

# WHAT CAN THE MID-VICTORIAN CENSUSES TELL US ABOUT VARIATIONS IN MARRIED WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT?

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## Introduction

It is only since 1911 that it has been possible to trace in detail the dramatic changes in patterns of employment of married women in Britain (though the 1901 census gives occupations of married and widowed women combined). Before that, only in the Reports for 1851, 1861 and (for England and Wales only) 1871, is it possible to obtain any estimates at all of the overall proportion of married women who were recorded as in employment. Otherwise, and for any detail of the occupations involved, we have to rely on the census enumerators' books (CEBs).

Following Margaret Hewitt, whose path-breaking *Wives and mothers in Victorian industry* was published in 1958,<sup>1</sup> several scholars in the 1960s and 1970s used enumerators' books to analyse married women's employment in the context of the family, kinship, and the household economy.<sup>2</sup> While recognising that no source is perfect, most of these authors treated the reporting of women's occupations in the enumerators' books as reasonably valid and reliable indicators of the incidence of women's income-generating contribution to the family economy.

The first significant attack on the reliability and validity of the enumeration of married women's employment in the Victorian censuses was Higgs' work on Rochdale servants. Higgs noted that very substantial numbers of 'servants' seemed to be kin who probably assisted with domestic or business work in the households of their relatives, while most of those recorded as 'housekeepers' in the published census report were housewives responsible for managing their own households.<sup>3</sup> Higgs later generalized a case against the reliability and validity of the enumeration of married women's occupations, arguing that the instructions to householders and enumerators might reasonably have been interpreted in ways which would discourage the reporting of casual, seasonal and domestic industrial employment. He also produced other evidence which suggested that some male householders and some male enumerators failed to report occupations for many women, some of whom are known from other sources to have been in regular employment.<sup>4</sup> Extending this argument, Elizabeth Roberts subsequently argued that 'part-time work (usually undertaken by married women) was grossly under-enumerated' and that '[t]here is certainly a very big discrepancy...between the number of married women enumerated as working full-time in the Census...and the large number of women...who worked at some point in their lives on a casual, part-time basis — about 40% in Preston and Lancaster, and

50% in Barrow'.<sup>5</sup> Particularly alarming for its wider implications, Roberts presented data from John Holley's comparisons of employment revealed by the census and by wage books in the textile and papermaking industries in southern Scotland. This appears to show levels of under-enumeration of women's employment ranging from 46 per cent to 100 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, the work of Higgs and Roberts has been used to cast serious doubts on the reliability of census recording.<sup>7</sup> One particular manifestation of what is fast becoming a new orthodoxy appears in a paper published in 1995 by Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, where they assert that: 'the [nineteenth-century] census enumeration of women's employment is demonstrably inaccurate... Checks provided by local and national evidence suggest substantial under-reporting of female work in the agricultural sector, in manufacturing, and in certain service occupations. Frequently enumerators omitted any occupational designation for married women whose work was thus particularly under-reported'. They go on to argue that '[t]he invisibility of married women's work may well have distorted views of the nineteenth-century labour force; for example, the view that factory work was confined to the young and single may be a statistical artefact'.<sup>8</sup>

As an alternative source, Horrell and Humphries use a large collection of family budgets as the basis of new estimates of trends in women's labour force participation, and on this basis claim, *inter alia*, that '[a]round 15% of working married women were recorded as working in factories at the turn of the [eighteenth] century and this had declined to 10% by the 1830s... 60% of women with husbands with factory occupations were themselves working in factories in 1831-50, a higher proportion than the 14% of married women employed in factories in Preston in 1851. In the 1840s, 38% of our women are working; this is considerably higher than the estimate of 7% in Birmingham in 1841, and again illustrates the downward bias of census estimates'.<sup>9</sup>

## Evaluation

It would be easy to read Horrell and Humphries as arguing that the reporting of married women's employment in the CEBs is so bad that the data are almost useless for serious analytical purposes.<sup>10</sup> But is this really the case?

A second look at much of the evidence put forward against the CEBs suggests that many concerns about reliable reporting are exaggerated. For example, women entered as domestic servants in the occupation column, but shown in the relationship column as relatives of the head of household, are easily identified in the enumerators' books.<sup>11</sup> If we exclude those listed as 'housekeepers' and simply as 'domestic', they make up about 13 per cent of English and Welsh 'servants' in the National Sample from the 1851 Census of Great Britain.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, their status is ambiguous: some, as Higgs has pointed out, were correctly returned as they were genuinely providing domestic or other services to the household in which they lived, while others, in 1851, were following a widespread custom of servants being allowed to return home for Mothering Sunday, which coincided with the census in that year. Wives, mothers and daughters who were listed as 'housekeepers' in their own households are similarly easy to spot in the

enumerators' books — where, indeed, in England and Wales, this title is given in 1851 to 1.1 per cent of all married women living with husbands on census night and aged between 20 and 59. However, this use of the term 'housekeeper' to identify the person principally responsible for day-to-day household management is locally highly concentrated into the Lancashire cotton towns, with nearly half of all such occurrences in the sample occurring in Lancashire and Cheshire. Also, and offering a slightly different gloss on the position apparently identified by Higgs in Rochdale, examination of the many hundreds of enumerators' books in the National Sample shows clearly that registrars and census office checkers in many parts of the country were well aware of the possible anomaly. The result is that a minimum of 32 per cent of 'housekeepers' who were heads of households or relatives of the head are fairly unambiguously marked as having been reallocated to the residual census report category of 'persons of no stated occupations or conditions'; there are also many less clear cases, suggesting that the true extent of this reallocation was significantly higher.

Possibly more seriously, in the National Sample, about 9 per cent of married women aged between 20 and 59 and living with their husbands in England and Wales were returned only with a 'rank, profession or occupation' relating to their husband's principal economic activity (as 'labourer's wife', 'butcher's wife', 'spinner's wife' etc.). There are, however, very few enumeration districts where all married women are returned in this way and it may well often reflect not the concealment of married women's employment but the absence of anything else which could be entered against their names in the appropriate column. This is not to deny that there are some well-documented cases where there are inconsistencies in occupational recording between different enumerators in the same community, some of which do suggest under-recording of married women's employment. However, the number of well-documented examples remains small, and in the absence of much more extensive research controlling for husband's occupation and life-cycle stage, it is unclear how significant they are on a national or even a local scale.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, also, the activity of those who engaged in seasonal work in sectors like agriculture and the tourist trades is not well-reported in the census, but that is arguably a correct representation of the situation at the end of March or beginning of April, where the census snapshot coincided with what in many areas was a relatively quiet time of year. This reminds us that a nineteenth century population census was no more a budget survey than is the modern Labour Force Survey; at best it reflected — and still reflects — a situation at a particular season. As a result, when compared with a hypothetical study of year-round economic activity, it under-emphasizes the significance of some forms of employment — but it also over-emphasizes others. To criticize a census for failing to entirely reflect the life-time employment history of married women (as Sonya Rose, using Elizabeth Roberts' work, has implicitly done)<sup>14</sup> is clearly unfair, particularly since there are very few published surveys of year-round life-time employment experience even of modern populations.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, as Catherine Hakim has pointed out, it is important in evaluating what to expect from a census to distinguish between: a) work which is 'gainful': which ideally should be included, though not all women would consider home-based activities like

providing domestic services for a lodger as 'an occupation'; b) work which is 'productive': which would normally be counted only if the product is marketed; and, c) work which is aimed at 'expanding consumption': which, however important to the household economy, is not likely to be recorded in censuses or even in budget studies.<sup>16</sup>

