

**ERC Consolidator Grant 2021**  
**Research proposal [Part B1]<sup>1</sup>**  
*(Part B1 is evaluated both in Step 1 and Step 2,  
Part B2 is evaluated in Step 2 only)*

**Women at work: for a comparative history of African  
female urban professions (Sudan, Tanzania and  
Ghana), 1919-1970**

**WomAtWork**

**Cover Page:**

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- 60 months

WomAtWork represents the first comparative investigation into the history of female urban popular professions in three African countries – Ghana/Gold Coast, Sudan, and Tanganyika/Tanzania – over the course of fifty years (1919-1970). Not only is this topic under-studied in African history, but these professions (i.e. midwives, beauticians, wedding singers, market vendors, craftswomen) are also characterised by fascinating and unsettling aspects. For example, notions such as a set price for a service and fixed working times or workplace did not apply to many of them.

WomAtWork aims first to discover the peculiarities of these labour patterns and see their historical transformations as a result of political changes and the introduction of new technologies and commodities. Secondly, it examines professional subjectivities, the work ethos, norms and values of women at work. Finally, it questions the relationship between these professionals and their communities – including in the light of the social stigma sometimes attached to them – as well as the nexus between these labourers and protest, charting when and why they laid down their tools.

Based on an innovative methodology, this project seeks to overcome the invisibility of women in official archives by weaving together different threads of sources. It begins inside those photographic archives connected with institutions that had conscious agendas of representation and routines of intense textual production (for example, missionary stations). In some cases, these visual and textual sources lead to networks or families of women professionals, whose oral history will be solicited. Third, the project aims to analyse the vernacular press combined with oral accounts.

Through these objectives and methodologies, WomAtWork will be a participant in the mission of writing a more democratic, more inclusive history, one that firmly establish the centrality of women's labour in African history.

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<sup>1</sup> Instructions for completing Part B1 can be found in the 'Information for Applicants to the Starting and Consolidator Grant 2021 Calls'.

## Section a: Extended Synopsis of the scientific proposal

**WomAtWork aims to be the first detailed investigation of the history of female popular urban professionals in three African countries** (Sudan, Gold Coast/Ghana, Tanganyika/Tanzania) through fifty momentous years of their history (1919-1970). By “female popular urban professional”, I mean a broad category of professions that developed mostly (but not exclusively) in urban settings starting in the colonial period, such as market women and food vendors, artisans (tailors, cloth makers), untrained midwives, beauticians (such as henna ladies), hairdressers, wedding singers and musicians. From a social perspective, these women came from the popular classes, and had not received any formal education.

**Our preliminary findings and the existing heterogenous literature about these professionals reveal a host of fascinating and unsettling characteristics, demonstrating that the existing categories we customarily use to read the history of labour in Africa are inadequate for analysing them, and urgently need new analytical tools to be developed** To illustrate this point, I will give the example of two types of professional: women who provided services to other women, and market vendors. In Sudan, as in the Gold Cost, **for professions such as midwives, singers, or ritual practitioners, notions such as fixed compensation for a certain service offered or work performed, or fixed workplaces and working hours did not apply.** These professionals, who were called to attend events such as births, funerals, and weddings, were paid according to what those who were taking part could afford, which at times meant extensive competition for the highest compensation, while in other cases it was barely enough to allow the practitioner to survive. Moreover, these practitioners could not refuse to offer their services when they were required, and had to accept even symbolic intangible compensation. Payments were therefore related to the customer’s economic situation and not the professional’s economic needs. As for **market vendors and food sellers**, our preliminary findings show that these **professions were marked by a work of cooperation**, from complex micro-credit structures to collaboration with training and operating a business, to mutual support and protection in cases of hardship and danger. Second, **female vendors counted a great deal on significant “emotional work” in order to) to attract loyal clients**, creating special links of affection, care, trust, and even intimacy, entangled in the act of selling This meant that exchanges were not only economic but also affective, which helped them face the uncertainties of the market. It is important to see affective exchanges as being not only linked to professions such as prostitution, but also as a feature of much broader professional categories. These two examples hint at a fundamental characteristic of female urban professions in the African contexts studied: **working women were much more embedded in – and dependent on – a web of social relations in the community in which they lived**, to a far greater extent than male workers. This embeddedness meant a series of opportunities but also constraints, which went considerably beyond the mere economic exchange, and shaped the relations between a professional and her customers as ethical, normative, and affective (Bartels 1966; Aryee 1977; Campbell-Platt 1978; Akerele 1979; Nwanganga 1980; Salih 1989; Saghayroun 1987; Robertson 1990; Willemssee 2007; Clark 2010).

