Sex work and war in the early modern Low Countries

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"All Thinges come into Commerce."
— John Marston, *The Dutch Courtesan* (1604)

Abstract
This response to Marjolein 't Hart's *Oorlog en ongelijkheid* reconsiders her argument about the indirect benefits of war for women by focusing specifically on those engaged in sex work. It argues that although urban sex workers initially profited from the booming wartime economy, the subsequent professionalization of the military and the rise of moral and legal reforms ultimately undermined these gains. It shows that the economic opportunities during war were tempered by harsher scrutiny, prosecution, and cultural marginalization that eroded the legitimacy of sex work. Immediate monetary benefits came at the cost of long-term social and legal disadvantages for these women.

In her book *Oorlog en ongelijkheid,* Marjolein 't Hart strives to answer the question 'why were the benefits of war mostly reaped by elite of the province of Holland?', while looking at the struggles faced by the rest of the population and their contributions, sometimes at their expense, to this successful and unique economic growth. 't Hart wants to know where the chances for enrichment came from and why they were so unequally divided between provinces and, ultimately, between groups of people. One of her strong points is the inclusion of women and their roles during the Eighty Years' War: women are depicted as fighters and rioters, as working bodies in the war economy, as essential cogs in the functioning of the army, and as victims of plundering and sexual assaults

by soldiers: they were both "vulnerable and resilient".[1] Parallel to Els Kloek's conclusions, women are recognized as having an unmissable role both during the most well-known events of the Eighty Years' War and in the daily (economic and social) grind of the Low Countries' cities and countryside, therefore contributing as well to the enrichment of the elite in the province of Holland.[2] 't Hart concludes that the Eighty Years' War was a period with "indirect positive effects" for women: even if they were "direct victims of war violence", they were resilient, they adapted to the belligerent context, and some of them managed to benefit from the new financial system and commercialization of war.[3]

To test 't Hart's conclusions about "indirect positive effects", I would like to concentrate on a particular group of women who are not usually considered as beneficiaries of economic development: women who engaged in sex work. Sex work has often been associated by historians with the female economy of makeshifts, linking it to the disadvantageous economic situation faced by many women. It has been conceived as a potential source of revenues in uncertain times, yet historians have rarely considered sex work as a legitimate form of employment, not only because of the stigma attached to sex work, but also because of the risks women could face regarding prosecution and violence.[4] To what extent women engaging in sex work benefitted from the Eighty Years' War is thus the focus of this contribution.

As the book is centered on explaining economic growth during a long period of war, 't Hart's analysis is firmly grounded in the economic developments of the time and the opportunities taken by women to engage with the military issues at stake: some became soldiers or sailors; others helped defending cities and villages; others still had a voice, even if indirect, in the political decision-making process. The examples given of resilience are varied, though mostly focused on economic opportunities. The changes in religious, cultural, and legal contexts surrounding women remain largely unexplored, although they also had an impact on their economic opportunities.

1 Marjolein 't Hart, *Oorlog en ongelijkheid. Een inclusieve geschiedenis van de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam 2022) 131-133.

2 Els Kloek, *Kenau & Magdalena* (Nijmegen 2014).

3 't Hart, *Oorlog en ongelijkheid*, 189.

4 Judith R. Walkowitz, 'The politics of prostitution and sexual labour', *History Workshop Journal* 82:1 (October 2016) 216, https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbw029.

