Invisible no more: women's work in the oil and gas industry

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Invisible no more: women's work in the oil and gas industry

Abstract

The oil and gas industry is generally imagined as a prototypical 'men's world', with the multifaceted work women have performed largely invisible. This is being rectified by growing research on women workers in the industry. This paper introduces this literature and calls for further research into how women have enabled but also challenged the industry, and how gendered arrangements of work and family have been constitutive of it. The paper draws on the example of *The Royal Dutch Shell Group of Companies* to highlight women's contributions and experiences in three roles, as graduates, housewives, and domestic workers. The paper argues that 1) women's work as much as its relegation to the private sphere and positioning as lesser or not work are constitutive of the industry; 2) women never constituted a homogeneous group, as intersecting inequalities of class, nationality, and racialisation further shaped their positioning and often-ambivalent relationship with the corporation; 3) not only labour regimes in the oil industry but also its archive are deeply gendered, necessitating the opening up of corporate archives, as well as methodological plurality.

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INTRODUCTION

1 Despite growing attention to gender in energy histories,[1] the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and symbolic work women have performed in the oil and gas industry remains largely invisible. Until recently we knew little about women in the industry, and their motivations, contributions and experiences in an industry generally imagined as a prototypical 'men's world'. This is being rectified by a growing literature on women's work in the oil and gas industry. This paper introduces this literature and calls for further research into how women's multifaceted work has enabled but also challenged the oil and gas industry, and how gendered arrangements of work and family have been constitutive of this industry. Such historical inquiry, the paper further argues, requires a sustained engagement with fields such as feminist political economy, social and cultural business history, and post- and decolonial critiques of historical knowledge production.

2 Towards these aims, this paper discusses three dimensions of women's work within *The Royal Dutch Shell Group of Companies*, focusing on the early 20th century to the 1970s. The Group's two parent companies – the Br*itish Shell Transport and Trading Company* and the *Royal Dutch Petroleum Company* – were both formed during the 19th century period of European-dominated imperial globalisation, and from the onset their activities were entangled with British and Dutch imperial projects.[2] This was also a time when women in Europe and its imperial sphere of influence were systematically relegated to the household and excluded from paid work and formal political activity. In 1907, *Shell Transport* and *Royal Dutch* amalgamated their activities to form *The Royal Dutch Shell Group of Companies*, hereafter simply called 'the Group' or 'Shell'. While its activities merged, the Group did not become a legally unified corporation until 2005. Instead, its parent companies became 'holding companies' with *Royal Dutch* holding 60% and *Shell Transport* holding 40%, and with two headquarters located in The Hague and London.[3] As such, Shell ranked among the world's biggest, most powerful corporations of the 20th century and became one of the 'Seven Sisters', the oil corporations that dominated the global oil industry until the 1970s. In line with Euro-American imperial practice, the Group relied on a racially stratified workforce with white men staffing virtually all posts of responsibility until the post-WW2 era of decolonisation.[4] Shell's workforce was also strictly gendered and until the 1970s, Shell hardly employed women except in traditionally female roles, such as nurses, teachers and secretaries. Indeed, in the 1990s, European men still comprised the vast majority of Shell's elite cadre of 'International Staff', and thus of Group senior management.[5]

3 Despite women's exclusion from most formal employment, *Royal Dutch Shell*, like other oil companies, relied on women's manifold work, both paid and unpaid. This paper discusses some of this work. It focuses, first, on Dutch women's advance into higher-echelon corporate functions in the 1970s; second, on Shell wives' vital contributions to corporate management;

1 See, for example, JEHRHE issue 6, which is dedicated to connecting the historiographies of gender and energy consumption "that, with a few exceptions, have generally ignored one another". Mathis Charles-François, Virgili Fabrice, Williot Jean-Pierre, "Households, Gender, and Energies: Issues and Perspectives", *Journal of Energy History / Revue d'histoire de l'énergie*, vol. 6, 2021, 1. URL : energyhistory.eu/en/node/279

2 Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1991); Timothy Mitchell. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2001); Jan Luiten Van Zanden et al., *A history of Royal Dutch Shell*, Vol 1-3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

3 Id.

4 Keetie Sluyterman, "Decolonisation and the Organisation of the International Workforce: Dutch Multinationals in Indonesia, 1945–1967", *Business History,* vol. 62, no. 7, 2020, 1182–1201; Sarah Kunz, "A Business Empire and Its Migrants: Royal Dutch Shell and the Management of Racial Capitalism", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* vol. 45/2, 2020, 377-391; Sridevi Menon, "Narrating Brunei: Travelling Histories of Brunei Indians", *Modern Asian Studies*, vol 50/2, 2016, 718-764.

