand methods of manufacturing and a dispersed production structure that were both characteristic of French industry as a whole.

Recent research has shown that, contrary to the model of industrialization that posits inexorable progress toward greater efficiency and output through mechanization and concentration of production, in France hand manufacturing and dispersed structures were often viable alternatives to mass production. Scholars note several factors behind this form of industrial development, including labor supply, the multiple income sources of working-class households, a distinctive work culture, consumer demand fluctuations, and the ingenuity of entrepreneurs. In addition, a growing number of researchers are focusing on the sexual division of labor within working-class families, and the contribution of working women to explain developments related to this pattern of industrialization, notably declining fertility and the absence or peculiar nature of working-class activism. While these works have greatly enhanced understanding of industrialization and of the role of working-class women in this process, none has been able to show how gender—that is, ideas about proper female activity and behavior—as distinct from the sexual division of labor contributed to industrial development. The unique documentation of the debate over economic policy in relation to Lorraine embroidering allows for an analysis of industrialization that integrates the sexual division of labor and gender. This essay will emphasize the economic and family structures that made embroidery a female occupation in Lorraine, and that enabled women to resist manufacturers’ efforts to alter the production process at the expense of embroiderers’ independence and convenience. It will also show how gender informed the arguments about national economic policy, resulting in the perpetuation of dispersed, hand manufacturing of embroidery in Lorraine.

The Embroidery Industry and the Supply Crisis

Embroidering has a long history in France. For centuries prior to the French
Revolution, embroiderers used valuable materials such as gems, gold and silver thread, colored silk, and colored wool to produce expensive articles of furnishing and clothing for the church and wealthy lay consumers. Both women and men engaged in this highly skilled and, after the thirteenth century, incorporated craft, in capacities ranging from apprentice to respected master. After the French Revolution, however, when embroidering and other luxury industries declined precipitously, a merchant named Chenut introduced into Lorraine the production of white embroidery (*la broderie blanche*), consisting of designs stitched in white cotton thread onto white cotton cloth to embellish personal and household linen.

From the start, white embroidery manufacturing in Lorraine was a woman’s occupation performed in the home. Several explanations for this fairly rigid sex typing are possible. Because Chenut was taking a risk with the new industry, he could save on labor costs and overhead by hiring young, unmarried women and having them work at home. In addition, white embroidery materials cost much less than the materials used in the older form of embroidering; therefore, Chenut could afford to entrust the cotton cloth to inexperienced workers outside of his immediate control. Finally, in a predominantly subsistence-level agricultural region, the labor of females was probably more expendable than that of males for industrial wage earning on a part-time basis. As long as men owned property and provided the primary source of family income through cultivation, women embroidered for supplementary cash when men did not need their assistance in the fields. Only later did the powerful ideology about women’s place in the home lend support to the economic interest and necessity behind embroidery as women’s work.

After Chenut’s venture proved successful, the number of manufacturers increased and the white embroidery industry spread, so that by the middle of the nineteenth century an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 embroiderers plied their needles in the four departments of Lorraine (Meuse, Meurthe, Moselle, and Vosges). Workers who produced common grades of embroidery earned an average of .40 to .60 francs per day, while those who did finer work brought in 1 franc, occasionally 1.25 francs, for thirteen to fourteen hours of labor.

While manufacturers in Paris, Nancy, and other towns of Lorraine sometimes employed a small number of workers on the premises—twenty-five or thirty-five at the most, including male designers and finishers—embroidering itself was done almost entirely by women at home in the towns and especially in the countryside of Lorraine. Embroidery manufacturing began in the cities with the creation of embroidery designs. Intermediaries (called *entrepreneuses* or *entrepreneurs*), who were mostly women and often former embroiderers, then distributed the patterned cloth to embroiderers in their homes. The workers provided needle, thread, and their informally acquired but impressive skill. After the intermediary retrieved the completed embroidery and paid the worker by the piece, she returned the embroidery to the manufacturer for bleaching, pressing, finishing, and finally for sale in France or abroad. White embroidery was very fashionable at midcentury, decorating handkerchiefs, collars, cuffs, petticoats, chemises, bonnets, napkins, tablecloths, pillows, sheets, runners, and other articles of clothing and furnishing.
dery flourished; one commentator described the period as similar to the California gold rush. Men and women hastened to become manufacturers or intermediaries in an industry that yielded high returns for minimal investments, and manufacturers always found female embroiderers to do the work. However, abuses and inefficiencies were inherent in the putting-out structure of embroidery manufacturing. Embroiderers resented and regional officials deplored the excessive cuts intermediaries took out of the wages paid to workers. “The intermediaries . . . are in agreement to pay the least possible,” asserted an embroiderer from Epinal (Vosges). Workers and manufacturers agreed that while 10 percent of the price for a given piece of embroidery was a reasonable fee for the intermediaries’ services, intermediaries were wont to take 15, 33, and even higher percentages for themselves, at the expense of the embroiderer.