Living off the war: Women following the armies

In *Oorlog en ongelijkheid*, Marjolein 't Hart draws a clear distinction between the countryside, which suffered the constant *va et vient* and violence of the troops, and the cities, especially in Holland, which were better protected and, except during siege, continually prospered. This difference is also important when considering where women were engaging in sex work. A large number of women (and children) followed early modern troops: on his way to the Low Countries in 1567, the duke of Alva had 10,000 soldiers and 6,000 people coming with the soldiers; when he left The Netherlands in 1577, there were around 7,000 fighting troops for 13,000 followers.[5] The few military historians who have looked further into the various roles and positions other than soldier held by women – whether coming with or joining the early modern armies on the way – have made a distinction between three 'statuses': John A. Lynn II calls them "the prostitute, the 'whore' and the wife". As Lynn notes, this distinction was somewhat confusing: the famous German *LandknechtHürn* (soldier's whore), who has been represented in various drawings of the time, refers to the non-legally married woman who followed her soldier lover and was therefore attached to a specific man for a certain amount of time.[6] It is unclear if she also sold sex, but even if she did, it was not the main reason she was following the soldiers. While taking care of her and her partner's belongings, she might also be employed as a washerwoman, for instance, or tasked to find, prepare, and sell food. Thomas Cardoza, researching the women who followed the French army, has noted that he did not find any evidence of *vivandière* (woman selling food and small goods to the soldiers) being prosecuted for prostitution.[7] 't Hart follows Lynn's distinction ('*naast die wettige vrouwen waren er ook minnaressen en hoeren*')[8] and agrees that the tasks of the non-married women were varied. They were preparing food, doing the laundry, and taking active part in plundering or in reselling plundered items. Women whose main source of revenues during the war was earned through paid (in goods or in money) sexual relationships belonged thus to another group. Referring to the

5 Kloek, *Kenau & Magdalena*, 27-28.

6 John A. Lynn II, *Women, armies, and warfare in early modern Europe* (Cambridge 2008) 75-76.

7 Thomas Cardoza, *Intrepid women. Cantinières and vivandières of the French army* (Bloomington 2010) 23.

8 't Hart, *Oorlog en ongelijkheid*, 132.

'prostitute' as a sex worker makes it easier to understand their place and acceptance within the military organization.

As an early example of service-based economy, sex work was susceptible to the law of supply and demand, and the presence of a large number of men and, therefore, a potential pool of customers could be an important pull factor. Until the mid-seventeenth century, various publications about the needs and training of soldiers recommended the presence of sex workers to prevent the rape of honest women (this practice did not apply in times of plunder), even if this argument has never been proven true.[9] Although sex workers were officially allowed within the ranks of most armies in the sixteenth century, a shift gradually occurred which put them under stricter control at the same time as the soldiers. 't Hart gives a prominent place to the professionalization of the army as a positive change which contributed to the economic 'Golden Age'.[10] Changes in military organization can be seen as a form of rationalization of the warfare economy: a more effective and reliable army was desirable, one that could rely less on plundering to survive.

Even if these changes did not happen overnight, they had an impact on the presence of women on or near the battlefield.[11] With the professionalization and disciplining of the army in mind, William of Orange imposed a new judicial system onto the army and a set of rules to be followed:[12] by taking away the judicial power of the *landknechten*, the stadtholder also increased his power over the people following or living off the army. In 1580, William of Orange ordered that soldiers who had their wives, children, and "other useless pursuants" following them had to find accommodation themselves; he also demanded that only legally married women followed the soldiers.[13] John Hale quoted an article, possibly from the 1580 ordinance, criminalizing prostitution in military camps: "all common whores shall for the first offense be shamefully driven from camp, and for the second offense, being found

9 Lynn II, *Women, armies, and warfare,* 69; Enriqueta Zafra, 'El caso de las "mujeres sueltas". Isabella de Luna, prostituta en el ejército imperial y cortesana Española en Roma, y la Monja Alférez, Catalina de Erauso', *Hispanic Review* 82:4 (2014) 491, https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/stable/43279326.

10 't Hart, *Oorlog en ongelijkheid*, 189.

11 Mary Elizabeth Ailes, 'Camp followers, sutlers, and soldiers' wives. Women in early modern armies (c. 1450-c. 1650)', in: Barton Hacker and Margaret Vining (eds), *A companion to women's military history* (Leiden 2012) 62.

12 't Hart, *Oorlog en ongelijkheid*, 44.