5 Kunz "A Business Empire and Its Migrants"; see also Max Van Overstraten Kruysse, "Graduate Manpower Requirements for a Large Multinational Group of Companies", *European Journal of Engineering Education*, vol 10/1, 1985, 7-9.

third, on 'local' domestic workers who tended to Shell executive households all over the world. The paper argues that the work rendered by women, and the demotion of 'women's work' to the private sphere and its positioning as lesser or not work, played a constitutive role in Shell and the oil industry more broadly. The paper also highlights that women never constituted a homogeneous or unified group but were differentiated and stratified by class, citizenship, and racialisation. Women's intersectional social positioning shaped their opportunities, experiences and often-ambivalent relationship with the corporation. Finally, the paper considers what histories we can tell and what experiences account for, given the intersecting inequalities structuring not only work in the oil industry but also its archive. This paper relies primarily on sources from *The Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History* (ATRIA) in Amsterdam, and the Shell Ladies' Project (SLP) collection held at the *Expatriate Archive Centre* (EAC) in the Hague.[6] Notably, both are not corporate archives. In telling the social history of oil, it is thus vital to discuss the politics of archiving, such as the uneven collection and widespread 'privatisation' of relevant sources. In short, not only work in the oil industry but also its archives are deeply gendered, necessitating the 'opening up' of corporate archives, as well as 'methodological plurality'.

WOMEN'S WORK AND GENDERED SILENCES IN ENERGY HISTORIES

4 Women have until recently been largely absent from energy histories. Writing in 2021, Harrison Moore and Sandwell observe that "Arguably no aspect of energy's history is less developed than gender, and no topic less explored than women's relationship to the last great society-changing transition to fossil fuels".[7] The reasons for this scholarly silence are multiple. One obvious reason is the systematic exclusion of women from most formal employment for much of the industry's existence. Harrison Moore and Sandwell note that,

> "the transition to modern energies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century North America and Britain was brought about in the context of a sharpening of gender distinctions and inequalities, most particularly manifested in ideologies of the 'separate spheres'".[8]

5 That is, the modern oil industry's emergence formed part of 19th century industrialisation, when "the roles of men and women began to diverge sharply" and women were "consigned to the domestic sphere and legally and ideologically constrained from access to waged work".[9] Although women's work remained vital for households and communities, it became "undervalued, and indeed was not recognized as work".[10] Gender is a social system of signification within which 'woman' denotes a socio-historical rather than a biological position. What 'woman' means has thus changed over time and differs by context. From the beginning, oil corporations took an active part in the (re)formulation of normative gender roles and relations, not least by excluding women from most paid work and positions of power.

6 Much fewer women than men thus formally worked in the oil industry. However, some always did, while others supported it from the supposed 'fringes', in often unrecognised and unremunerated roles. These 'informal' women workers generally remained invisible, too, because the ideology of 'separate spheres' not only shaped the industry's actual labour relations but also

6 The SLP was initiated by the wives of high-ranking Shell managers posted to The Hague in the early 1990s. The SLP produced two anthologies of women's memories of live on the move with Shell (SLP 1993, 1996) and then developed their project into a broader collection of the social history of Shell 'expatriation' from the 1920s to the 1990s.

7 Abigail Harrison Moore, R.W. Sandwell R, *In a New Light: Histories of Women and Energy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 4; Martin Anfinsen, Sara Heidenreich, *Energy & Gender - a Social Sciences and Humanities Cross-Cutting Theme Report* (Cambridge: Shape Energy, 2017).

