

“To be employed in the Company’s work”: Women working with and against the English East India Company

Women generally lacked formal opportunities within the East India Company, though some did find formal work as hotpressers, dyers or petty victuallers. However, women were also integral in the networks that constituted the companies, both in England and in Asia. The private networks, encouraged by the East India Company’s semi-decentralised structure, allowed, and even necessitated, otherwise disenfranchised agents, such as women, to filter into their knowledge base, which, perhaps inadvertently, improved the companies’ performances. However, the role women held in large overseas companies in the period before the financial revolution have generally been under-appreciated in the existing historiography. Based on a database consisting of more than 1,200 female petitioners to the English East India Company, 1600-1759, this paper examines how women worked with and against the company in the seventeenth century.

As companies like the East India Company expanded, they had to make provisions for women who came to hold more varied roles as investors, entrepreneurs and relatives of employees. In maritime communities, smaller activities were often given over to wives and other female relations of sailors, making them responsible for the sale of the goods and giving them a supplementary income alongside their standard wages. On a larger scale, particularly regarding female relations of key company personnel such as presidents and factors, the involvement in company business meant more than just an alternative income: it included investment and management responsibilities.

Early modern trading companies consisted of numerous overlapping networks, which were shaped by individuals’ participation in institutions, churches, neighborhoods, business transactions and through kinship. Women were also an integral, albeit often overlooked, part of the commercial networks. Nonetheless, they were all were integral in shaping and maintaining durable ties across the world, which ultimately changed the global economy. By viewing corporations’ output as the result of work undertaken by messily organised overlapping networks, it is possible to appreciate the influence of otherwise seemingly disenfranchised actors such as women.

Keywords: Institutions; commerce; informal networks