13 Kloek, *Kenau & Magdalena*, 30.

Illustration 1 The caught husband, print by Gilles van Breen, after a design by Karel van Mander (Haarlem 1601)

(source: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam https://id.rijksmuseum.nl/200166108)

in the camp, shall be heavily flogged and banished".[14] Kloek has likewise noted that Alva already tried to discipline his soldiers from the start of the campaign: in 1568, soldiers were only allowed to sleep with their legally married wives or with the women allowed to sell sex to the soldiers of the battalion (6 per 250 soldiers).[15] Although in this case sex work was not forbidden, it is clear that Alva had single women on his radar, and that non-official sex workers were not welcome.

14 John Rigby Hale, *War and society in renaissance Europe, 1450-1620*, vol. 1 (London 1998) 162.

15 Kloek, *Kenau & Magdalena*, 30.

Due to the spread of syphilis, stricter health controls were put in place. By the late sixteenth century, military codes requested women to be regularly checked by the army surgeon.[16] Roberts suggests that soldiers during the Eighty Years' War were more likely to suffer from syphilis than from a gun or canon wound.[17] These imposed 'health checks' are very important when considering the shift occurring within the cultural framework: the 'prostitute', whose image in Christian society was exemplified by Mary Magdalene, used to be seen by the religious elite as morally tainted but redeemable; city and army officials used this to tolerate her presence.[18] With the spread of syphilis in Europe from the late fifteenth century onward, however, the discourse about sex workers gradually changed: they were more and more often depicted as a source of infection. Worse, according to commentators, they may have used artifice to keep their sickness hidden.[19]

This change of perception and consideration as a health risk made its way to the army. The need for a more effective army started thus to put their 'necessary' presence into question. It is remarkable that these attempts to push away single women and sex workers, in particular, were not limited to the Spanish and Low Countries troops: heads of the French, German, and English armies were all devising similar ordinances, suggesting shared concerns about soldiers' health and efficiency.[20] Although disciplining and professionalization of the army benefitted the economy of Holland, the constant state of war also gave shape to a judicial framework that impacted the revenues of women selling sex.

Sex work in urban centers during the 'Golden Age'

'Prostitution' in the long Renaissance in Europe is intrinsically linked with the economic evolution of the European urban fabric.[21] The urban economy saw an exponential development thanks to the perception

16 Lynn II, *Women, armies, and warfare,* 70, 73.

17 Benjamin B. Roberts, *Sex and drugs before rock 'n roll. Youth culture and masculinity during Holland's Golden Age* (Amsterdam 2012) 115.

18 On the use of Thomas of Aquinas and St Augustine to justify prostitution as necessary see: Marion Pluskota, 'Prostitution and the market during the long Renaissance', in: *Cultural history of prostitution* (London forthcoming).

19 Roberts, *Sex and drugs before rock 'n roll,* 157.

20 Lynn II, *Women, armies, and warfare*, 70-71.

21 Pluskota, 'Prostitution and the market'.

people had of the city: urban communities seemed to offer an array of chances to better their lives,[22] as well as a safer place to live. People, goods, and money converged on the developing commercial towns, as did the women who sold sex.[23] During the Eighty Years' War, refugees from the countryside moved to the cities for safety.[24] Doing sex work in urban Holland had its advantages: the cities were usually better protected, and the war economy did make some people rather comfortable financially, meaning it was plausible that some of this money eventually ended up in sex workers' purses. The direct benefits of the war in the cities, when not besieged, could most likely be felt by women engaging in sex work.