8 Id.

9 Harrison Moore and Sandwell 2021, *In a New Light*, 8.

10 Id.

its culture, folklore and historiography. Research consistently notes the "macho" and "cowboy" culture of oil production, a culture that centrally hinged not only on the physical but even more so on the symbolic exclusion of women.[11] The usual (origin) stories of the oil industry are thus centred on men – whether daring innovators, adventurous capitalists, weathered drillers, or roughneck labour. Women hardly appear in such accounts, and if they do, they are most likely featured in stereotypical roles as wives or prostitutes, but certainly not as workers, thinkers, and plotters. As Myrna Santiago observes about the early Mexican oil industry, "oil companies ignored women and historians followed suit", also because women "did not fit in the categories examined".[12] The oil industry, *as usually portrayed*, thus seems to be par excellence a 'man's world'.

7 The silence on women's participation in energy production is being corrected by a small yet growing literature on women's historical and present-day work in the oil and gas industry.[13] This research is also fuelled by a broader resurgence of labour history. After having fallen 'out of favour' since the 1980s, the study of labour relations in the international oil and gas industry has in recent years gotten renewed attention.[14] This literature shows that women were never excluded wholesale from all spheres of activity in the oil industry. Rather, organising oil production in gendered ways meant women's partial and strategic incorporation, the material and symbolic devaluation of their labour and their systematic exclusion from decision-making positions. Accordingly, research has begun to trace not only women's multifaceted work but also the legal, organisational and socio-cultural strategies by which women were thus excluded and relegated. To date, this research has primarily focused on Euro-American women working as oil wives, offshore workers, and in professional and managerial roles. In the remainder, this paper will discuss this emerging literature, and contribute to it with the case of *Royal Dutch Shell*. Doing so, the article also calls for a critical interdisciplinary and intersectional approach that actively reflects on and pushes the limits of the archive.

WOMEN'S WORK IN THE OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY IN THREE CATEGORIES

Barriers to graduate employment: marriage, mobility, and separate toilet facilities

8 Emerging research into women's oil work has explored women in traditional 'pink collar' jobs,[15] those in non-traditional manual labour roles, especially in offshore exploration and production, and, to a lesser extent, women pushing into higher managerial and executive roles.[16] This research centrally investigates when and how

11 Jane Lewis et al., *Women, Work and Family in the British, Canadian and Norwegian Offshore Oilfields* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 2; Gloria Miller, "Frontier Masculinity in the Oil Industry: The Experience of Women Engineers", *Gender, Work & Organization,* vol 11/1, 2004, 47; Diane Austin, "Women's Work and Lives in Offshore Oil", *Research in Economic Anthropology*, vol.24, 2006, 164; Lauren McKee, "Women in American Energy: De-Feminizing Poverty in the Oil and Gas Industries", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol 15/1, 2014, 167-178.

12 Myrna Santiago, "Women of the Mexican Oil Fields: Class, Nationality, Economy, Culture, 1900–1938'", *Journal of Women's History*, vol 21/1, 2009, 87.

13 Mearns and Wagstaff 1996; Miller 2004; Johnson 2005; Austin 2006, 2018; Tinker-Salas 2009; Vitalis 2009; Carlsson-Kanyama et al 2010; Herman and Lewis 2012; Foss et al. 2013; Mckee 2014; Ryan 2014; Prietl 2017; Anfinsen and Heidenreich 2017; Williams 2018; Ponton 2019; Bass 2020; Gooday and Harrison Moore 2021; Harrison Moore and Sandwell 2021.

14 Touraj Atabaki et al. (eds.), *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry*. (New York: Palgrave, 2018).

15 'Pink-collar' professions are historically female-dominated, including teaching, nursing, secretarial work, and cleaning.

16 Lewis et al., *Women, Work and Family,* 1988; Valerie Johnson, "Making the Invisible Visible: Women in the History of BP", *Business Archives Sources and History*, vol. 90, 2005, 15–25; Austin, *Women's Work and Lives in Offshore Oil*, 2006, 2018; Rebecca Ponton, *Breaking the Gas Ceiling: Women in the Offshore Oil and Gas Industry* (Ann Arbor: Modern History Press, 2019); Elizabeth Bass, ""That These Few Girls Stand Together": Finding Women and Their Communities in the Oil and Gas Industry" (PhD diss., Oklahoma State University, 2020); Carla Williams, *Wildcat Women: Narratives of Women Breaking Ground in Alaska's Oil and Gas Industry* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2018); Graeme Gooday, Abigail Harrison Moore, "Networks of Power? Rethinking Class, Gender and Entrepreneurship in English Electrification, 1880-1924", *Journal of Energy History /Revue d'histoire de l'énergie*, vol. 6, 2021, 1-23.