These preliminary findings offer glimpses of the complexity of this topic, but they must be systematised and inserted into broader historical phenomena. They must also be read through a sustained comparative lens that will potentially lead to a broader theoretical framework on female urban professions. For this reason, **WomAtWork will adopt a comparative approach** by studying the history of female urban professionals in three countries, Sudan, Gold Coast/Ghana, and Tanganyika/Tanzania, both together and against each other. These countries have been selected because of their comparative potential: during the period covered by this project, all three were part of the British Empire; were mostly plantation economies in which the colonial state was the major investor and employer; experienced similar dynamics in the development of and changes to the labour force; and, finally, were characterised by vibrant and fast-developing urban cultures (Brown 2017; Brennan et al. 2007; Arn 1996). They were, however, tied to distinct trading and cultural networks: the Atlantic Ocean for the Gold Coast; the Indian Ocean, but also the Great Lakes and central Africa for Tanganyika; the Red Sea and the Arab world for Northern Sudan; and central Africa for Southern Sudan.

As for the period in which the project is set, its starting point has been chosen because it was in the 1920s that the sources on female professional labour began to multiply (and this was also when Tanganyika was placed under a British mandate). It then covers the period of the Second World War and the independence of the three countries (1956 for Sudan, 1957 for Ghana, and 1961 for Tanzania), and ends at the time of their transition into one-party states. In this way, **WomAtWork** aims to transcend the colonial/post-colonial cleavage, looking at the continuities and ruptures that occurred during these politically intense times, including the way in which state structures after independence tackled – or failed to tackle – the problems of working women.

**The ground-breaking impact of WomAtWork will be to unearth and map the specificities of the working worlds of female professionals, to shape new intellectual tools to conceptualise the characteristics of their**

**professions, and through comparative analysis, to build a broader theoretical framework that will complexify the relationship between labour, income, and society.**

### **State of the art: Mapping blind spots in the study of female labour**

In recent decades (although the trend is actually much older, see Freund 1984 and 1988), there has been an **increasing interest in the history of labour in Africa** triggered by works such as that of Frederick Cooper on the relationship between decolonisation and the labour movements (1996), which focused on the stabilisation of the labour force in Africa, the development of a workers' movement and trade unions, and their contribution to decolonisation processes (Bellucci and Eckert 2019; Hofmeester Karin, Jan Lucassen; Filipa Ribeiro da Silva 2014; Lynn Schler, Louise Bethlehem & Galia Sabar 2009). It is impossible to overlook the quality and quantity of this scholarship, but it has had one fundamental blind spot: female labour. The workers who became an increasingly dependable labour force, and later unionised and marched against the colonial regimes, were overwhelmingly, if not exclusively men, and the scholarship reflects this gender bias.