The economy of prostitution reflects an important facet of female agency and of women's contributions to the household. In her study on sex work in Venice during the Counter-Reformation, Ferraro underlines how "family economics and commercialization [of sex] undermined the rules of patriarchy."[25] By turning sex into a commodity, women were able to provide extra income to the household, at times as the main provider, and sometimes they were even able to live independently. Marston's satire of urban life, *The Dutch Courtesan* (c. 1604), depicts prostitutes as closely linked to the domestic economy and actively participating in the revenues of the household.[26] As Emily Kuffner explains, prostitutes also partook in the gift economy, where food, clothing, or other goods were given in exchange for sexual favors, "which gave rise to a number of strategies used by the women involved to increase their sexual capital, or the economic profit women could extract from their sexual labour".[27] In *The Dutch Courtesan*, the author mentions the marketability of certain fake or real attributes: "innocence," "virginity," "modesty," all "virtues" that allowed women and their "bawd" to ask for a higher price. The money or goods earned by

22 Wim Blockmans, 'Urbanization in the European middle ages', in: Leo Lucassen and Wim Willems (eds), *Living in the city. Urban institutions in the Low Countries, 1200-2010* (Abingdon 2011) 1-11.

23 Paula C. Clarke, 'The business of prostitution in early renaissance Venice', *Renaissance Quarterly* 68:2 (2015) 419-464, https://doi.org/10.1086/682434.

24 Myron P. Gutmann, *War and rural life in the early modern Low Countries* (Princeton 2014); Leo Adriaenssen, *Staatsvormend geweld. Overleven aan de frontlinies in de meierij van Den Bosch, 1572-1629* (Tilburg 2007).

25 Joanne M. Ferraro, 'Making a living. The sex trade in early modern Venice', *The American Historical Review* 123:1 (2018) 34, https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/123.1.30.

26 Quoted in Garrett A. Sullivan Jr, '"All thinges come into commerce". Women, household labor, and the spaces of Marston's "The Dutch courtesan"', *Renaissance Drama* 27 (1996) 19-46.

27 Emily Kuffner, *Fictions of containment in the Spanish female picaresque. Architectural space and prostitution in the early modern Mediterranean* (Amsterdam 2019) 52.

selling sex was reinjected into the urban economy, when they bought or exchanged food, clothes, and services or drank in the taverns.

If their role within the urban economy must not be forgotten, the increased attention put on them by the religious elites must not be forgotten either. The period covered by 't Hart also paralleled the time of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, with the religious elite pushing, successfully or not, for moral reform. The warring context called for more entrenched ideas, setting the belligerents apart from one another. In his book *Onder Censuur,* Herman Roodenburg noted that some Protestant groups had very radical ideas about morality: in 1580, the *Staten van Holland* proclaimed that prostitution, adultery, and premarital sexual relations were punishable offenses. Four months later, the municipality of Amsterdam proclaimed the same ordinance and reiterated twice in the coming years. Noticeably, all the cities that had joined the rebellion closed their brothels after this proclamation.[28] With this shift, *hoererij* had become a punishable offense. When 's-Hertogenbosch fell into the hands of the Republic in 1629, the Calvinist Church actively tried to police inhabitants' morals by complaining to the city council about *hoererij*: although the city officials clearly stated that the prosecution of *hoererij* remained their own prerogative, the Calvinist Church was allowed to sanction public displays of immorality.[29] As Roodenburg noted, it is not always clear from the archives what *hoererij* really meant, as unmarried women and men were often accused of *hoererij,* even when no exchange of money was implied.[30] Yet the fact remained that a legal basis was put in place to prosecute women and men who engaged in *hoererij*: this written basis, even if it was not always enforced in practice, carried a lot of weight when considering the process of state-formation occurring at that time in the Northern Low Countries. The proclamations by the *Staten van Holland* or from the municipalities defined what was deemed acceptable and what was not, and as such, also excluded, if not always nominally, some people or activities from this process.

This development was part of a larger municipal movement influenced by religious elites and rigorist ideas: the late sixteenth century consecrated the demise of the public, institutionalized

28 Herman Roodenburg, *Onder censuur. De kerkelijke tucht in de Gereformeerde Gemeente van Amsterdam, 1578-1700* (Hilversum 1990) 32.

29 Jos Wassink, *Dagelijks leven in 'ontugt'. Prostitutie in de vestingstad 's-Hertogenbosch, 1629-1795* (Woudrichem 2021) 56-57.