women entered such roles, and how corporations incorporated and treated women workers. Research has found women's experiences in the oil and gas industry "essentially similar to those in other traditionally male-dominated industries".[17] Across the global oil industry, corporations used a variety of strategies to keep women out, citing for example "women's lack of ability to do the work, their lack of ability to handle the stresses of being offshore, and the lack of living quarters for women".[18] Women were most readily admitted into traditional 'female' jobs and not generally considered for non-traditional let alone executive roles prior to the 1970s, when second wave feminism helped achieve a revolution in gender roles. For example, Diane Austin finds that the early industry in southern Louisiana relied heavily on familial and friendship social networks "to provide a relatively inexpensive and compliant workforce" of mostly white men; women's entry into the workforce here "coincided with other changes wrought by increasing regulation of the industry", including legislation against race-based discrimination.[19] Work in the oil industry was thus always socially embedded, and shaped by corporate practice as much as broader political and legal context. Generally speaking, until the 1960s to 1970s, laws and social norms in Western countries and their imperial spheres of influence limited the work women could do and backed corporate resistance to employing women. Since then, social and political pressure and anti-discrimination legislating has often had a positive impact on the admission of women oil workers, as noted especially for the Norwegian case.[20]

9 Research has also begun to explore the motivations and experiences of women employed in the oil and gas industry. For example, Austin finds four primary motivations of women working offshore in southern Louisiana: to earn more money than available in other jobs, work in a familiar environment, break out of stereotypical roles, and pursue challenging and interesting work.[21] Women have used assimilation and adaptation as key strategies to navigate work contexts often marked by resistance from colleagues and superiors; indeed, women, like their African-American colleagues, "who tried to demand fair treatment were ostracized".[22] Accordingly, Miller argues that the strategies that professional women in Alberta's oil industry deployed "to survive, and, up to a point, to thrive, are double-edged in that they also reinforced the masculine system, resulting in short-term individual gains and an apparently long-term failure to change the masculine values of the industry".[23] However, already in the early 20th century US oil industry, some women also formed networks and organisations for mutual support and to advance female employment. While studies like these are path-breaking, they remain rare. We still know little about the diverse roles and experiences, motivations, and strategies of women oil workers, especially outside North America and Western Europe.

The need for more research is urgent, also 10
because even after the profound social and legal changes since the 1960s and 1970s, and the heavily publicised corporate diversity and inclusion agendas since the 1990s,[24] women today remain concentrated in "jobs at the bottom of the pay scale",[25] with few female managers and executives.[26] Today, the "sparse body of literature on women's participation across the energy sector"[27] is conclusive that there is a long way to go toward equitable employment in

17 Lewis et al., *Women, Work and Family,* 1988, 2; Johnson, *Making the Invisible Visible*, 2005; McKee, *Women in American Energy*, 2014.
18 Austin, *Women's Work and Lives in Offshore Oil*, 2006, 177.
19 Ibid, 186-189.
20 Lewis et al., *Women, Work and Family,* 1988, 29.
21 Austin, *Women's Work and Lives in Offshore Oil*, 2006, 181.
22 Ibid, 189; Lewis et al., *Women, Work and Family,*1988.
23 Miller, *Frontier Masculinity in the Oil Industry,* 2004, 47.
24 For Shell, see Sarah Kunz, *Expatriate: following a migration category* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023); for BP, see McKee, *Women in American Energy,* 2014.
25 McKee, *Women in American Energy,* 2014, 171.
26 Miller, 2004, 48-49, even reports a reduction of women in such roles during the 1990s industry downturn.
27 Sarah Ryan, "Rethinking Gender and Identity in Energy Studies", *Energy Research & Social Science*, vol. 1, 2014, 102.

the oil industry, in terms of number of women employed, the roles available to them, their inequitable remuneration, their severe underrepresentation in managerial and executive roles, and the extent to which their work is valued and their ideas implemented.[28] It thus remains vital to examine how some women managed to break the "gas ceiling",[29] what happened during the pivotal decades of the 1960s and 70s, how corporate management dealt with increasing social and political pressure to employ and promote women, but also how (oil) corporations have proved by and large resistant to change.