There is also a rich vein of scholarship on female labour that developed predominantly during the 1980s and 1990s, informed by a Marxist-feminist framework, and in particular by the so-called "**Boserupian paradigm**". The works written in the wake of Ester Boserup theoretical analyses revolutionised the way female labour was conceptualised. They also described how in times of economic duress, most of the adverse economic consequences fell on the shoulders of women, who were compelled to enter the labour market under the worst possible conditions. The historical studies on Africa that have been influenced by this paradigm have focused on the proletarianisation of women as a consequence of male labour migration, in particular during colonial times (Bay and Hafkin 1975; Strobel 1979; Chauncey 1981; Berger and Robertson 1986; Bay 1979/2019; Bryceson 1980; Dinani 2019; Stichter 2012; Jain and Reddock 2020). Again, in spite of the significance and quality of this scholarship, it, too, has had a number of blind spots. First, it has tended to focus on **large macro-economic phenomena** and broad categories (for example, women peasants). Second, using Nancy Hunt's formulation, they have "**set a history of exploitation**" which has left little space for women's agency (Hunt 1989). Third, as this scholarship has tended to focus mostly on rural women workers, **urban professionals have been overlooked**, in particular because it was widely considered that the only profession open to women in urban settings was prostitution, in response to the urban presence of male migrants (Stichter 2012). **WomAtWork** seeks to address these blind spots.

**WomAtWork** has been inspired by a different strand of works that have focused on the history of educated women professionals during the colonial rule, such as Barthélémy's study of female civil servants in French West Africa (Barthélémy 2019) and Hugon's study of graduate midwives in the Gold Coast (Hugon 2009, 2019 and 2020). The methodology adopted by these scholars has been to study not only the material conditions of work, but also, and more importantly, the existential dimension of having a certain profession, the creation of affective communities of workers, work ethos and *esprit de corps*, and the norms and values shaped by professional identities. **These studies are examples of a new way of studying women at work, one that finally focuses on how work impacts women's existence overall.**

In **WomAtWork**, I seek to apply a similar approach to urban popular professionals. It may go without saying that there were blatant differences between popular professionals and elite graduates, such as the absence of a fixed income and push factors such as economic strains. Many popular women went to work because of hardship, and not for pleasure or ambition. Yet, I believe that this scholarship yields a great potential for reconceiving the way we study popular professionals; indeed, **WomAtWork sees work as an existential and social phenomenon that goes beyond the issue of the material benefits to be gained.**

### **Objectives: Understanding work as an existential phenomenon**

I shall outline now **five objectives** to be pursued by the project likely to produce cutting-edge knowledge about popular female professionals in African history.

1. Map urban female professions and their evolution over time. How did the major historical, political, economic, and technological changes impact female urban professionals, and how did women transform their professions in order to cope with new situations? Three main phases will be considered in the project: 1) 1919-1940, the period of colonial economic austerity, albeit one marked by the development of urban cultures; 2) the 1940s and 1950s, a period marked in the history of labour by the stabilisation of the male labour force and the migration of a larger number of women to urban settings to follow their partners. More women also looked for work, driven to do so by economic turbulence such as inflationary crises; and 3) the 1960s, a period of rapid transition from independence to one-party systems, and a time when working women were increasingly becoming the target of the new governments as potential bearers of authoritarian schemes.

Last but not least, this **periodisation** will not only follow the political history of these countries, but **will also take into account the major technological and commodity changes of the period under review**, as they had a fundamental impact for female professionals (ie electricity: Coquery 2004; Marwah 2017).

2. Shed light on the distinctive characteristics of popular women's labour. The second objective is to understand the specificities of popular professions, such as the way in which micro-credit worked, the system of cooperation among workers, the link between retribution and reciprocity, embeddedness in the social web, and so on, as described in the introduction. These findings will be further analysed through a comparative perspective in order to reveal possible general features shared by popular professionals.

3. Consider women's professional subjectivities. This involves uncovering the perspectives of women at work and their rationales for making certain work choices, and looking in depth at the actors across all aspects of the operation of their trades. It also entails unearthing discourses about the self, the motives of self-esteem attached to carrying out a certain occupation, the work ethos described by the workers, and the values and norms attached to their professions.

4. Decipher the paradoxical relations between women professionals and their communities. I have described the existence in some professions of an "emotional work" that linked the professionals to their clients, and how tightly they were embedded in a certain community. However, this also reveals a striking paradox, as many categories of female professionals were actually perceived as socially marginalised elements, and in many contexts a stigma was attached to female labour. This project aims to dig into this paradox and deconstructing the description of these women as mere subalterns, while also attempting to understand what fed these discourses in the light of the relationship between women professionals and their communities.