For embroiderers with a little capital and the ability to travel regularly, a solution to this problem was to join the ranks of the intermediaries. Another, more common strategy of workers to try to ensure a steady income was to accept from intermediaries more jobs than they could complete on schedule. This practice caused serious difficulties for intermediaries and manufacturers because orders could not be delivered on time, and sometimes a total loss was taken when fashion changed and the tardily completed embroidery pattern was no longer in vogue. Despite these difficulties, high demand for all grades of embroidery kept French manufacturers in business and Lorraine embroiderers employed. But in the late 1840s—a period of severe economic depression and a time when Swiss embroidery threatened French control of foreign and domestic markets—this boom waned.

Swiss embroidery manufacturers had modeled their industry after Lorraine’s beginning in the 1830s, but owing to several significant differences, manufacture in Switzerland proved more competitive. First, Swiss embroiderers allegedly used a frame, which probably consisted of small, interlocking wooden hoops, while most Lorraine embroiderers worked by hand alone. Placing the cotton cloth between the hoops stretched it taut, allowing embroiderers to count each thread of the weave and reproduce patterns precisely. In principle, frame embroidery was superior to embroidery done by hand, because the stitches were even and the pattern was more carefully executed. However, several embroiderers, intermediaries, and even manufacturers contended that handwork was just as fine as frame embroidery and that it displayed more creativity and imagination.

Second, Swiss manufacturing was less widespread geographically than Lorraine manufacturing, and production was better regulated in that intermediaries supplied workers with cotton thread, and workers had the right to verify manufacturers’ prices through the intermediary. In addition, the number of workers in Switzerland was between 10,000 and 40,000—smaller and more manageable compared to the hundreds of thousands in Lorraine. Third, men as well as women and children embroidered in Switzerland, which suggests a greater family dependency on income from embroidery. Herding was the only significant agricultural occupation in the Swiss embroidery region, which left considerable time and need for peasants to embroider. It is likely that few men owned cultivable property that would have kept
them in the more prestigious agricultural sector, as in Lorraine. Because of the poorer economic conditions, compared to Lorraine, in the area surrounding St. Gall and Appenzell, the sexual division of labor that designated embroidering as women's work did not develop. Finally, wages were lower in Switzerland than in France, due to lower costs of living, which meant that Swiss manufacturers sold their embroidery at lower prices than the French. For all of these reasons Swiss embroidery presented a formidable rival to the Lorraine product because it was finely executed and comparatively cheap.

Not surprisingly, Parisian retailers began to order embroidery from Switzerland, despite the fact that its importation was prohibited by an 1816 law designed to protect the French cotton textile industries. Smuggling Swiss embroidery was relatively easy, however, until Lorraine manufacturers complained to the French government about this violation of the law. From 1846 to 1848, customs officials increased their vigilance, searching retail shops in Paris and confiscating suspected contraband embroidery from Switzerland. But these measures solved neither retailers' demand for fine embroidery nor manufacturers' fears of Swiss competition. Presumably in response to this situation, a few manufacturers in Lorraine tried to increase their output of fine embroidery by introducing a frame method of embroidering to their handworkers. But such a change in production proved fairly costly to manufacturers and unacceptable to most embroiderers.

In order to introduce frame embroidering into the Lorraine countryside, manufacturers had to establish workshops, hire embroidery teachers, purchase frames, and then persuade embroiderers to give up regular earnings during a six-month to one-year apprenticeship while they learned to embroider with a frame. These changes in the labor process represented a form of proletarianization because they increased the number of women solely dependent on wage earning for their livelihoods and increased manufacturers' control over embroiderers. As an embroidery mistress in charge of a workshop with thirty-five embroiderers asserted, "This is advantageous because I supervise them [les surveille]. The work is better done, and in addition they work harder." To be sure, women were learning a new skill by embroidering with a frame, and they even earned minimal wages during the apprenticeship. But how valuable was this skill to workers under the circumstances?

The frame used in France was "rather inconvenient," as the author of a technological dictionary described it. Called a drum (métier à tambour), this device consisted of a thin wooden hoop covered with wool or flannel cloth. A worker stretched the embroidery muslin across it like the skin of a drum, securing the muslin with a leather belt and a buckle (see Fig. 5). Just mounting the muslin onto the frame took half an hour, according to a report on embroidery at the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851. Moreover, frame embroidering was more demanding than handwork, requiring the embroiderer to peer intently at the weave of the fabric and to bend constantly over the frame while she pushed and pulled the needle through the cloth. Manufacturers could promise embroiderers little financial gain for the production of frame rather than hand embroidery, since they were competing with cheaper Swiss products. After several weeks of effort, most rural embroiderers who
tried to learn the frame method gave it up. "It took too long to learn," Mademoiselle Poucher, an embroiderer from Lorquin (Meurthe), explained. "We are used to embroidering by hand, and we feared that we might earn no more doing frame embroidery even though the work was more painstaking and more difficult." Other embroiderers asserted that their hand embroidery was just as good as that done on a frame. An embroiderer in Mirecourt (Vosges) said, "I do as well and as quickly embroidering by hand as I would do working on a frame." Other
tarianization. Because

For these embroiderers, the frame was merely a means for manufacturers to exploit workers even more, and the women refused to go along with this innovation because it entailed greater hardship for them with inadequate remuneration. Rejection of the frame was one of many strategies that embroiderers used to resist proletarianization. Other efforts included the acceptance of too many jobs, refusal to do jobs that paid too little, total withdrawal from the putting-out system in favor of direct dealings with consumers, and seasonal (occasionally permanent) abandonment of embroidering to do agricultural labor. But in this critical period of economic depression and serious competition, manufacturers seized upon embroiderers' resistance to the frame to further their interests in another way. Accusing embroiderers of being set in their ways and too independent, manufacturers called upon the government to save their foundering industry by protecting it against foreign competition.