30 Roodenburg, *Onder censuur*, 291.

brothel all over Europe. The closing of brothels did not mean the end of prostitution, and women continued to sell sex in inns and taverns, or on the street, but their visible presence gradually declined.[31] The involvement of representatives of the main churches in local politics had led to a more authoritarian approach to sexual behaviors.[32] Legal, judicial, and moral patterns were reproduced in various cities based on their confession. Municipalities closed their public brothels. Protestant cities such as Geneva, Amsterdam, and Augsburg explicitly forbade 'fornication' (sexual relations outside marriage), and it became easier to sentence women transgressing this rule to a stay in penal institutions.

What is particularly interesting, and what deserves more attention from scholars of the 'Golden Age', are the economic gains and losses made by these new laws and penal institutions. The tenets of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation fine-tuned the moral systems that dictated acceptable behaviors regarding sexuality and marriage. As "sins were transformed into crimes", premarital, extramarital, and homosexual practices were criminalized and, "in this respect, the confessional differences in Protestant and Catholic countries concerning marital policies were minimal."[33] The creation and opening of the Spinhuis in Amsterdam in 1596, and its use as a reformatory place for, among others, women having sex outside marriage, reflected these moral and penal changes. As van de Pol mentions, 'prostitutes' were never the majority of the women jailed in the Spinhuis to be reformed, even if the tourists paying a fee to enter the premises in the second half of the seventeenth century believed it to be so at the time.[34] Pieter Spierenburg saw the Rasphuis and Spinhuis as economic and penal institutions meant to harness the work of "idle and immoral" people, while improving their behavior.[35] Although it turned out that the expected economic gains were never fully realized, the creation of these institutions fits with the political and economic patterns of the new Dutch Republic, and of the province of Holland especially, all born by years of war.

31 Ibid., 293.

32 Tessa Storey, *Carnal commerce in counter-reformation Rome* (Cambridge 2008); Silvia Sovic et al., (eds), *The history of families and households. Comparative European dimensions* (Leiden 2015).

33 Daniela Hacke, *Women, sex and marriage in early modern Venice* (Abingdon 2017) 181.

34 Lotte van de Pol, *The burgher and the whore. Prostitution in early modern Amsterdam* (Oxford 2011) 100.

35 Pieter Spierenburg, 'Prisoners and beggars. Quantitative data on imprisonment in Holland and Hamburg, 1597-1752', *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 15:4 (56) (1990) 33-56, https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/stable/20754529.

Due to the vast scope of 't Hart's book, women tend to be presented as a homogenous group, whereas strong differences in opportunities existed between groups of women; some of them may not have fared as well as others in the long term. Indeed, the 'Golden Age' brought not only economic changes but also religious, cultural, and legal changes. Choices in (war) politics that shaped the Dutch state and eventually favored, to a large extent, the elite of Holland, had both negative and positive impacts on the sex work economy. Whereas the state of war, the large concentration of men, and the protection offered in urban centers may have had a direct positive effect economically speaking, professionalization and disciplining of the army, the supplantation of towns over countryside, and Calvinism-instilled local politics all impacted sex work in the long term.

As such, my conclusion regarding women engaging in sex work during the Eighty Years' War would be opposite to the one from Marjolein 't Hart: to be sure, the tumultuous era had direct positive effects in terms of monetary gains. Yet it also meant navigating a less forgiving society where changes in cultural and legal contexts threatened their existence. Their role and necessary place at the side of the armies began to be questioned (as well as those of other women present), and their legitimacy eroded. In the cityscape, they certainly benefitted from the economic upturn following the Dutch Revolt, but because of the Reformation, they also faced increased scrutiny by religious officials, who could pressure the municipal councils to act against *hoererij*. The Eighty Years' War and the superior religious, political, and economic powers held by the elite in Holland laid the legal and cultural foundations for their prosecution.

About the author

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