What, though, about the criticisms of the census enumeration of factory working wives? These were clearly gainful occupations where most women were regularly employed, in 'jobs' of a 'non-domestic' kind. Clearly no conscientious reading of the householders' or enumerators' instructions should have led to significant omission. And, indeed, on close inspection, the evidence so far available against the CEBs in this area is pretty thin. One study often referenced in connection with doubts about the reliability of recording of women's occupations is Judy Low'n's *Women and industrialisation: gender and work in nineteenth-century England* (cited by Horrell and Humphries and, in its earlier Ph.D. version, by Higgs). But while Low'n suggests, though on the basis of no hard evidence, that many married women domestic straw plaiters, washerwomen and charwomen were under-reported in the census, her comparisons of employment records at the Courtauld silk mills in Halstead with the local CEBs lead her to conclude that, among silk workers, 'there are not a great many married women...who evade classification'.<sup>17</sup> In fact, as far as I know, the only published case of significant under-enumeration of textile factory employment is John Holley's work on Walkerburn, which involved six women in the 1861 census and six in 1881.<sup>18</sup>

What, though, about Horrell and Humphries's apparently devastating evidence of under-enumeration of married women's factory employment, based on comparing the 14 per cent of married women identified as employed by the present author in Preston in 1851 with the 60 per cent of the wives of factory workers reported as employed in their budget studies? Unfortunately, reference to the original source shows that Horrell and Humphries reach their conclusion only by not comparing like with like. The table they cite for Preston shows 26 per cent of all wives in the 1851 Preston enumerators' book sample as employed, and 52 per cent of these working in factory occupations, so that 14 per cent of married women in Preston were employed in factories — but this is 14 per cent of the wives of *all* men (including middle class men and men in non-factory occupations). It is quite illegitimate to compare this figure of 14 per cent with the 60 per cent of the wives of husbands in factory occupations in their budget sample, especially since only 32 per cent of married men in Preston worked in textile industries and only 22 per cent in textile factories. So what was the situation in Preston?

### **Married women's employment in Preston in 1851**

This section of the paper uses the 10 per cent sample from the enumerators' books for Preston in 1851, originally drawn in 1965. In the light of subsequent experience, some occupations have been re-classified, and analysis is here confined to couples where both partners were resident on census night and where the husband was actively employed.<sup>19</sup> This means that the results differ marginally from the figures first reported in 1971.<sup>20</sup>

Figure 1 Percentage of women in employment, by husband's occupation: Preston sample, 1851

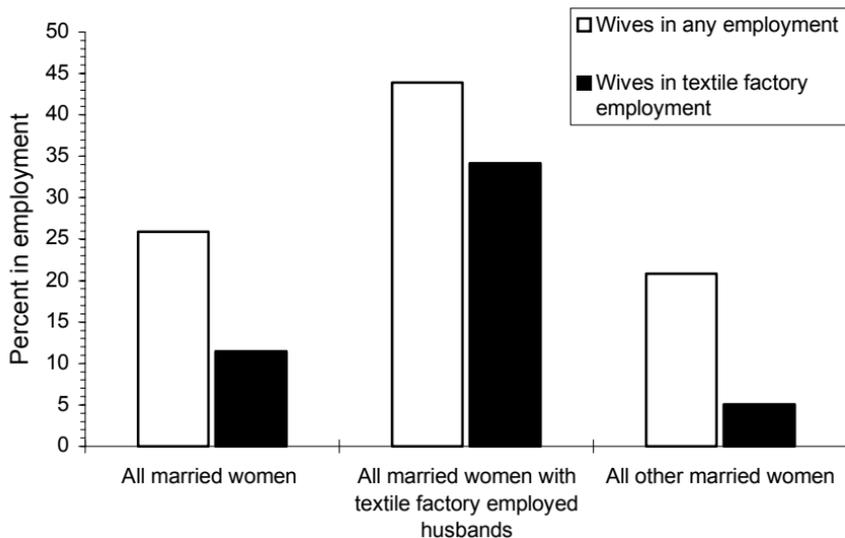
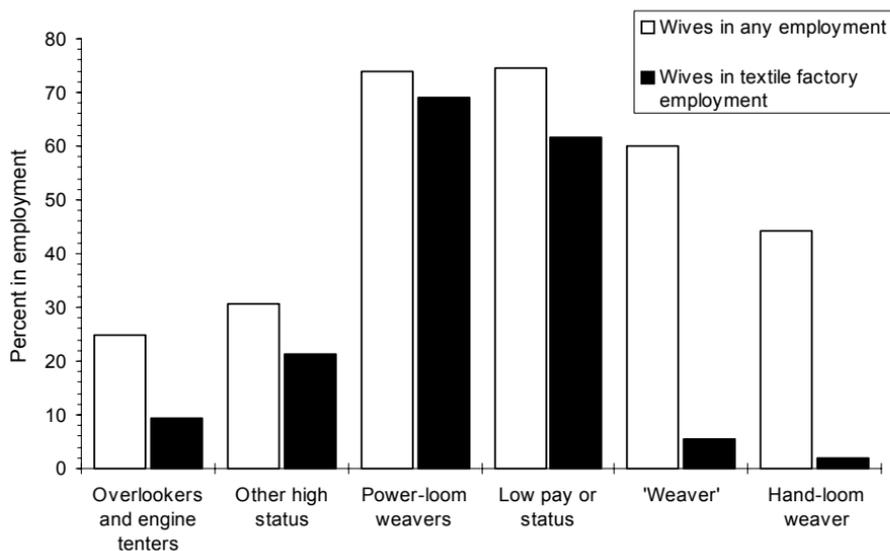


Figure 1 examines married women's employment in the CEBs broken down by the occupation of their husbands. Twenty-six per cent of all wives had some recorded employment and 12 per cent worked in factories. But, of the wives of textile factory working husbands, 44 per cent were in employment, and 34 per cent worked in factories. Among all *other* married women (including wives of non-factory textile workers such as hand-loom weavers), only 21 per cent were in any form of employment, and a mere 5 per cent worked in factories.

Nevertheless, a figure of 34 per cent of the wives of textile workers with a factory occupation still leaves a substantial gap compared with Horrell and Humphries' 60 per cent. However, Figure 2 shows that there were very substantial variations in employment rates between the wives of men in different textile factory occupations, so comparisons must critically depend on the mix of occupations included in any non-census dataset. At one extreme (and not therefore shown on the graph), none of the wives of owners, managers and clerks employed in textile mills had a recorded occupation, and just 25 per cent of the wives of overlookers and the highly paid engine tenters; just 9 per cent of the wives of these latter groups worked in factories, and just 18 per cent of the wives of other higher paid groups like spinners and warpers. Quite different, however, was the experience of the wives of lower paid preparatory workers (for example, scutchers and carders), piecers, and factory labourers, or those whose husbands worked at the only occupation where men and women were regularly employed at the same job: power-loom weavers. Seventy-four per cent of the wives of these two groups were recorded as in employment, 62 per cent and 69 per cent respectively being in factory employment.<sup>21</sup>

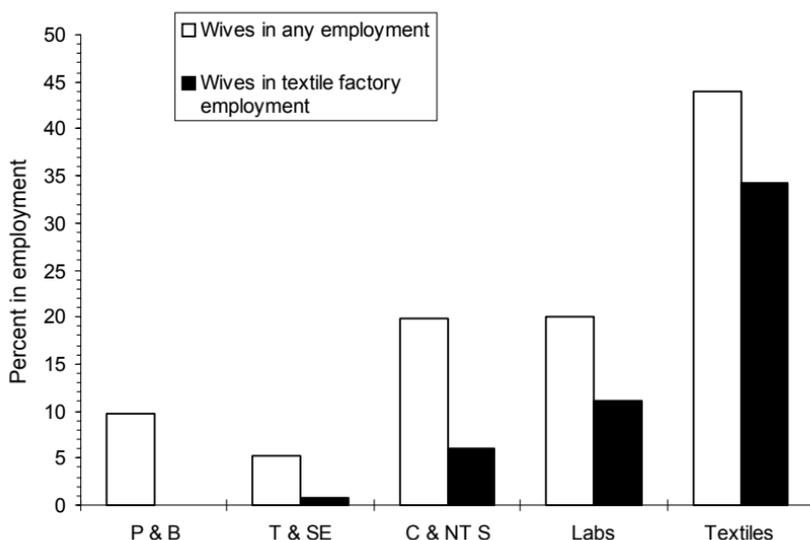
**Figure 2 Percentage of wives of textile workers in employment, by husband's occupational group: Preston sample, 1851**



What about the wives of non-factory workers? Figure 2 shows that very few wives of weavers and hand-loom weavers worked in textile factories. Figure 3 shows the marked contrast between the wives of textile factory workers and wives of the principal remaining groups of the Preston population. Very few middle class and petit bourgeois wives had reported occupations (and almost none had factory employment). Even among men in the mass of non-textile manual occupations, only one wife in five had a reported occupation. Labourers' wives were more likely than other non-textile groups to have factory occupations. Even so, less than one in nine even of these wives were reported as doing factory work. If there were large numbers of undeclared occupations, is this especially where they will be found?