Countering the demands of Parisian retailers for free trade that would enable them legally to import fine embroidery from Switzerland for a flourishing domestic and foreign trade in finished embroidery and embroidered goods, Lorraine manufacturers claimed that such a policy would ruin the French embroidery industry and throw thousands of Lorraine women out of work. According to the manufacturers, the reason they could not compete with the Swiss was that French women workers were too obstinate and proud to produce frame embroidery at low wages.

Nonetheless, they argued, this was no cause for destroying an industry that brought prosperity to an entire region and that generated yearly revenues in the millions of francs. Enforcement of the prohibition against foreign embroidery, they concluded, was the only solution to the problem.

Advisors to the minister of agriculture and commerce, Jean-Baptiste Dumas, to whom retailers and manufacturers directed their opposing demands, hesitated to go along with either side until an investigation of the industry was completed and the claims of both sides could be weighed with some knowledge. Thus, in 1851 the ministry appointed a nine-man committee of retailers, manufacturers, and a customs official for this purpose. In their interviews of Lorraine manufacturers, intermediaries, local officials, and embroiderers, the members of the investigating committee tried, albeit feebly, to determine whether sufficient numbers of embroiderers could be persuaded to adopt the frame and thereby satisfy retailers' demand for fine embroidery. Though they never answered this question definitively, the testimony they gathered indicated that manufacturers stretched the truth regarding workers. Many embroiderers, indeed, rejected the frame, but not for the reasons manufacturers gave, while others, particularly in urban areas, accepted the new technique.

What made some women resist this form of exploitation and others acquiesce?
Round frame or “drum” mounted on a stand.
With the kind permission of le Musée de la Broderie, Fontenoy-le-Chateau (Vosges).

What resources were available to embroiderers to support a collective works manufacturing system that was less exploitative than workshop production? Census data reveal that significant differences in embroiderers’ roles in the family economy and

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the relative importance of paid industrial work to embroiderers and their families influenced female workers' response to the frame. From this information a clearer understanding of female workers' responses to proletarianization emerges and a basis for evaluating male entrepreneurs' and officials' views about women and their work can be established.

The Condition of Embroiderers

Lorquin (Meurthe), in the eastern reaches of Lorraine, was an area where manufacturers failed completely to introduce frame embroidering. The 1846 census of the commune of Aspach in the canton of Lorquin reveals several salient features about local embroiderers that help explain this failure. All of the 21 embroiderers in this community of 236 inhabitants were young (mean age of 22) and unmarried, and they were all daughters living in their parents' (or in one case grandparents') households (see Table 1). The fathers of embroiderers were almost all involved in agriculture: five were day laborers, two were farmers, two were property owners or pensioners, and one was a peddler. The three female heads of households with embroiderers were day laborers, and one was a property owner or pensioner (see Table 2). Clearly embroidering was not the sole means of support for the embroiderers in Aspach, nor was it a lifelong occupation for women. Moreover, as the archives repeatedly indicate, rural embroiderers invariably alternated industrial work with seasonal agricultural labor.  

At this time agriculture in Lorraine consisted primarily of smallholdings for the cultivation of grains and common pastures for the keeping of animals. Laboring on the family plot or tending family animals was probably more important for women in Aspach than industrial work, especially after marriage. In addition, some chores appropriate for adolescent daughters, such as minding younger siblings or watching animals in pasture, could be done while embroidering by hand but not

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**TABLE 1**

Age and Civil Status of Embroiderers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE AND CIVIL STATUS</th>
<th>ASPACH 1846</th>
<th>NANCY 1851</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age of embroiderer</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married or widowed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** ADM 6M 89, Listes nominatives de la population, Lorquin, arrondissement Sarrebourg, 1846; ADM 6M 110, Listes nominatives de population, Nancy-ville, sect. 1-4, 1851; ADM 6M 111, Listes nominatives de population, Nancy-ville, sect. 5-8, 1851.
while using a frame. A recent sociological study of a contemporary rural village in Lorraine (in the northern portion of the department of Moselle) reveals that the extensive traditional obligations of married women left them no time for industrial wage earning. Women in Grand-Fraud assumed with marriage enormous responsibilities for food cultivation and household maintenance: they had complete charge of the stable and animals, they did all the gardening, and they helped in the fields when necessary, in addition to performing all household tasks such as food preservation, cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. It is likely, too, that in the middle of the nineteenth century women's productive work on the land was essential to family survival, and that the wages from embroidering were either a welcome cash addition to the family income or the source of a dowry for a single girl. Thus, women's life-cycle stage and their role in the rural family economy help explain why Lorquin embroiderers refused to adopt the frame technique.