11 This section addresses some of these questions with a focus on the work of Maria Christina (M.C.) Endert-Baylé with *Royal Dutch Shell* in the Netherlands in the 1970s. The sources used stem mostly from the personal archive of Shell technical engineer, Jasna Esser-Bronic, held by the Dutch Institute on *Gender Equality and Women's History* (ATRIA). Initiatives to increase women graduate employment at Shell headquarters in London and The Hague began very tentatively in the 1960s and intensified in the 1970s. These first efforts to increase the number of women in senior roles were fragmented and hesitant. In the 1960s, Shell employed only a handful of women in senior positions in its British and Dutch headquarters and until 1963, Shell officially stipulated that women had to leave the company upon marriage.[30] Even after 1963, most women "resigned voluntarily at marriage as a result of prevailing tradition" and although this had begun to change, by 1972, Shell still did not recruit women "for jobs that were starting-points for careers leading to managerial positions".[31] In the UK, two women officers were appointed in the 1960s to improve the position of women in the London central offices. These efforts produced "some results" with a few women having reached "high positions" in Personnel and Finance so that when the second woman officer left Shell,

> "the prevailing opinion in London was that appointment of a third functionary of this kind was not necessary anymore. A breakthrough had been made and further progress was expected to continue".[32]

12 In 1971, Shell Netherlands, too, decided to create a "'focal point' for promotion of women in Shell in the Netherlands", and in 1972 hired M.C. Endert-Baylé for this role.[33] Endert Baylé, born 1922, had previously been a Rotterdam city councillor for the conservative-liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). Endert-Baylé's initial contract was only for one year, "a very cautious start" which she attributes to the bad economic situation and a lot of expected resistance from within the organisation.[34] Eventually, she worked for Shell until she retired in 1981, to monitor women graduates' experiences and produce associated research and recommendations.[35]

13 In 1971, Shell Netherlands employed 15 female university graduates, who constituted less than 1% of graduate employees; in total, 27 women graduates had worked at Shell Netherlands

28 Austin, *Women's Work and Lives in Offshore Oil*, 2006; Annika Carlsson-Kanyama et al., "Unequal Representation of Women and Men in Energy Company Boards and Management Groups: Are There Implications for Mitigation?" *Energy Policy*, vol. 38/8, 2010, 4737–40; Lene Foss et al.,, "Creativity and Implementations of New Ideas: Do Organisational Structure, Work Environment and Gender Matter?", *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, vol. 5/3, 2013, 298–322; Ryan, *Rethinking Gender and Identity in Energy Studies*, 2014; McKee, *Women in American Energy,* 2014; Anfinsen and Heidenreich, *Rethinking Gender and Identity in Energy Studies,* 2017.

29 Ponton, *Breaking the Gas Ceiling,* 2019.

30 M.C. Endert-Baylé, *Improving career possibilities for women in Shell in the Netherlands*, 1978; Archief Jasna Esser-Bronic 1975-1993, Collection ID IIAV00000276; ATRIA, Amsterdam. In the Netherlands, married women were barred from working in the civil service until 1957. This 'marriage bar' "spilled over" into other sectors, with many private employers contractually requiring women to stop working when getting married. In the UK, sector-specific marriage bars were gradually abolished from the 1940s onwards, and declared illegal in 1975; See Irene Mosca, Robert Wright, *Economics of Marriage Bars*, GLO Discussion Paper No. 933, (Essen: Global Labor Organization, 2001).

31 M.C. Endert-Baylé, *Improving career possibilities*, 1978, 5.

32 Ibid, 4.

33 Ibid, 5.

34 Endert-Baylé, WOTW article, 5.

35 Article titled *Vrouwen zullen moeten vechten voor een stukje van de koek*, Opzijj,1989, ID 201467, ATRIA

before then.[36] In 1972, when Endert-Baylé started her work, 70% of female staff were younger than 25 years and women constituted roughly 12% of Shell employees in the Netherlands but only 2.5% of the highest salary groups (where women were also concentrated in the lower salary bands).[37] Endert-Baylé found this situation comparable to other Dutch industrial companies, and credited Shell with being among the first Dutch firms to show interest in changing the status quo. At the time, she wrote, there was no anti-discrimination legislation in the Netherlands and UK and,