Returning to the wives of textile factory workers, there is further reason to doubt that there was significant under-enumeration in Preston, and this relates directly to the suggestion, made both by Higgs and by Horrell and Humphries, that the frequently observed finding that factory work was confined to the young and single may be a statistical artefact of census under-reporting of married women's work. Figure 4 shows the proportions of the wives of various occupational groups with reported employment, but dividing each group of wives into three different age groups. The results are of substantive and conceptual interest, though the small number of cases in some categories means that the data should be treated with care.

**Figure 3 Percentage of wives in employment, by husband's occupational group: Preston sample, 1851**

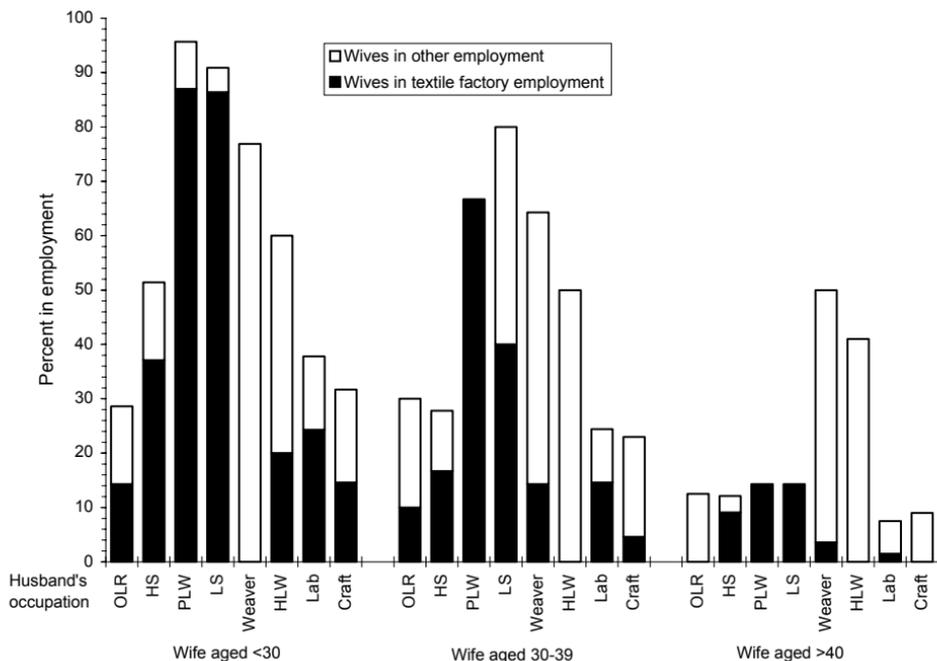


**Notes:** P & B = Professional & business      T & SE = Trade and small employers  
 C & NTS = Craft and non-textile skilled      Labs = Labourers  
 Text = All factory textiles

The graph shows a marked reduction in employment, and particularly in textile factory employment, as women aged. This occurs for all occupational groups (except the highly pressed families of hand-loom weavers where high levels of employment, among married women, predictably continued into late middle-age). However, the effect is much less marked among the wives of low-paid men like power-loom weavers and preparatory workers; these groups are recorded in large numbers in textile factory employment over the age of 30. Nevertheless, no group reported more than 15 per cent of their wives in textile factory employment at ages of 40 and over. It would seem difficult to identify plausible explanations of this change in terms of differential reporting by age. It thus seems reasonable to conclude that the decline in married women's textile factory employment by age is a real rather than an artefactual effect. Horrell and Humphries' conclusion is therefore almost certainly wrong.

The very high levels of reporting of occupations among younger low-paid factory textile workers also suggests that, for these occupational groups at least, reliable reporting was fairly comprehensively achieved. Ninety-six per cent of the wives of powerloom weavers aged under 30 reported some employment, and 91 per cent

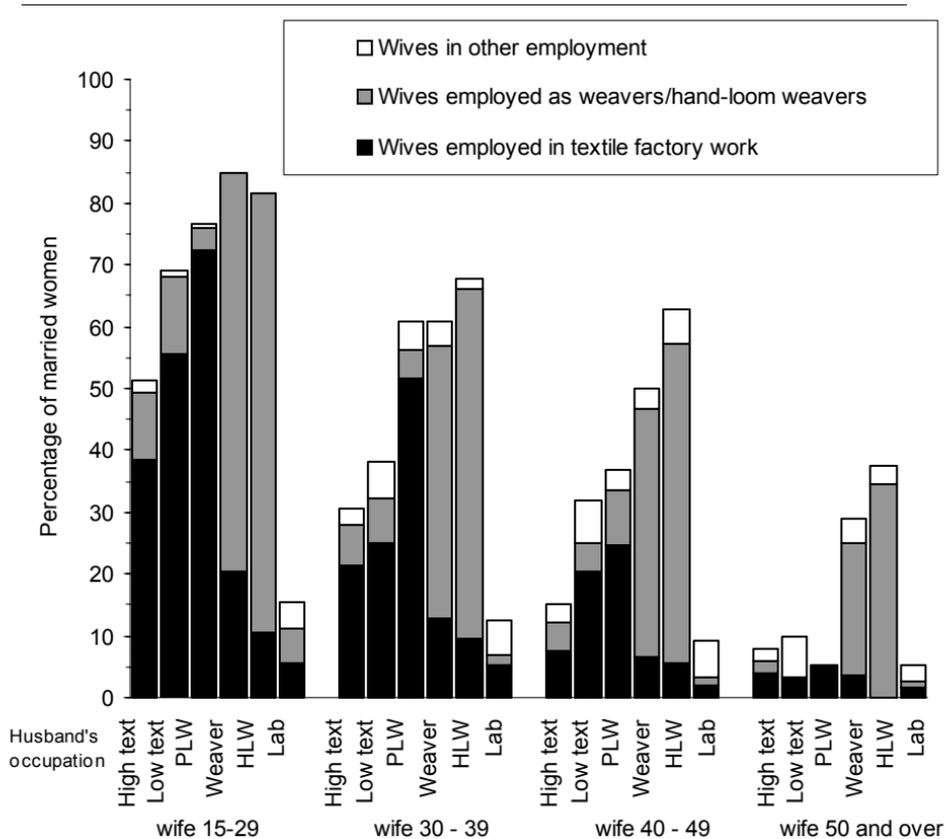
**Figure 4** Percentage of wives in employment, by husband's occupation and age of wife: Preston sample, 1851



**Notes:** OLR = Overlooker etc. HS = Other high status worker  
 PLW = Power-loom weavers LS = Low status workers  
 Weaver = Unspecified weaver HLW = Hand-loom weaver  
 Craft = Craft etc. Lab = Labourer

of the wives of other low status factory textile workers. The very marked age effects for all occupational groups except non-factory weavers also have important implications for the use of non-census surrogates as sources for estimating overall levels of women's employment. While the census provides a representative cross-section of the population by age and family life-cycle status, representativeness is much more difficult to ensure when using other sources, such as Horrell and Humphries' budget studies. Indeed, given the interests and objectives of most of those who collected the budgets, it seems possible that they will have focused especially on families which were at the earlier and most standard-of-living critical stages of the life-cycle. They may thus have missed most of the youngest married women with no or few children who would most frequently have been in employment, but they would also have missed families at later stages of the life cycle when grown-up children were in employment and leaving home and fewer wives were working out of the home.<sup>22</sup> To explore these effects we move to larger data sets drawn from the National Sample from the 1851 Census of Great Britain.