In addition, the many opportunities for and importance of sociability while working might have stiffened rural women's resistance to the frame and to the workshop setting it entailed. The testimonies of manufacturers and regional officials indicate that embroiderers often worked together in groups of ten or twelve at a worker's

TABLE 2
Occupations of Heads of Households with Embroiderers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATIONS</th>
<th>ASPACH 1846</th>
<th></th>
<th>NANCY 1851</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day laborers</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic servants</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled workers</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embroiderers</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other needleworkers</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile workers</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundresses</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory workers</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerks</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery/transport</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artisans</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopkeepers/merchants</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal professions</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owners/pensioners</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No profession</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ADM 6M 89; ADM 6M 110; ADM 6M 111.
home, in order to share heat and light. Though the questions directed to embroiderers never elicited any comments on this practice, a contemporary embroiderer living in Lorraine today can shed some light on the significance of collective work outside of a workshop. Madame Rapin of Remoncourt (Vosges) remembers that before World War II the veillées—evening gatherings of local inhabitants for work and socializing—were lively, cheerful occasions that strengthened community ties while providing a congenial and relaxed atmosphere for needlework. For embroiderers who could survive on hand embroidery, the veillé was clearly a better work environment than a workshop.

But embroiderers could not always work under such ideal conditions. A big job with a short deadline required a different kind of collective labor, where a half-dozen or so women joined in on a single project for an intense bout of continuous labor. Madame Rapin and her friends once worked on a piece of embroidery for two days and two nights straight, after which one of the embroiderers climbed on her bicycle in the wee hours of the morning to deliver the completed fabric to an intermediary by 6:00 A.M. The community networks supported rural embroiderers psychologically and practically in ways that would have been difficult to re-create in a workshop.

To be sure, even the sociability of handwork in the home could not banish the stresses and strains of embroidering as a trade. But rural women could call upon the saints to help them through such difficulties. Madame Bonétat of Mirecourt (Vosges), the daughter and granddaughter of embroidery intermediaries, recalls one embroiderer who lit a taper to Saint Jude, the saint of persons in desperate situations, when she had to do a lot of embroidery in an impossibly short amount of time. As she expected, Saint Jude came through, and she finished the job. Other embroiderers invoked Sainte Lucie, the saint of light, to relieve them of the eyestrain that embroidering caused. They did this by filling a carafe with clear water on 13 December, Sainte Lucie's day, and then placing the carafe in front of a candle to refract the light onto the embroidery.

Resistance to the frame and the workshop, then, was possible for rural embroiderers whose first priority was agricultural labor. In addition, the persistent demand for hand embroidery allowed them to continue to work by hand and in the home, conditions that were more agreeable to them for practical and personal reasons. Finally, the rural setting, with its religious rituals and community networks, may have contributed to embroiderers' sense of solidarity against manufacturers' efforts at exploitation.

A brief glimpse at the situation of embroiderers in urban Nancy reveals an entirely different family economy and labor supply compared to those in rural areas, which explains why workers here did both hand and frame embroidering. Nancy was a thriving city with a growing population of over 40,000 in 1851; significantly, the number of female inhabitants greatly exceeded that of males (22,310 females versus 17,979 males), especially among individuals between the ages of twenty and thirty-five, which suggests considerable need and competition for jobs among Nancy women. The census sample from Nancy includes 1,649 individuals from
TABLE 3
Females over 13 Years Old in Occupations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATIONS</th>
<th>ASPACH 1846</th>
<th>NANCY 1851</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day laborers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic servants</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled workers</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embroiderers</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other needleworkers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile workers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundresses</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory workers</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerks</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery/transport</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artisans</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopkeepers/merchants</td>
<td>—</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal professions</td>
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<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owners/pensioners</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No profession</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>68.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ADM 6M 89; ADM 6M 110; ADM 6M 111.

two densely populated working-class streets in the center of town in 1851. While the 163 embroiderers in the sample, like their coworkers in Aspach, tended to be young and unmarried, their mean age of thirty was considerably higher than that of women in the countryside. Twenty-nine percent of them were married or widowed, while no embroiderers in Aspach were married (see Table 1). For women in Nancy, then, embroidering could be a lifetime occupation, and more families in the city than in rural areas depended on married women’s wages (as opposed to their productive functions).

Perhaps most striking in suggesting why many Nancy embroiderers accepted the frame and occasionally peopled embroidery workshops are the data on the occupations of heads of the 131 households with embroiderers. Forty-six households, or 35 percent, were headed by embroiderers, many of them single and living alone, some living with other embroiderers, and several with children (often illegitimate) or other relatives to support (see Table 2). The next-largest single category of heads of households with embroiderers was artisans (19 percent), which was followed by day laborers (16 percent) and unskilled workers (10 percent). Not surprisingly, embroiderers most often lived in poorer, working-class households. Clearly, women and
Embroidering by hand in Nancy (Meurthe), ca. 1905.
From Chambre de Commerce de Meurthe-et-Moselle,
Cinquantenaire, 1855-1905
(Nancy: Berger-Levrault, 1905),
between pp. 40 and 41.
families in Nancy depended more upon the income from embroidering than did the inhabitants of Aspach, and so embroiderers were more likely to adopt the frame technique, which might better ensure steady earnings. Additional reasons for some Nancy embroiderers’ acceptance of the frame probably included (1) manufacturers’ having more control over workers since they lived and worked in close proximity; (2) a few more women competing for jobs in embroidering; and (3) the greater possibilities of better pay and job mobility for more skilled embroiderers in Nancy than in the countryside.