5. Explore the connection between women at work and protest. Women professionals lived through momentous times of intense political and economic change. Without falling into the domination/resistance paradigm, **WomAtWork** seeks first of all to see if and how women handed down their tools in protest, and for what reasons. While the secondary literature on other African countries has pointed at the connection between women's workers and nationalist and trade union movements (Parpart 1988; Geiger 1990; Byfield 1997 and 2002; Lindsay 1999 and 2003; Schmidt 2005; Shonekan 2009; Titilope 2019), this is still to be accounted for the three countries studied. Inspired by Geiger's illuminating study on TANU women (1997), this project aims to gain an understanding of how popular professional women impacted, shaped, or even bent nationalist and women's movements, and their contribution to the development of nationalism as a grassroots force.

### **Methodology: Building threads of evidence from eclectic bodies of sources**

In the process of writing a history of women popular professionals, **WomAtWork** is faced with a formidable challenge: **their invisibility in textual sources in national and colonial archives**. These archives only **reflect the gendered nature of the labour force**: because the colonial state hired almost exclusively men (and delegated the hiring of women to men when it was necessary, thus blurring their presence in the labour force), little or no paperwork was generated about female workers. In addition, professional popular women, who worked on their own account for and with ordinary women and men, often in the intimacy of their homes, were notoriously difficult for the colonial state to "see". **WomAtWork seeks to deal with this challenge by adopting an ambitious methodology** which, in the tradition of the **evidentiary paradigm** outlined by Ginzburg (2013), **consists in building threads of evidence and clues woven together from heterogenous bodies of sources** that must be read 'against' and 'alongside' each other (Guha 2006; Stoler 2010). I briefly describe these bodies of sources below:

- **Photographic and textual sources.** This project is set to start inside the photographic archives of missionary, colonial, and national institutions. Preliminary archival research at the archives at Durham University and the International Mission Photographic Archive **has revealed a plethora of visual evidence that bears witness to the presence of women at work**: women carrying items to be sold in the market or preparing and processing food, artisans manufacturing various products, and so on. How do we understand these images? Although the use of colonial photography as a source is notoriously complex (Geary 1986; Adenaike 1996; Landau and Kaspin 2002; Gordon and Kurzwelly 2019) because many collections have few contextual descriptions or none at all, not to mention the tendency to "exoticise" women's bodies, this is by no means the case with all of them. Indeed, **certain institutions adopted a conscious representation agenda aimed at documenting the everyday life of their own organisations** (two examples of this are the Midwifery School in Omdurman, Sudan and the Basel Missionary Society in the Gold Coast). This **went hand in hand with practices of dense textual production**. Missionary stations, for instance, kept daily records of their operations, their parishioners, their routines, and so on. When this textual evidence is woven together with the visual documents, it promises to provide exceptionally rich information about the time, the place, and the conditions of women's work.

- **Oral history and photographic sources.** In the photographic archives, the names of the women represented are sometimes reported on labels, together with the place and time of the photograph. Because of the social web that joined these professionals together, it is my belief that at least in some cases, it will be possible to trace the families and/or colleagues of the people represented (for example, the oldest popular wedding singers in Khartoum were so famous that their families can still be located today), and meet them. Clearly, because of the huge economic upheavals, wars, and political turmoil these countries have experienced, this will only be possible in a minority of cases; however, meeting and taking the oral accounts of this minority will still yield important findings. Oral informants and photographic sources will also be woven together in another way: photographs representing women at work will be discussed with informants, which may help them recollect past working conditions, as well as older technologies and know-how.