**Figure 5** Percentage distribution of economic activity of married women, by own age and husband's occupation: Lancashire and Cheshire, 1851



**Source:** National sample from the 1851 census of Great Britain

### National sample data

For comparison with the Preston figures, however, a special dataset was prepared from the complete transcript for the 69 enumeration districts comprising the sample of Lancashire and Cheshire drawn from the 1851 census.<sup>23</sup> All married couples in which the husband was employed in textile manufacturing in other than a clerical or managerial capacity were selected,<sup>24</sup> plus, for comparison, all couples in which the husband was a labourer of any kind (except that textile factory labourers were included under factory workers). To exclude cases where occupation was not a fair reflection of the husband's income-generating capacity, couples were excluded where the husband was retired, unemployed, had a pension of some kind, or had a second occupation. The dataset contained 1,496

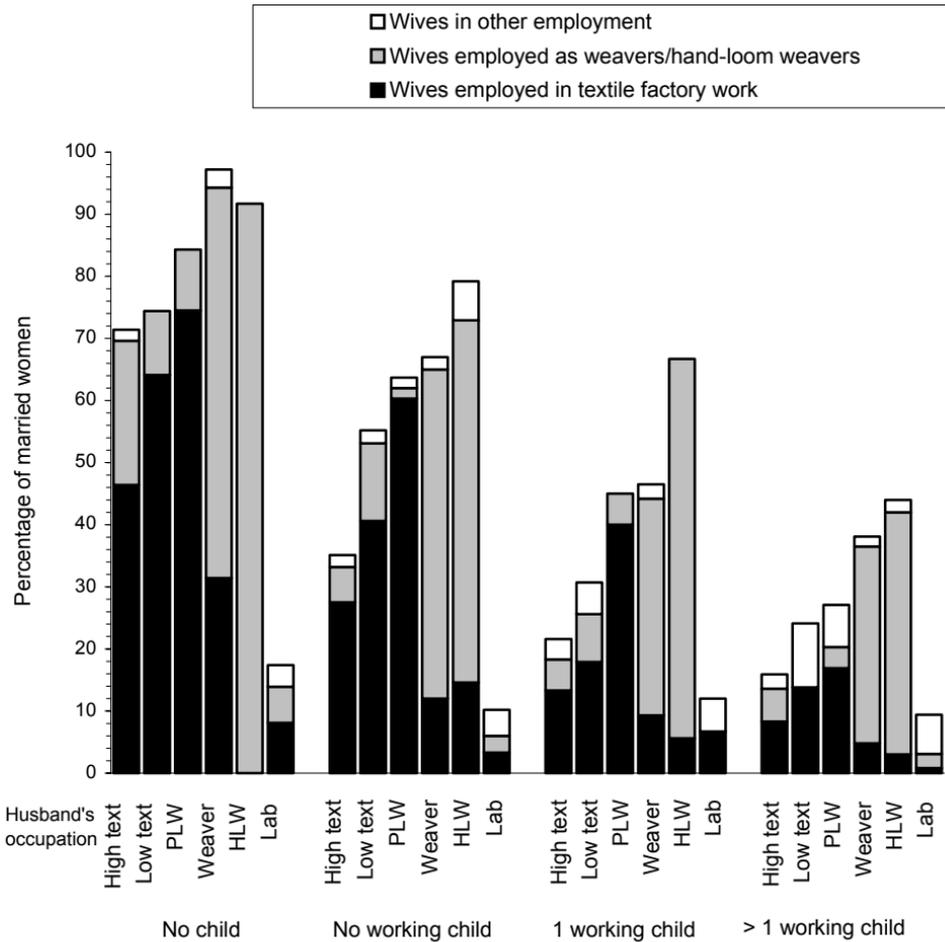
couples where the husband was a textile worker and 679 where he was a labourer. Occupations were grouped into the same categories as those used for the Preston analysis, except that, for final presentation purposes, overseers were grouped with other high status textile factory workers.

Figure 5 breaks down these data by husband's occupation and age of wife, with results reassuringly similar to those for Preston. Overall, of textile factory workers whose wives were under the age of 30, 64 per cent of the wives were in employment, falling to 39 per cent for wives aged 30–39, 25 per cent for wives aged 40–49, and 8 per cent for wives of 50 and over. At least 53 per cent of textile workers' wives aged under 30 were in factory employment. At older ages, the figures fall rapidly (29 per cent at ages 30–39), with only power-loom weavers' wives continuing in factory employment in large numbers past the age of thirty (25 per cent were employed even in the age group 40–49, along with 21 per cent of the wives of lower status textile workers). While overall employment figures do not quite reach the very high levels at the younger ages recorded in the Preston data, occupational titles are given to 77 per cent of the wives of power-loom weavers under the age of 30, and 69 per cent of the wives of lower-status textile factory workers at the same age. These are clearly high levels by any criterion.

However, the highest levels of wives' employment at all age groups were to be found among unspecified weavers and hand-loom weavers, the figures for hand-loom weavers being even higher than for Preston alone. This may reflect sampling errors from the very small numbers of these weaver groups in the youngest age category in Preston, but the Lancashire and Cheshire data also include some Cheshire silk-weaving districts, with little non-weaving employment, where entire households, even including very young children, have recorded occupations. The lower levels of employment among labourers' wives particularly reflect the large number of labourers living the docklands areas of Birkenhead and Liverpool where there was little textile (or perhaps any other) employment for women of any kind. Indeed, one marked feature of all the data in Figure 5 is the very low employment rates outside textiles.

Figures 4 and 5 explored women's employment experience by reference to age. However, contemporary comment and more recent analysis strongly suggests that household economic strategies with respect to married women's employment were not so much determined by age as by, firstly, the balance struck between more income which enhanced material consumption on the one hand, and more time applied to maintaining domestic comfort on the other; and, secondly, the balance struck in allocating different kinds of family labour on the one hand to child-bearing, childcare and domestic responsibilities, and, on the other, to external resource generation. Thus, for example, referring to north Lancashire in the early twentieth century, Elizabeth Roberts has shown how 'in many families it was assumed that the mother would stop work only when the children's wages were sufficient to raise the family wage to an adequate level' or when men were promoted and incomes rose; but she also suggests that for the wife to be able to spend more time on domestic activity was a preferred option of many men *and* women, and that loss of income from termination of employment was partly compensated by reduced costs of domestic activities, notably child-minding and

**Figure 6 Percentage distribution of stated occupations of married women, by husband's occupation and employment of children: Lancashire and Cheshire, 1851**



**Note:** Data for the 'no child' categories are for wives under 40 only  
**Source:** National sample from the 1851 census of Great Britain

purchase of prepared foods.<sup>25</sup> Consistent with these ideas, in Preston in 1851, 44 per cent of all childless married women were in employment, 29 per cent of women with at least one child but none in employment, and just 18 per cent of those with at least one working child.

Figure 6 explores these life-course effects in the Lancashire and Cheshire data. Among married women under the age of 40 and with no children, employment

rates are high for all groups except for the wives of labourers, who again had low levels of recorded employment at all life-cycle stages. Thus, among childless women under 40, an occupation is recorded for 85 per cent of power-loom weavers' wives, 92 per cent hand-loom of weavers' wives, and 97 per cent of the wives of unspecified weavers. Levels of under-recording of employment for these groups are clearly very low indeed. Substantively, they clearly suggest that it was normal for wives of the poorest textile workers to remain in employment until a first child was born. However, even among high status textile workers, 71 per cent of childless wives were in employment (among overlookers and engine tenters the figure was still 62 per cent), though it is interesting that, in contrast to the wives of other factory workers, significant numbers of the employed childless wives of higher status groups were engaged in domestic rather than factory textile work.