In general, then, embroiderers’ responses to the frame method depended on age, life-cycle stage, and whether productive functions were more valuable than wage earning in the family economy. The situation of the embroiderers expands upon and modifies Louise Tilly’s findings in her comparative study of female workers’ responses to proletarianization by introducing yet another form of female wage labor during industrialization. Tilly concluded that collective resistance to proletarianization among female workers was likely when (1) women worked away from home rather than under the supervision of a male head of household, (2) they felt solidarity with other female workers, as opposed to being isolated in homes or small shops, and (3) they were more concerned about wage earning than about other family interests.33

Lorraine embroidery workers differed from Tilly’s samples of urban working-class women in that most of them combined industrial wage earning with agricultural labor. Though embroiderers worked at home, no male family member supervised their labor, because embroidering was an exclusively female occupation. Nor were embroiderers (at least in the countryside) isolated from one another, because local women often worked together. And contrary to the situation of the female cigarmakers Tilly studied, embroiderers were more capable of resisting proletarianization when other family interests prevailed over industrial wage earning. To be sure, the embroiderers’ resistance to proletarianization was neither activist nor collective in the sense of an organized strike, such as that the cigarmakers waged, but it was no less effective for being passive and seemingly unorganized. Moreover, persistent demand for both fine and ordinary-quality embroidery throughout the 1850s allowed embroiderers to earn wages through handwork even after they rejected the frame. Thus, the case of Lorraine embroiderers shows that different work organizations, family economies, and gender divisions of labor influenced the motivations for and types of female workers’ responses to proletarianization.

It is also possible that embroidery manufacturers welcomed any excuse to desist from innovations—such as frame technology and workshop organization—that were costly and unrewarding. Certainly manufacturers put more concerted energy into lobbying the government to maintain protectionism than they put into restructuring embroidery production, a priority that momentarily won them relief from Swiss competition and the pressure to reorganize the industry. During the 1851 investigation of the embroidery industry, manufacturers argued their case in both market and gender terms, maintaining that protection of the embroidery industry was necessary for economic stability and social order in France. Though their claims
about women's role, women's work, and embroidery often were inconsistent and erroneous, gender proved a powerful support for protection of the embroidery industry in Lorraine.

**Gender and Embroidering**

Those members of the 1851 investigating subcommittee who actually visited Lorraine queried manufacturers and local administrators about social as well as economic issues related to the embroidery industry. At a time when the conventional view of the female role maintained that woman's first priority was family nurturance in the home, subcommittee members (consisting of five bourgeois men) wanted to know how industrial wage labor affected the social behavior of embroiderers and their families. Testimonies and other pertinent archival materials revealed male apprehensions about embroidery's negative effects on family relations and local welfare, but the vast majority of administrators and manufacturers agreed that the work was a necessary source of income for poor families in the region. Indeed, they supported this position with the argument that embroidery was suitable as women's work because it was done in the home. This argument proved particularly useful in manufacturers' theoretical case for protectionism, despite their practical efforts to remove embroiderers from the home by introducing frame embroidery and workshop organization.

Some local officials asserted that embroidery led to immorality and debauchery among girls and young women because it fostered their desire for finery, which, given the low wages embroiderers earned, could be satisfied only through loose living.\(^{34}\) Equally bad, according to the subprefect of Mirecourt (Vosges), was that girls who embroidered might never learn housekeeping skills and, as he once witnessed, would treat their parents with disrespect.\(^{35}\) Men holding these views feared that embroidery, as a wage-earning occupation, destabilized families and promoted social unrest, since women had neither time nor training to inculcate good morals among family members.\(^{36}\) Local administrators' solution to this problem was not to eliminate the embroidery industry but to guarantee that women and girls worked at home and under family supervision so they would learn and perform household tasks.

Embroidering, as a domestic industry, suited these requirements in principle. But in fact, rural Lorraine women regularly abandoned embroidering and left the home to do agricultural labor. An intermediary in Roechicourt (Meurthe) complained to the subcommittee that she could never find enough embroiderers at harvest time because women were "forced by farmers to work in the fields."\(^{37}\) Clearly, agricultural labor took precedence over embroidering because it contributed to the survival of the family farm and to regional economic and demographic stability. But how did local administrators reconcile this practice with the ideal of women in the home? Indeed, they strongly condemned other instances of embroiderers working outside of the home. For instance, the mayor of Fontenoy-le-Château (Vosges), the
only small town the subcommittee visited in which frame and workshop embroidery were common, asserted that "the meetings of workers on leaving small workshops, and in which they chat about their intrigues, might have contributed to their moral decline." Similarly, the subprefect in CommercY (Meuse), who thought that embroidery did not harm women's morals since they worked at home and alone, said, "It might be different if they were gathered in a workshop."38