- **Vernacular sources and oral history.** Certain categories of female workers are likely to be less represented in the photographic archives than others, in particular those services that were provided in the intimacy of private homes, such as by beauticians, hairdressers, midwives, wedding singers, and so on. My previous research on the Sudanese press in the 1950s has shown me that lively debates on the “women’s question” often espoused narratives on popular female occupations (Vezzadini 2016, 2020). In spite of the derogatory stance that was often endorsed by the press, it is in these vernacular sources (as well as in aural sources such as radio programmes dedicated to women) that it is possible to find information on those professions of the private sphere. These must be in turn be woven together with oral accounts. My past fieldwork experiences have shown me that elderly women tend to have clear memories of them, because many were socially indispensable. For instance, in northern Sudan, because of the problem of infibulation, no wedding or birth could take place without the assistance of a midwife.

- Finally, **other types of sources** from miscellaneous colonial, national, and international institutions (for example, the ILO) that possess indirect information on women will be considered (these include demographic reports, labour reports, and sources about urban changes). In particular, **court records of criminal offences committed by professional women** – even if these are an insignificant minority compared to men – may be especially interesting as ways of revealing the struggles and social problems experienced by professional women (Dickerman 1984 and Dickerman et al. 1990; Schmidt 1990; Hay and Wright 1982).

**This archival research will be carried out in six African and European countries**, in different missionary, colonial and national archives. A non-exhaustive list of these institutions includes the National Archives of Great Britain, the Bodleian Library in Oxford; the Comboni Missionary Archive, the White Fathers and White Sisters archive in Rome; the Basel Missionary archive in Switzerland; and the national archives of Sudan, Ghana and Tanzania. As for the fieldwork undertaken to collect oral accounts, the locations will depend to a large extent on the clues gleaned from the archival research, even if it is likely to begin from the capitals.

For the breadth of the objectives set by the project, for its methodology based on weaving together vast bodies of eclectic sources, for the number of archives and fieldwork sites that will need to be consulted, and also for its focus on gender, which is a major societal and academic challenge inside the EU and in Africa, **this project seems to me to fit perfectly into a funding scheme such as the ERC Consolidator grant. It is the stated aim of WomAtWork to create a more democratic, more inclusive history, one that places women at centre stage of research and reminds us of their fundamental role in the making of history.**

### **Research team, training, international networks and key outputs**

One of the key resources of this project is the composition of its staff. Two scholars whose research has inspired the PI have been included as senior staff. As I have mentioned, the scholarship of **Anne Hugon** on the history of midwives in the Gold Coast has led to a paradigmatic shift in the understanding of female professional identities, and her research is a role model for the PI. **Karin Pallaver**, who is a part of the “Global Collaboration on the History of Labour Relations 1500-2000”, has given us an enlightening history of female labour in Tanzania on the ‘long durée’ that has also affected the intellectual development of this project. In addition, because of their lifelong engagement with the histories of Ghana and Tanzania, their knowledge of archival sites, including minor and untapped ones, their familiarity with local actors and scholars connected to the theme of this research, and last but not least, their linguistic skills in the several languages involved in the project (such as Swahili and Akan, but also Italian and German, the languages of various missionary archives), **I believe that they represent the ideal team to carry out WomAtWork.** As associate professors, Pallaver and Hugon also have long experience with supervising PhD students.

The project will also include three PhD students and three post-docs, one for each of the countries to be studied. They will be supervised by the three senior staff members. **The decision to include such a comparatively large number of students and early career scholars is connected to one of the missions of the project, which is to nurture a young generation of scholars trained in the domain of gender and women’s history.**

This training will not only involve the PhDs and post-docs, however. One of the outputs of the project will be the organisation of three **summer schools**, the first based at the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy at the University of Accra; the second at the Regional Institute of Gender, Diversity, Peace and Rights at Ahfad University for Women, Omdurman, Sudan; and the third and final one at the Institute of Gender Studies at the University of Dar Es Salaam. **The summer schools will be open to African students at the undergraduate and graduate levels**, and African scholars will make up an important part of the training staff, working together with the staff of the project. Following the summer schools, the staff will work with the students to publish the output of their research in the form of articles, research notes, and fieldwork observations.