The birth of children led to a significant reduction in textile factory employment; 61 per cent of all wives of childless textile factory workers were in factory employment, compared with 40 per cent of the wives of those with at least one child but none in employment. However, inspection of the data suggests that the withdrawal from the labour force was by no means always immediate. Rather it was entry of children into the labour market that was associated with a marked reduction of wives' employment, except among power-loom and other weavers.<sup>26</sup> Among the wives of factory textile workers with one working child, only 19 per cent were in factory work, and among those with more than one working child the figure was a mere 12 per cent overall (17 per cent among the wives of power-loom weavers and a mere 6 per cent among the wives of overlookers and engine tenters), though the lower-paid groups compensated somewhat for the fall in textile factory earnings by increasing their levels of employment in non-textile work, including small shopkeeping and a range of outdoor domestic service activities.

To sum up so far, the patterns revealed by Figures 5 and 6, corresponding as they do with much contemporary and later commentary, confirm suggestions earlier in this paper that textile factory (and, indeed, all textile) work is well recorded by census enumerators' books in Lancashire and Cheshire.<sup>27</sup> Detailed examination of the 69 books from which the data are drawn supports this view. While a small number of enumerators do use the 'wife of' formula quite regularly, there is no book in which no wives are given occupations, and none in textile manufacturing areas which do not record a plausible number of wives in textile-related occupations. Indeed, with only a couple of possible exceptions, far from being suspicious about lax recording of women's occupations, what is striking is how many of the books create an impression of great care in this respect, with enumerators explicitly recording 'housework', 'housekeeper', 'domestic duties', or 'at home' against many of those wives and children of textile workers who one might have otherwise suspected of having been in unrecorded textile work.

So, textile employment seems to be fairly well recorded in Lancashire and Cheshire. But what about the very large numbers of women, particularly at older age groups, who are allocated no specific occupational title by the enumerators? Did they really do no gainful work and what, in particular, are we to make of the almost total lack of occupations attached to the wives of labourers in many

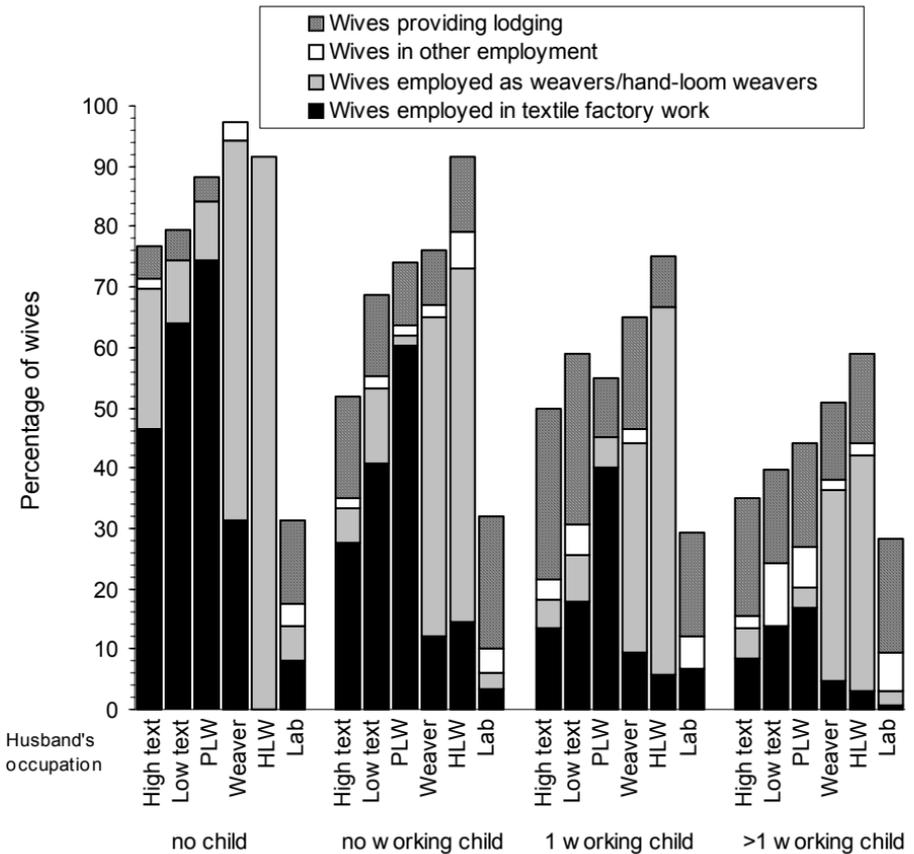
districts? One partial answer to these questions comes from consideration of the role of women as 'lodging providers'.

In this connection, various scholars have cited Leonore Davidoff's work on landladies and lodgers as evidence for under-reporting of married women's occupations,<sup>28</sup> but Davidoff herself is more circumspect, pointing to the ambiguous position, at the intersection of the market and domestic economies, of most of the women in whose households the census classified some residents as 'lodgers', 'boarders' or 'visitors'.<sup>29</sup> Nationally, in Great Britain in 1851, lodgers or boarders were present in almost one household in eight, with substantial numbers of further households having visitors or adult relatives many, perhaps most, of whom paid for their board. In all, it seems likely that at least a fifth of all households in Britain had one or more member who was not part of the conjugal family of the head and who was making some net financial contribution to the household economy. A majority of these 'lodgers' in the broad sense of the word were male, most were single and aged between 12 and 40, and substantial proportions in all areas were migrants, notably migrants from Ireland. More than half of lodgers specifically identified as such by the census enumerators lived in households where they were either the only lodger or one of just two.<sup>30</sup>

While income from lodgers made up just 3 per cent of average household income among the working classes in York at the turn of the nineteenth century,<sup>31</sup> this still means that, if only one household in five had such lodgers (and it was probably significantly fewer than this), lodgers still contributed on average one fifteenth of the income of those who took them in. One 1851 Preston census enumerator reported that adult lodgers paid between one shilling and half a crown per week if, as most did, they ate meals at the same table as the rest of the household, but provided their own food. Elsewhere in Lancashire, contemporary reports suggest payment averaging between one shilling and one and sixpence per week (sometimes including coals and candles), with a few extra pence for housewives who took responsibility for cooking the lodger's food.<sup>32</sup> On this basis, taking in two lodgers might contribute net to the household budget about one third of what a woman might earn gross as a power-loom weaver (maybe half of what she might earn net) and at least a fifth of what her husband might earn as a factory labourer. Where, as seems often to have been the case, care was provided for babies and small children of lodgers, further income will normally have accrued.

In Figure 7, women from the Lancashire and Cheshire data set who have been identified as 'lodging providers' have been added to the numbers in employment. Just who should qualify for inclusion in a 'lodging provider' category is a matter of judgment, since some co-resident non-conjugal family members were clearly not net providers of resource to the household (for example, some were illegitimate babies of resident unmarried daughters), and some older resident kin probably contributed by providing household services which enabled the wife of the head to remain in the labour market. For this reason, married women are only counted as lodging providers in Figure 7 where the household contains one or more lodger or visitor or relative (including married or widowed children if they themselves have children present) with a stated occupation and without a partner or child of their own capable of providing housework services on their behalf.

**Figure 7 Percentage distribution of identified economic activity of married women, by husband's occupation and employment of children: Lancashire and Cheshire, 1851**



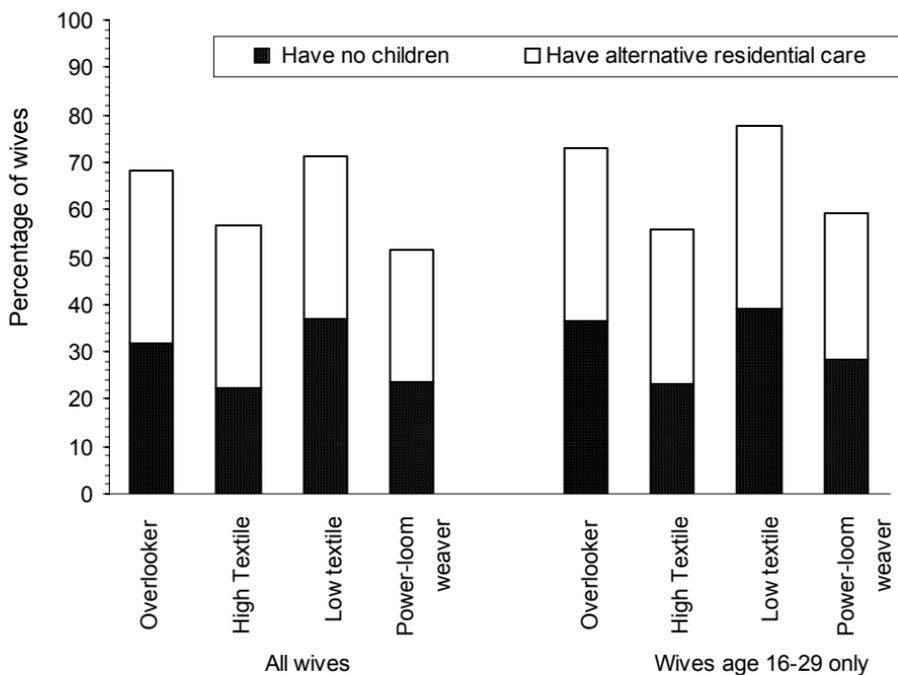
**Note:** Data for the 'no child' categories are for wives under 40 only

