For a long time to come, many women will still have to face the consequences of undergoing an abortion as isolated individuals, since each experience is unique and not easy for others to understand. But now that the issues and the

emotions are out in the open, and these two books are available in bookshops, many more of us will be able to approach this difficult subject with dignity and courage.

Ania Grobicki

Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England
Lindsay Charles and Lorna Duffin (Eds)

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There is a new contribution to the ongoing debate about the changes in the sexual division of labour brought about by emerging capitalism. Lindsay Charles and Lorna Duffin have edited a book about women and work in pre-industrial England. This collection of different papers originated as a series of seminars given under the auspices and with the financial support of the Oxford Women's Studies Committee. As Lindsay Charles says in the very informative introduction, it is meant to be a contribution to the debate which originated in the pioneering works of Alice Clark in

The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century and Ivy Pinchbeck in *Women Workers in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* about women's work and the transition to capitalism.

Although the essays do not contradict the underlying thesis of Clark and Pinchbeck about the fundamental change occurring in women's economic role through the rise of capitalism, they do question some basic assumptions. The work that women did in pre-industrial England was not always, as Clark and Pinchbeck claimed, closer to the household so that reproductive and productive work could be easily combined. Chris Middleton argues in the last essay that even the protocapitalist form of domestic industry common in seventeenth-century rural England did not provide space and time for household tasks. His sociological rather than historical essay makes a conceptual critique of Clark's and Pinchbeck's books. He claims that they have made false assumptions about the role of women in the feudal mode of production and have failed to see that the effects of the transition were more complicated and uneven than the 'critical-pessimist' tradition generally suggests.

Following this critique, Lindsay Charles calls for more historical research concentrating on specific regions and periods. Kay E. Lacey and Diana Hutton offer examples of such research for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They use court rolls, guild records and other available contemporary sources to draw a picture of women's work in London

and Shrewsbury.

Kay E. Lacey starts with an extensive investigation of the law concerning women's property, inheritance rights and contract rights in fourteenth-century London. Then she gives various examples of women appearing in records and their work. Both she and Diana Hutton are well aware of the problematic of using those sources and evaluate the possible invisibility of women in official records. But in assuming that women appearing in written sources were in fact exceptions, they come to the rather pessimistic conclusion that women achieved independent economic positions only under certain conditions; for example, when they took over their husbands' business as widows.

Sue Wright examines Easter-books and various other sources to give us a picture of 'Churmaids, Huiswyfes and Hucksters' in Salisbury. This essay deals with the seventeenth century and particularly emphasizes the role of service for women's employment. She also talks about midwives, nurses and women traders, concluding that all of them had rather subordinated positions.

Michael Roberts tries to use literature and poetry to show the emerging ideology of work in the seventeenth century, seeing work as vocation, a hierarchy between skilled and unskilled work and the moral call for employing the poor. But in his long essay he deals more with the general attitude towards work than with female work, as he admits himself. So one can't really figure out what the relation between the emerging ideology of work and changing conditions for women's work was. His major source is written from a male perspective of the early eighteenth century: Daniel Defoe's *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Molly Flanders*, 1720.

One advantage of the book is the extensive and critical use of primary

sources in the essays. But it is difficult to get a coherent picture of the development of women's work in the period covered, 1400-1700. Both the introduction by Lindsay Charles and the concluding essay by Chris Middleton give good and necessary summaries. To understand the complexity of the subject one has to keep in mind while reading the book that economic changes started to take place in the fourteenth century. Trade expanded and agriculture became more and more monetarized. Chris Middleton claims that one has to distinguish between the rise of capitalism and industrialization, but none of the contributors to the book seems to realize that this whole period can already be described as transitional. So all the restrictions on female labour that they describe might be re-examined from the point of view that the rise of capitalism had already started.

The book cannot deny the 'traditional feminist assumptions' about the capitalist impact on female economic roles, but it can help us to get a better idea of the various ways and steps in which the transition took place.

Heide Mertens