An important distinction between agricultural labor and embroidering away from home for Lorraine women was that field work was a family affair and occurred under male supervision. By contrast, when embroidering brought women together outside of family influence, local officials feared for female morality and docility. Patriarchal control, then, along with economic necessity, justified women's work outside of the home in the case of agricultural labor. However, male attitudes toward the sexual division of labor permitted no such flexibility for men. When the subprefect of Mirecourt learned that a few adolescent boys in his district had renounced farm labor to earn money by embroidering, he protested that the latter occupation "accords neither with [the boys'] age nor with their sex, and even less with the development of their health and their physical strength."39 What the subprefect suggested here was that agricultural labor—rough, tiring, taking place outdoors, and the mainstay of family and regional economies—was "men's" work, while the sedentary, painstaking, indoor, and secondary occupation of embroidering should be left to women. The rigidity of occupational sex-typing was less important than the belief that men should be the chief breadwinners and should be in control of family labor. It was precisely this position that embroidery manufacturers successfully exploited to support their case for protecting the industry in 1851.

Lorraine manufacturers argued for maintaining prohibition by asserting that embroidery benefited France because it allowed women to work at home under familial supervision and shielded from immoral influences outside the family. Echoing the position of manufacturers during the investigation of 1851, the prefect of Meurthe wrote to the minister of agriculture and commerce in 1854: "Beyond the resources it procures for the poor class, especially during the season when other types of work are lacking, embroidery offers the incomparable advantage of providing work for women and girls in the very heart of the family, without requiring their meeting in workshops where health and morals are only too often imperiled."40

However, at the same time the prefect, along with the manufacturers he supported, was extolling embroidering for allowing women to work at home where their morals were safe, market forces threatening Lorraine embroidering were moving women out of the home and into the workshop. As the census data suggest, manufacturers' chances of procuring fine embroidery were greatest where women were most dependent on embroidering for wage earning and where women and girls might work outside of the home. Yet manufacturers supported their case for protectionism with arguments positing an opposite situation for female embroiderers—wage earning subordinated to family productive interests and work in the home.

Manufacturers tried to address this inconsistency by establishing schools where girls could learn valuable skills of embroidering (presumably the frame technique) and
where teachers, clerics, and bourgeois ladies would supervise pupils at all times and give them Christian readings and lessons while they worked. But the fundamental conception of domestic womanhood won the day for embroidery manufacturers. They concealed their economic interest in removing embroiderers from the home behind their rhetoric on embroidering as a form of home manufacture and therefore a suitable feminine occupation. In 1851 the argument that embroidering contributed to female morality and family stability was more effective in serving entrepreneurial interests than were the efforts to train embroiderers to use a frame and compete with Swiss producers.

Of course, gender arguments were not manufacturers’ only justification for maintaining protectionism. Manufacturers reiterated to the commission and to the minister of agriculture and commerce how important their industry was to the French economy, how formidable Swiss competition was because of factors out of French control, how patriotic and good-hearted manufacturers were in providing employment for so many thousands of poor women, and how utterly disastrous a free-trade policy would be for France as a whole. These assertions were very persuasive, particularly given the strong precedent of protectionism in French economic policy. But the argument about embroidery allowing females to work in the home, thus preserving domestic and social tranquility, was also integral to the protectionist cause.

When the commission ended its investigation of the white embroidery industry, it decided in favor of protectionism. It concluded that the industry was too valuable in terms of revenue and jobs to expose it to the rigors of foreign, especially Swiss, competition. Gender, too, appeared in the commission’s recommendation to the minister of agriculture and commerce, as members indicated the importance of embroidering in providing the type of work that allowed women to help with family and farm, which in turn fostered social order. “Embroidery . . . is . . . (what one looks for so often today) one of a small number of jobs that, reserved especially for women, also combines with agricultural labor . . . . There is then a humanitarian and political interest of the first order [in embroidery]; for where there is work, tranquility reigns.”

The history of the Lorraine embroidery industry in the mid-nineteenth century shows how manufacturers’ efforts to control workers, and workers’ strategies to evade proletarianization, resulted in a standoff during a critical period that preserved the putting-out structure of embroidery manufacture. Rural women continued to divide their time among household responsibilities, agricultural labor, and embroidering by hand at home, while manufacturers, shielded from Swiss competition, still found ready markets at home and even abroad for Lorraine embroidery. Embroiderers remained overworked and underpaid, but they again engaged in passive resistance when, during the 1850s, regional prefects tried to implement a workbook (livret) requirement to prevent workers from accepting more than one job at a time. This attempt to make embroiderers carry workbooks in which all their jobs were inscribed failed utterly.
The situation, of course, eventually changed. As a result of several factors, the 1860s marked a steady decline in the number of embroiderers in the department of the Meurthe.45 In the first place, embroidery as an important part of feminine dress went out of style. Second, the Civil War in the United States deprived French embroidery producers of a major market. Third, the French government finally adopted a free-trade economic policy that forced Lorraine embroidery to compete with foreign goods, including machine-made embroidery from Switzerland. Finally, industrial developments in Nancy and other parts of the Meurthe meant that increasing numbers of women found more remunerative types of industrial-age employment than embroidering.46

However, domestic and workshop embroidery manufacturing never disappeared completely from Lorraine. In the later decades of the nineteenth century, manual embroidery continued to sustain families in the less industrialized department of the Vosges.47 In fact, in this comparatively poor economic setting offering few agricultural and wage-earning opportunities, frame embroidering flourished, and even men took up embroidering in some villages.48 These developments reinforce the findings of this study—that forms of manufacturing during industrialization were various and mutable within the framework of manual technologies and nonfactory capitalist organizations. The conditions of workers and their interaction with employers influenced the forms and structures of manufacturing, and not necessarily in the direction of mechanization, concentration, and mass production.