**Source:** National sample from the 1851 census of Great Britain

This definition thus excludes married couple lodgers where there is a non-working wife present, and it also excludes young children even where they are listed as 'nurse child' or 'orphan' with the possibility that some cash recompense might have been provided. The vast majority of these 'lodging providers' were therefore generating net income for their households and providing some domestic service on behalf of those who lived with them.

As Figure 7 shows, adding lodging providers to those with stated occupations

**Figure 8 Percentage of factory working wives with no children or with alternative residential care for children: Lancashire and Cheshire, 1851**



markedly increases the numbers with some gainful economic activity, especially at older age groups and among better paid textile factory workers and labourers with children. For example, 8 per cent of childless overlookers' wives were lodging providers as defined here, rising to 27 per cent of such wives with children none of whom were employed, and 26 per cent of those with one employed child, then falling to 20 per cent of those with two or more working children. Comparable figures for low status textile workers are 5 per cent of the childless, 14 per cent of those with no working children and 28 per cent and 16 per cent of those with one and more than one working child respectively. In all families of factory textile workers, 5 per cent of childless wives were lodging providers, 14 per cent of those with only non-employed children, 25 per cent of those with one employed child and 18 per cent of those with more than one such child. Nineteen per cent of the wives of unclassified weavers with one employed child were lodging providers. Among labourers, such provision of lodging was undertaken by 22 per cent of the wives of labourers with children none of whom were in employment, and 18 per cent of those with one or more than one employed child. The effect of this is to treble the proportion of labourers' wives with any children who had an identifiable gainful activity from 10.2 per cent to 30.6 per cent. Among other

groups, the inclusion of lodging provision only raises the proportion of childless textile factory workers with gainfully active wives from 77 per cent to 82 per cent and of all childless textile workers' wives from 82 per cent to 85 per cent. But among those in the still costly stage of the life-course where just one child was in employment, the figures for all factory textile workers' wives rise from 29 per cent to 54 per cent and for all textile workers' wives from 38 per cent to 60 per cent.

This lodging provision has a reverse side, also relevant for married women's employment and for their roles as wives and mothers. Most of the lodgers and financially-contributing relatives were unmarried, widowed or separated. But significant numbers were not; they were married and some had children. For these wives, living with a relative or other provider of housekeeping services allowed them to earn while delegating some housework and child care services to someone else. Some heads' wives also delegated these tasks to a co-resident relative (often a widowed mother) or specifically allocated them to a daughter, sometimes explicitly designating that person in their enumeration return as 'at home' or 'domestic duties' or 'housekeeper'. Figure 8 looks at the wives of factory textile workers who were themselves in textile factory employment. Overall, 27 per cent of these women had no children. Another 34 per cent had at least one child but also had a potential carer available in their house, in the form of an unoccupied female aged 8 years or over. For wives under the age of 30, who were most likely to have had dependent children, the comparable figures are 30 per cent with no children and 33 per cent with a potential carer available. Among power-loom weavers, as Figure 8 shows, over half of all wives and nearly three fifths of wives aged less than 30 had either no children or a potential carer available. If we focus just on textile factory workers with a child under one year of age and no potential residential care alternative, just 8.5 per cent had wives in textile factory employment.

## **Conclusion**

There is thus little evidence to support an argument for widespread under-recording of factory and domestic textile employment in Lancashire and Cheshire; for this group at least we can go on placing considerable trust in the census figures. Substantively, large numbers of married women continued to work in textile factories after marriage, some left when they had children and most by the time their children entered the labour force. A majority of those who continued in employment once they had children had husbands in lower paid employment and nearly half had someone else in their households who could provide household services and child care. In a highly integrated system of interlocking family economies, most factory textile workers' wives, on leaving factory employment, almost certainly then focused most of their economic activities on what, in the absence of modern domestic technology, was potentially a full-time activity: improving the standards of life of their family by devoting more time to housekeeping, by preparing and cooking more of their own food, by spending more time in seeking bargains in the market and, no doubt, by a range of self-provisioning (productive but not gainful) activities. Many, however, supplemented the family's income to a significant degree by also providing these services to continuing full-time factory workers, including some married women who remained in textile factory employment. Among the wives of hand-loom

weavers, most of whom worked on looms in their own home, combining household duties and productive activity was both easier and an economic necessity, given the appallingly low wages in this activity by the middle of the century. Two Lancashire enumerators, indeed, specifically recognized this dual function by recording the occupations of women as 'weaver and housekeeper' or 'hand-loom weaver and lodging-house keeper'.<sup>33</sup>

So, textile workers offer little cause for anxiety over the comprehensiveness of the recording of their paid employment. But what about the low recording of the wives of craftsmen, traders and labourers? Among the first two of these groups, we must accept that many, on a quite regular basis, assisted or participated in their husband's activities, although the extent and amount of this varied from occupation to occupation; there were probably also some life-course effects, something that needs further research. It is, however, important not to be over-critical of the census for not including more of these women as 'occupied'.<sup>34</sup> Their activities will seldom have been separately remunerated (and therefore not 'gainful' in Hakim's terms), would very often therefore not have been seen by themselves as 'an occupation' or even as 'work', and certainly will not affect our estimates of total household income.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, in as far as there was under-enumeration here, it continued into the present century and may not markedly affect our assessment of trends over time (and, indeed, how many shopkeepers', GPs', or MPs' wives declared their considerable contribution to their husbands' work activity in the last census?). This, however, is another area where some more sensitive, life-course based, analysis of larger samples may prove fruitful in the future.

Finally, what about the activities of labourers' wives, who could not in most cases participate directly in their husband's work? It is easy to assume that many of these women 'must' have engaged in some kind of earning activity, perhaps as homeworkers of some kind.<sup>36</sup> If they did engage in this kind of work on a large scale, however, we must also assume that every enumerator in the Lancashire and Cheshire sample failed to include most of them, for a close inspection reveals how very few non-textile manufacturing jobs are recorded for labourers' wives in any of the enumerators' books examined; this is particularly true outside the textile manufacturing centres (see Table 1, which is confined to the EDs which include at least ten labourers' wives). Of course, and importantly, this does not mean that labourers' wives were not actively engaged in non-gainful but productive or consumption-enhancing activities, through foraging, self-provisioning and in many other ways.<sup>37</sup> Some were gainfully providing lodging services. Also, almost certainly, most of them probably, at some points in their lives, had sought, not always successfully, to earn money in periods of crisis or when opportunity arose, so that the census snapshot does not reflect the total numbers who may have made some economic contribution at some time in the past or who would do so at some time in the future.