> "no pressure of any importance was exerted by women's groups either. The full impetus of the women's Liberation movement in the U.S. had not yet been reached and what was going on in this field did not become known in Europe until 1974".[38]

14 Shell was likely 'ahead' due to its international business, aware of developments in the USA, where equal employment legislation and affirmative action programmes were forcing companies to hire and promote more women and ethnic minorities,[39] and thus expecting increasing pressure also in Europe "to employ more women in better jobs".[40]

15 During her 9-year tenure at Shell, Endert-Baylé reported, she experienced little outright resistance to her work but "astonishment" and "scepticism" among both women and men.[41] The three main objections against women in higher positions were, "Women are going to marry and leave the company", "Women with the right qualifications are not available" and "Women are not mobile. They cannot be sent overseas".[42] The first two objections were common at the time. The expectation that married women would leave meant that even when 'available', "high-calibre women" were not given "equal opportunities... either in recruiting or promotion".[43] Counter to such stereotypes, Endert-Baylé observed that although the number of women graduates was too small to allow generalisation, the percentage of women graduates reaching "natural terminations" equalled that of men.[44]

Like other firms, Shell Netherlands more readily accepted women in 'pink collar' professional functions. Endert-Baylé herself arguably resorted to gender stereotypes that placed women in support and service roles, when she observed that "women are consumer-oriented" and, consequently, "marketing research, merchandising, selling of domestic heating oil and debt collection are considered as functions that might be done better by women than by men".[45] Women found it harder to break into manufacture, exploration and production. Resistance within Shell was compounded by Dutch law at the time that prohibited women to work on oil production sites, with the 'Inspector of the Mines' authorised to grant dispensations "only for work in the kitchen, for cleaning, for office work in a laboratory";[46] in short, only for socially accepted 'women's work'. The law also required separate toilet facilities and while the law was about to be changed, the inspector "made it clear that no exemption could be tolerated of the condition that separate toilet facilities be available". As Endert-Baylé humorously noted,

> This did not sound new to me at all. In the past many achievements of women have been accompanied by much fuss about separate toilet facilities not being available. The problem has arisen for example ... when the first women entered the House of Lords in Britain [in 1958]. This last event has even become the subject

36 M.C. Endert-Baylé, *Career possibilities for women in Shell in the Netherlands, The Hague,* October 1973, Archief Esser-Bronic, ATRIA.
37 Ibid, 4.
38 M.C. Endert-Baylé, no date, article in 'WOTW'; in Archief Netwerk Shell Partners 1992-1998, Collection ID IIAV00000724 30/4/6; Archief Netwerk Shell Partners, ATRIA.
39 No author, Report *Position of women in Shell Canada*, 1977, 8, Archief Esser-Bronic ATRIA
40 Endert-Baylé, *Career possibilities,* 1973, 1.
41 Endert-Baylé, WOTW article, 5.
42 Id.
43 Endert-Baylé, *Career possibilities,* 1973, 1.
44 Ibid, 2.
45 Ibid, 2.
46 Endert-Baylé, *Improving career possibilities,* 1978, 10.

> of a popular song at that time, with the witty refrain: 'But there is no Ladies in the Lords'.[47]

17 She went on to recount her first visit to a refinery, where employing women was considered impossible for that very reason, yet, when a few years later it was "considered useful" to employ a female corrosion specialist, "a toilet and a shower were cleaned for her, and she got the keys".[48] Indeed, the absence of separate toilet facilities was – supposedly – such a significant hurdle to women's graduate employment in technical and operational professions in the 1970s Dutch oil industry that the topic takes up the better part of a page in Endert-Baylé's 17-page report. That patriarchal gender norms often underwrite supposedly practical barriers to women's equitable employment was already concluded by Lewis et al. over thirty years ago:

> "beneath the querulous wailing about accommodation that some use as an excuse not to hire women lies a more profound disquiet over the confusion of 'home' and 'work'. The intensity of opposition indicates a deeper than rational desire to keep the spheres separate".[49]

18 This should at the very least make us suspicious of today's claims that it is the built environment of oil production, specifically the lack of separate living quarters, that primarily stands in the way of women's equitable employment.[50]

19 The third and possibly most significant hurdle to women's movement into senior roles within Shell was that women were 'not mobile'. An imperial company in origin and design, Shell relied on a group of mobile elite employees to manage its business and,