In addition to showing how the sexual division of labor within the family and rural women’s resistance to work intensification contributed to the persistence of hand and dispersed manufacturing in embroidering, this study also reveals the importance of gender in the making of French economic policy and in the development of French industry. Gender was embedded in the controversy surrounding embroidery manufacture and trade in Lorraine, which was part of a long-standing political conflict over national economic policy. Previously regarded as a gender-neutral subject, the debate over free trade versus protectionism that continued throughout the nineteenth century in France actually embodied male notions about female character and behavior and the respective roles of men and women in society. Feminist scholars have argued recently that this is not at all surprising—that gender is incorporated more or less explicitly in all social, political, economic, and cultural institutions.49 The debate over economic policy with regard to the embroidery industry is noteworthy in the openness of the discussion of gender and helpful in illuminating this fundamental basis of social organization and politics. In addition, the case of Lorraine embroidery hints at the tension between gender and the actual experience of working women and the means by which bourgeois men could maintain and enhance their power through the construction of gender.

The Lorraine embroidery industry during the mid-nineteenth-century crisis offers a view of the resources mobilized by workers and employers to protect their respective interests. Rural embroiderers relied upon agricultural labor, the still-viable market for hand embroidery, and possibly community solidarity with other embroiderers to resist the manufacturers’ introduction of the frame. For their part, manufacturers’
most potent resources were their connection with the state and the arguments about women’s proper place and French economic stability that they used to support protectionism. The very failure to impose the frame upon some rural embroiderers became a useful weapon in the manufacturers’ campaign against free trade. This case indicates how important the examination of working-class women and gender can be to the understanding of industrialization in the nineteenth century.

Notes

This chapter originally appeared as an article in the Journal of Women’s History 2, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 42-65.

1. J. Hauro, Populations industrielles de la France. La broderie et les brodeuses vosgiennes (Epinal, 1856), pp. 49-50. By comparison, Hauro indicated that cotton weavers or spinners earned 75 centimes to 1.20 francs for twelve hours of work. Ibid., p. 25.

2. Ibid., p. 40.


4. Elinor Accampo, Industrialization, Family Life, and Class Relations (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Gay L. Gullickson, Spinners and Weavers of Auffay (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Louise A. Tilly, “Paths of Proletarianization,” Signs 7 (1981-82): 400-17. Scholars of protoindustrialization (rural manufacturing for export markets) often address the issue of the gender division of labor in the home of protoindustrial workers. However, these authors tend to view protoindustry as an early phase of industrial capitalism that either leads to a factory system or simply disappears. Such works are not helpful in explaining how women and gender contributed to the success of dispersed manufacturing as a part of modern industrialization. See, for example, Franklin F. Mendels, “Protoindustrialization,” Journal of Economic History 32 (1972): 241-61; Peter Kreidte, Hans Medick, and Jurgen Schumlehn, Industrialization before Industrialization, trans. Beate Schempp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and several articles in Annales ESC 39 (September-October 1984). For a critique of the protoindustrialization model that raises intriguing questions about patriarchy and the sexual division of labor, see Anna Cento Bull, “Proto-industrialization, Small-Scale Capital Accumulation and Diffused Entrepreneurship,” Social History 14 (May 1989): 177-200.


6. Archives Départementales de Meurthe-et-Moselle (hereafter ADM) 9 M 28, Industries diverses, An IX-1939. The report on embroidery and lace industries for the 1851 Exhibition in London indicates that white embroidery started in France just before 1789, but after suffering during the revolutionary years it revived under Napoleon and proceeded, with minor setbacks, to flourish under the Restoration (1814-1830) and the July Monarchy (1830-1848). France, Commission française sur l’industrie des nations à l’Exposition universelle de

7. ADM 9 M 28.


10. AN F12 2357-58.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.; AN F12 6884, *Broderies de coton, dentelles, 1833-1899* (douanes). Though French documents frequently referred to the embroidery frame used in Switzerland, descriptions of that frame were few and rather vague. It appears that the Swiss manufacture consisted almost entirely of the higher grades of embroidery, while Lorraine produced a wide range of quality, from "rich" to "ordinary" embroidery. Ibid.

14. Ulrich Pfister’s research on two rural Swiss communities in the late eighteenth century lends credence to this hypothesis. In a community of small, independent property holders, a gender division of labor evolved whereby males cultivated land and females engaged in rural textile manufacturing. However, in a community with little independent landholding, men, women, and children all worked in rural industry, particularly cotton spinning, and no gender division of labor developed. Ulrich Pfister, “Work Roles and Family Structure in Proto-industrial Zurich,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 20 (Summer 1989): 83-105.