Nevertheless, in terms of what a census, taken on one day, might be reasonably expected to record as a gainful (and certainly as a significantly gainful) occupation, the fact that so few labourers' wives were allocated an occupation by any enumerator must raise the possibility that levels of omission were in fact relatively low. In part, rather, low levels of gainful activity occurred because, like

**Table 1** Employed labourer's wives by place and type of employment

	Number 'employed' by occupation of husband					All 'employed'	'Employed' %	Possible Home w/k %
	All	Possible Home w/k	Factory Textile	Non-fact Textile	Labourer			
Broughton	26	0	0	1	1	2	7.7	0.0
<b>Withnel</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>10.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>
Chester	19	1	0	0	0	1	5.3	5.3
Birkenhead	81	2	0	0	0	2	2.5	2.5
Liverpool	129	4	0	0	1	5	3.9	3.1
Toxteth	20	1	0	0	0	1	5.0	5.0
Toxteth	28	0	0	0	0	0	0.0	0.0
Everton	13	0	0	0	0	0	0.0	0.0
West Darby	16	0	0	0	0	0	0.0	0.0
<b>Latchford</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9.5</b>	<b>4.8</b>
Manchester	10	2	0	0	1	3	30.0	20.0
<b>Preston</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>61.5</b>	<b>15.4</b>
<b>Preston</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>36.4</b>	<b>0.0</b>
<b>Bury</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>8.3</b>
<b>Werneth</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>8.3</b>
Wavertree	12	2	0	0	2	2	16.7	16.7
<b>Heap</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>0.0</b>
<b>Walton-l'-Dale</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>30.8</b>	<b>0.0</b>
<b>Macclesfield</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>38.5</b>	<b>0.0</b>
Sanbach	10	0	1	0	0	1	10.0	0.0
<b>Ashton-u-Lyne</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>0.0</b>
<b>Over Darwen</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>20.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>

**Note:** EDs shown in bold have substantial textile employment

the wives of miners elsewhere, many wives were deeply embroiled in child care and heavy domestic tasks, and had children who brought in significant amounts of money from diverse formal and informal resource-generating activities.<sup>38</sup> In addition, however, many, and particularly those living in docklands areas, (and again like the wives of miners) lived in places with few local opportunities for women's paid employment (at least relative to the large potential labour supply which included not only themselves but unmarried daughters and widows).<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, a careful reading of Horrell and Humphries' paper seems actually to confirm the low contribution to the household economy of most urban married women. Overall, for the period 1846–1865, nearly half the married women in their budget data set had either a recorded occupation or non-zero earnings,<sup>40</sup> though, as noted above, life-cycle variations in labour-force participation by married women probably inflates this figure compared with the population as a whole, and there must be some suspicion that families with a wide spread of income sources would have been especially likely to be selected for inclusion in budget studies in a largely pre-statistical age.

Some of Horrell and Humphries' most interesting figures, however, are those which, for households where women's share is separately identifiable, show the wife's contribution to total family income.<sup>41</sup> Ignoring agricultural families, where some seasonal income is a well-known feature (though not one that a snapshot

Spring census should have recorded in many areas), there are seven sets of observations, covering four different occupational groups and two different time periods between 1841 and 1865 (there are no cases in one of these cells, thus reducing the total from eight to seven). In only one set of observations does the mean contribution of married women to the family budget exceed 12 per cent of total family income, and this relates to a single textile family. In only one other case does the figure exceed 10 per cent. The weighted average of all seven cases is 2.5 per cent.<sup>42</sup> Bearing in mind that some women had occupations producing considerably more than this sum, the proportional contribution of the rest must have been tiny. This is not, of course, to deny its importance to the family's viability at particularly critical periods of time – but it does raise questions as to whether it would have been more rather than less misleading had the 'job' it reflects featured in a census return.

So, the census undoubtedly did under-record non-agricultural married women's employment, but how significantly remains an open question. Unless we can find alternative and representative sources allowing firm estimates of the proportionate contribution to family incomes of casual and part-time work, the census enumerators' books must remain, for many parts of the country at least, the best indicator that we have of variations in married women's gainful work activity in the mid-nineteenth century.

## Notes

1. M. Hewitt, *Wives and mothers in Victorian industry*, (London, 1958). Hewitt took samples from the 1851 CEBs for seven Lancashire registration districts, and had similar samples prepared by the Registrar General's office from the as yet unavailable 1871 CEBs. In the book, she reports only a few findings from these data, but there is much more detail in her 1953 University of London Ph.D.
2. For early examples, M. Anderson, *Family structure in nineteenth-century Lancashire*, (Cambridge 1971); J. Foster, *Class struggle and the industrial revolution*, (London, 1974); W.A. Armstrong, *Stability and change in an English country town: a social study of York, 1801–51*, Cambridge, 1974).
3. E. Higgs, 'Domestic servants and households in Victorian England' *Social History* 7 (1983), 202–10; see also his revised paper 'The tabulation of occupations in the nineteenth-century census, with special reference to domestic servants' in D. Mills and K. Schürer eds, *Local communities in the Victorian census enumerators' books*, (Oxford, 1996), 27–35.
4. E. Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work in the nineteenth century censuses', *History Workshop Journal* 23 (1987), 59–80.
5. E.M. Roberts, *Women's work, 1840–1940*, (London, 1988), 18; E.M. Roberts, *A Woman's place: an oral history of working-class women, 1890–1940*, (Oxford, 1984), 136. The 1911 Census Report gives the percentage of married women and widows in what Roberts, probably wrongly, assumes is only fulltime employment as 35.0 per cent in Preston, 11.0 per cent in Lancaster, and 6.9 per cent in Barrow (see also Roberts, 'Working wives and their families', in T. Barker and M. Drake eds, *Population and society in Britain, 1850–1980*, (London, 1982), 167–8).
6. Roberts, *Women's work, 1840–1940*, 19.
7. Though not all writers have been as skeptical; see for example, E. Jordan, 'Female unemployment in England and Wales 1851–1911: an examination of the census figures for 15–19 year olds', *Social History* 13 (1988), 175–90; A. August, 'How separate a sphere: poor women and paid work in late-Victorian London', *Journal of Family History*, 19 (1994), 285–309.
8. S. Horrell and J. Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation and the transition to the male-breadwinner family, 1790–1865', *Economic History Review* 48 (1995), 89–117.
9. Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation', 99, fn. 50. The references are, for Preston, to Anderson, *Family structure*, 72, and G.J. Barnsby, *Birmingham working people*,

- (Wolverhampton, 1979), 195. Note that most of Horrell and Humphries' 'factory workers' were in fact textile workers: see Horrell and Humphries, 'Old questions, new data, and alternative perspectives: families' living standards in the Industrial Revolution', *Journal of Economic History* 52 (1992), 849–80.
10. I should make clear that this is a view that, in private communication with me, both authors have said it was not their intention to convey – but it would be very easy to read such a view into their work and, given, as we shall see below (n. 12), the ways in which scholars in this area have so frequently drawn quite incorrect implications from others' work, it seems almost inevitable that their paper will soon be added to the list of sources condemning the reporting of women's occupations in the CEBs.
  11. As D. Cooper and M. Donald have pointed out in 'Households and "hidden" kin in early nineteenth-century England: four case studies in suburban Exeter, 1821–1861', *Continuity and Change*, 10 (1995), 257–78, there were probably significantly larger numbers of servants who had some kinship relationship to some other member of their households but were reported as servants in both the occupation and the relationship columns of the census – but the great majority of these were probably unambiguously providing domestic services, even if their recruitment, as with so many other servants at the same date, was the result of a personal connection rather than an open market operation.
  12. The National Sample is a systematic cluster transcript of one fiftieth of the enumerators' books from the 1851 Census (except for institutions where every fiftieth family or person is sampled and settlements with populations of less than 2,000 in England and Wales where one settlement in fifty is sampled). The whole dataset is in machine-readable form and also on computer-generated microfiche, but only subsets of the data were processed through software which generated the family and household relationships and coded the transcribed entries. Where national figures are cited in this paper, these subsets, totally some 50,000 persons, have been used.
  13. Reviewing the footnotes supporting the case for the gross under-enumeration of married women's employment, one finds the same small number of examples used again and again. More worryingly, some writers use second-hand references, presumably without checking back to the original. The consequence is that what starts as an unsubstantiated (and probably erroneous) 'presumption' (Roberts, 'Working wives and their families', 167–8) or an undocumented 'belief' (Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work', 63, citing J. Lown, *Women and industrialization: gender and work in nineteenth-century England* (Oxford, 1990), 91), or a comment on life-time employment (Roberts, *A woman's place*, 136) ends up as "supporting" an assertion which implies that working-class married women's employment in London may be underestimated by two and a half times (J.A. Schmiechen, *Sweated industries and sweated labour: the London clothing trades, 1860–1914*, (London, 1984), 68–9) which in turn partly underlies a further assertion that 'Women who earned wages as industrial homeworkers were especially likely to be invisible in statistical records of the nineteenth century' (S.O. Rose, *Limited livelihoods: gender and class in nineteenth-century England*, (London, 1992), 81–2).
  14. Rose, *Limited livelihoods*, 230.
  15. There are, however, a few large-scale survey studies of the last twenty years in which long-term life and work histories have been collected retrospectively (for example, the Women and Employment study and the ESRC Social Change and Economic Life Initiative). What these show, above all, is the very fragmented employment experience of many women – and, recently, also of many men. And they sharpen our understanding of the often complex relationship between snapshot and life history studies, each of which has strengths for its own particular purposes.
  16. C. Hakim, 'Census Reports as documentary evidence: the census commentaries', *Sociological Review* 28 (1980), 551–80 esp. 562; for important similar distinctions, see esp. R.E. Pahl *Divisions of labour* (Oxford, 1984).
  17. Lown, *Women and industrialization*, 91; see also n. 12 above. Similarly, Rose, having vigorously criticized the census data, especially on homeworkers (*Limited livelihoods*, 80–2, 230–2), then makes extensive use of these data, including data on Nottingham home laceworkers.
  18. Note also that both the communities which Holley studied were places where dominant firms had explicit policies to exclude married women from their works (J.C. Holley, 'The two family economies of industrialism: factory workers in Victorian Scotland', *Journal of Family History* 6 (1981), 57–69, esp. 63). Evidence presented below suggests that under-enumeration at the level that Holley suggests cannot have been widespread in factory textiles in all parts of Britain.