Besides the organisation of the summer schools, the project will also work in close contact with African research institutions and scholars in several ways. First, **WomenAtWork will create a panel of African scholars as expert advisers**, two for each of the countries being studied. For Sudan, the panel will include **Professor Balghils Badri**, Dean of the Gender Studies Department at the University of Ahfad, and one of the pioneers of the study of gender in Sudan, and **Professor Mahassin 'Abd al-Galil** of the University of Bahri, Sudan, a specialist in the history of women's movements in Sudan. Both scholars' intellectual output has been crucial for the elaboration of this project (Badri 2005 and 2008; Abdel Galil, forthcoming). For Ghana, the project will involve **Professor Akosua Adomako Ampofo**, Professor of African and Gender Studies at the University of Ghana, a leading expert in the field of gender and who has been collaborating with Prof. Hugon for years, and another of Hugon's collaborators, **Nana Yaw Boampong Sapong**, a Lecturer in social history at the Department of History, University of Ghana. Finally, for Tanzania, it will include **Professor Fred J. Kaijage** of the University of Dar Es Salaam, who specialises in the history of labour in Tanzania, and **Bertha Omary Koda**, a Lecturer at the Institute for Development Studies of the same university, whose work on females in the national movement has been an inspiration for this project (Ngaiza and Koda 1991). **This cluster will be deeply involved in the conception of the research tools for the project**, and in participation in all its research activities. **Those of them who teach at universities will be asked to involve their students** in the summer schools, research seminars, and publications.

By closely associating African researchers and institutions with the project, I have several objectives: first, **to make this research as participative as possible**; second, **to foster academic exchanges and the training of students and early career scholars**; third, **to publish the results of WomAtWork as early as possible**, so that the programme's findings will be of assistance not only to African students but also to civil society actors and international organisations. In this way, **WomAtWork aims to participate in these countries' developmental challenges in relation to gender equality**. One example of this is the **UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Goal 5: Gender Equality (SDG 5)**, to which the three countries have adhered.

As for other international scholars, the project will work closely with the best European research networks on the history of both African and global labour. Some examples include Re:Work (IGK Work and Human Life Cycle in Global History) based at the Humboldt University of Berlin, led by Andreas Eckert, and the Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations, 1500-2000, based at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, led by Professor Karin Hofmeester. Beside benefiting from their scholarship, my aim in working with these networks is to keep gender high in their research agenda. In addition, scholars of African labour have also expressed an interest in this project, including Professor Stefano Bellucci (University of Leiden), Professor Alexander Keese (University of Geneva), and Professor Gareth Curless (University of Exeter). Other leading experts on colonial female labour such as Judith Byfield, Lisa Lindsay, and Samita Sen will be included as the project unfolds.

As for the academic output of **WomAtWork**, through the participation of 3 senior member, 3 PhD students, and 3 post-docs, and the involvement of a cohort of international scholars, **WomAtWork has the ambition to produce a critical mass of academic publications and research activities on the history of female labour in Africa, and disseminate widely its findings**. A non-exhaustive list includes: the PI's personal project monograph and an open access monograph/textbook on urban professional women from a comparative perspective; two special issues and a number of research articles and/or monographs, produced by the two senior members and the post-docs, and three doctoral dissertations. Other activities included in the project are **the three summer schools, a monthly research seminar** starting from year 3, the creation of a **website** where to download material about the project, and the organisation of a final large **international conference** on popular urban professionals in Africa, followed by conference proceedings.

Last but not least, a final component for the success of this project is the fact that it is being hosted at the Institute des Mondes Africains, Campus Condorcet, Aubervilliers. Besides the excellent working conditions offered by the Campus Condorcet, and its supportive, warm, and human working environment, the **IMAF is a place of scientific excellence for gender studies**. Among its ranks are a dozen scholars from all disciplines who work on issues related to gender, who will be crucial for giving the project a comparative and interdisciplinary outlook.

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