15. AN F12 6884.


18. AN F12 2357-58.


20. AN F12 6884. It is possible that Lorraine manufacturers also introduced large, rectangular frames, which stretched embroidery fabric across simple wooden slats, or vise frames. However, the vise frame was very expensive, and the slat frame often stretched the embroidery fabric too much or too little. The rectangular frame, like the round frame, often rested on a stand. Laboulaye, *Encyclopédie*. Two separate French committees appointed by the minister of agriculture and commerce to investigate the embroidery industry found Lorraine manufacturers to be either unwilling or unable to implement in France the exact technique of Swiss embroidering. AN F12 2357-58; AN F12 6884.

21. AN F12 2357-58.

22. Ibid.

23. An embroiderer from Metz (Moselle), obviously fairly skilled, said she had once been offered four francs to embroider a pillowcase very extensively. “I refused to accept it,” she declared. “I would not have earned fifty centimes a day on it.” Similarly, Madame Bonlarron of Mirecourt (Vosges) also rejected certain unfavorable rates: “I give you the example of a petticote that was proposed to me for fifteen francs, and which I refused because it did not pay enough.” A few workers dispensed entirely with intermediaries and manufacturers and dealt directly with their bourgeois female customers. Paraphrasing the testimony of Madeleine Roland, St. Mihiel (Meuse), the written account reads: “She works neither for intermediaries nor for merchants of Paris or Nancy. In view of how little workers earned, she decided ten years ago to work for direct and individual requests of women needing embroidery…” Women who embroidered independently did not necessarily earn more than other workers, but they had more control over their time and made at least as much as those who
worked for intermediaries. Two unmarried sisters from Bains (Vosges) could not say whether they earned more by embroidering for private individuals, "because we do not work consistently all day. We embroider only after we have done the necessary housework." Unfortunately, the investigation that elicited the above statements by embroiderers did not address itself to the women who quit embroidering for other occupations, though manufacturers and Lorraine officials attest to this common occurrence. AN F12 2357/58.

24. Embroidery manufacturer Augé Chedéau asserted that, compared with Swiss embroiderers, French workers "are not very intelligent; they are generally very routine." A manufacturer in Nancy lamented, "The workers lay down the law to us a little. . . . They do [the work] which seems most profitable, and leave the rest undone." F12 2357/58. A regional newspaper representing the interests of embroidery entrepreneurs reported, "Compared to Swiss workers, French embroiderers want to work at home and when they want. They are more difficult to supervise. . . ." L'impartial de la Meurthe et des Vosges, 16 February 1851.


27. Hugues Lamarche, Susan Carol Rogers, and Claude Karnoouh, Paysans, femmes et citoyens. Luttes pour le pouvoir dans un village lorrain (Le Paradou, 1980), pp. 73-77. See also Martine Segalen, Mari et femme dans la société paysanne (Paris, 1980).

28. AN F12 2357/58; Haxo, La broderie, pp. 49-50.

29. Interview with Henriette Rapin, Remoncourt (Vosges), 27 May 1986.

30. Ibid.


33. Tilly, "Paths."

34. One of many examples of this attitude came from a welfare officer in Metz (Moselle) who told the subcommittee: "I would never advise a mother to give her daughter a calling that . . . being a luxury occupation, leads the worker to accustom herself to ideas of luxury and dress." AN F12 2357-58.

35. The subprefect reported in 1863 that too many girls devoted themselves exclusively to embroidering and never learned housekeeping skills. Families encouraged this, since they wanted the wages daughters earned from their needlework, and so the mothers of these girls performed all domestic tasks unassisted, allowing the embroiderers to work unimpeded. Not only did these embroiderers never learn to keep house, according to the subprefect, but they also became imperious and disrespectful of their mothers. The subprefect asserted that he overheard an embroiderer demand that her mother polish the girl's boots. "Doesn't one find in this convention between mothers and daughters, in this degradation of the mother, one of the causes of family dissolution . . .?" Ibid.

36. Lorraine officials were not alone in these attitudes. See also Baron de Gérando, Des progrès de l'industrie, considérés dans leurs rapports avec la moralité de la classe ouvrière (Paris, 1842), pp. 73-76; in AN F12 2361* Arts et manufactures, 1845-1883; Charles Dupin, Le petit producteur français, vol. 6, L'ouvrière française (Paris, 1828), p. 44; Jules Simon, L'ouvrière (Paris, 1861), pp. 15, 103-104.

37. AN F12 2357-58.

38. Ibid.


40. AN F12 1884. In a pamphlet published in 1854, a supporter of the Nancy embroidery manufacturers wrote, "[Embroidering] has the great advantage of solving a problem that has
41. AN F12 2357-58. See also A. Deniau, De la nécessité d'un conservatoire de broderie à Nancy (Nancy, 1862), p. 15.
42. AN F12 2357-58. AN F12 6884.
43. AN F12 2357-58.
44. ADV M 292; ADV M 242, Livrets d'ouvriers, 1856-1870; ADM 9 M 28; ADM 8 M 22, Législation et conditions du travail, 1854-1900.
46. Ibid.
48. ADV Recensement de population, Fontenoy-le-Château, canton Bains, 1886. See also the Musée de la Broderie, Fontenoy-le-Château (Vosges).