19. Note, as an aside, that there is a very important distinction between the proportion of married women in employment and the proportion of wives in employment. In the 1851 census National Sample (see below), more than one fifth of all employed married women had no spouse present.
20. The main area of uncertainty is over the workplace of those who are recorded simply as 'weavers' (rather than 'power-loom weavers' or 'hand-loom weavers') and 'winders'. For the present purposes both these inadequately specified groups are classed as engaging in non-factory occupations, though some undoubtedly were employed in factories.
21. For similar findings in Clitheroe in 1881, see Rose, *Limited livelihoods*, 161. Note that the similarity of the employment pattern of 'weavers' and 'hand-loom weavers' in Figure 2 strongly suggests the likelihood that most of the former should be classified with the latter rather than with power loom weavers.
22. This is suggested by the rather large mean household sizes in Horrell and Humphries' data; see 'Old questions, new data', 853 and App. 2.
23. Strictly, there are 68 whole districts and part of one more in the sample in these counties.
24. A small number of typically domestic textile occupations, such as wool-combing, were omitted from the analysis presented here to maintain reasonably consistent categories.
25. Roberts, 'Working wives and their families', 146, 144, 148. A contrasting view of the pattern of employment over the life-cycle is, however, portrayed for primarily unskilled workers in three poor areas of London in August, 'How separate a sphere', esp. 298. In August's data, census-recorded employment is relatively flat across the life-cycle, but is at its lowest levels among those with small children, reflecting, he argues, the primacy of domestic care responsibilities at this period of life.
26. Compare also Rose, *Limited livelihoods*, 165.
27. A similar conclusion was reached by Rose in her study of women's employment in Clitheroe (Rose, *Limited livelihoods*, esp. 81).
28. L. Davidoff, 'The separation of home and work? Landladies and lodgers in nineteenth and twentieth-century England', in S. Burman ed., *Fit work for women* (London, 1979); Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation', 95; Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work', 63, confines his specific comment to citing this paper as evidence of an area of ambiguity, but misleadingly terms the women involved as 'lodging-house keepers', missing one of Davidoff's key points and giving the activity of most of those involved a spurious degree of scale and business formality.
29. As Davidoff notes in 'The separation of home and work?', 66-7, the distinction between these categories is often arbitrary.
30. For more detail, see M. Anderson, 'Households, families and individuals: some preliminary results from the national sample from the 1851 census of Great Britain', *Continuity and Change* 3 (1988), 421-38.
31. B.S. Rowntree, *Poverty: a study of town life* (London, 1901), 83.
32. For more detail, see Anderson, *Family structure*, 47.
33. Similar intermeshing of gainful and domestic work among poorer sections of the population is suggested by Rose, *Limited livelihoods*, 86-8.
34. In the published Reports for 1851 and 1861 and, for England and Wales, 1871, all the otherwise unoccupied wives of a small number of trade and craft occupations were allocated by the Census authorities to the 'occupied' categories. It would clearly be open to those using enumerators' books to do the same thing for these and any other women who they believed were most probably contributors to their husbands' activity.
35. On homeworking as not seen as 'work' see, among others, Rose, *Limited livelihoods*, 82, 232.
36. The most blatant example of the use of assumption and assertion to replace historical evidence is in S. Alexander, A. Davin and E. Hostettler, 'Labouring women: a reply to Eric Hobsbawm', *History Workshop Journal* 8 (1979), 174-80. Their discussion, frequently cast in terms like, 'Can we really conceive that...?', and extrapolating from non-quantitatively grounded examples of casual and seasonal work without any assessment of its scale or financial significance, is based on an assertion that most labouring, and maybe most working-class, women would have wanted to work whenever they could (ignoring the significant drawbacks in terms of domestic comforts and their own energy input) and appears to assume that in most cases remunerative work acceptable to them and to their husbands was available. A similar intuitive and quantitatively unsubstantiated attack on the Census, apparently ignoring the important implications for married women's employment of its (correctly) snapshot character, is S. Alexander, 'Women's work in nineteenth-century London: a study of the

- years 1820–50', in J. Mitchell and A. Oakley eds, *The rights and wrongs of women*, (Harmondsworth, 1976), 59–111, esp. 64–6.
37. On which see, for example, Roberts, *A woman's place*, esp. 148–63; Rose, *Limited livelihoods*, esp. 80–1; E. Ross, *Love and toil: motherhood in outcast London, 1870–1918*, (Oxford, 1993), esp. 51–5, 81–4; etc.
  38. The casual income-generating activities of children are, in fact, far more extensively referred to in the literature and in contemporary sources than are married women's gainful activities, and most budget studies suggest that their contribution in cash terms was significantly more important than those of wives; see Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation', esp. 102–3; A Davin, *Growing up poor: home, school and street in London, 1870–1914*, (London, 1996), esp. ch. 9. E. Ross, *Love and toil*, 159, also notes that employed children expected higher standards of domestic comforts, perhaps a further incentive for mothers not to engage too heavily in gainful work themselves.
  39. E. Jordan, 'Female unemployment in England and Wales 1851–1911'. One of the most fascinating and surely significant features of Ellen Ross's brilliant *Love and toil* is how seldom the women she studies, however hard-pressed they may be, seem to resort to the labour market, perhaps in part because they would not then have so easily been able to participate so readily in the economically vital women's networks and in the foraging and other non-gainful productive activities which she describes (see also E. Ross, 'Survival networks: women's neighbourhood sharing in London before World War I', *History Workshop Journal* 15 (1983), 4–27; even August's study, 'How separate a sphere', the abstract of which claims that 'employment was common', actually finds just 20 per cent of married women in employment and comments specifically on the relative availability of jobs in different areas (August, 'How separate a sphere', 285, 301).
  40. Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation', 98.
  41. Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation', 102–3.
  42. Even if the mean is calculated across all nineteen sets of observations between 1787 and 1865, the share contributed by married women still averages out at less than seven percent. The share of family income contributed by wives in the ten labourers' budgets given by Rowntree in *Poverty: a study of town life*, ranges from zero to 19.9 per cent with a mean of 5.8 per cent and a median of 4.9 per cent. As an example of selective illustration, note that all of Rowntree's selected married-couple-headed families had children, none of whom contributed to the family budget.