> "'experience overseas' is generally looked upon as a necessary phase for a career in all Functions... [and because] the prevailing tradition still is that married women follow their husbands – and not the reverse – the emphasis on 'experience overseas' constitutes a serious handicap for married women who want to make a career in Shell".[51]

Especially in Exploration and Production, working overseas in often remote areas was "a must" but operational jobs "are generally considered not to be suitable for a woman" and even legally prohibited for women in some countries.[52] Yet, Endert-Baylé also astutely observed that "As many secretaries, nurses, female teachers and programmers served overseas, there is no reason why women graduates could not, except in very isolated locations".[53] Indeed, women had served overseas for decades – even in very isolated locations – as nurses, teachers, and wives. 20

The Expatriate Archive Centre in The Hague holds a life history interview with a British woman, Jane,[54] who recounts how she and her friend joined Shell as teachers in 1957 and were sent to Trinidad and Venezuela respectively.[55] Jane fondly remembers her travels, which proved rather comfortable: "we were all travelling first class...And we were really looked after. We had a lovely home. Very modern, beautiful club. And a lot of bachelors there (laughs)". While oil companies like Shell enforced and exported bourgeois European gender norms that domesticated and subordinated women, they also allowed (some) women a life of relative independence and adventure. Jane worked for Shell for a year, before marrying a 'Shell bachelor' and following her husband to Nigeria, now as a 'Shell wife'. Here, she recalls, "there were times when they needed a supply teacher. So I would do a few weeks here and there, but not as a permanent teacher anymore, just if someone was ill or something".[56] As a 'Shell wife', Janee became a source of flexible 21

47 Ibid, 10.
48 Ibid, 10.
49 Lewis et al., *Women, Work and Family,* 1988, 28.
50 McKee, *Women in American Energy,* 2014
51 Endert-Baylé, *Improving career possibilities,* 1978, 6; see also Sluyterman, *Royal Dutch Shell*, 2007, Kunz, *A Business Empire and Its Migrants*, 2020.
52 Ibid, 9.
53 Endert-Baylé, *Career possibilities,* 1973, 4.
54 Pseudonym.
55 'Life history interview about Shell career as single woman teacher', Shell Ladies' Project (SLP) collection, Nr 1.0076, held at *Expatriate Archive Centre*, The Hague, Netherlands (henceforth: EAC).
56 Ibid, 2.

reserve labour. For Shell, it seemed, the problem was not sending women overseas, but sending women overseas in positions of corporate responsibility and decision-making power.

22 Access to mobility and thereby to senior management roles remained uneven at Shell. In 1973, Shell's Committee of Managing Directors declared that "the way [for women] should be open to the very top-management levels in the Company."[57] Yet, Endert-Baylé reported that while all graduate starting positions were now "in principle open to women" this still excluded "jobs requiring work in remote areas, in primitive circumstances and on platforms at sea" because "It did not seem likely at that time that women would like to do things like that".[58] Still, women were not allowed to themselves decide what work they might like to do. In the 1970s, the number of women in middle and top management rose from 20 to 43, which still represented only 1.3% of the comparable number of men.[59] In 1988, female Shell employees considered for higher corporate functions were still 3-4 times more likely to resign than their male colleagues, and there were still "reservations on the mobility of women" at Shell.[60] An evaluation of Shell's International Staff recruitment programme found it to indirectly discriminate against women in 1991,[61] and an internal report noted that Shell's corporate culture was experienced as "unfriendly" for women in 1992.[62] In 2014, despite a diversity agenda now in place at Group level for almost two decades, 87% of traditional long-term assignments were still headed by male employees.[63]

Shell wives' lives on the move: the unpaid glue of corporate management

23 Diane Austin observes that 'oil wives' are the women in the oil industry most frequently studied. This includes both management wives living abroad, like Jane,[64] and working-class wives primarily studied in US 'boomtowns'.[65] 'Expatriate' wives have long formed an integral part of the 'company towns' that are a trademark feature of the oil industry, as much because oil production often took place in remote areas as because of the racism that shaped the industry.[66] As Valerie Johnson notes, British Petroleum first – very grudgingly – admitted management wives to company towns so that they could satisfy their husbands' sexual needs.[67] Wives of course assumed other roles, too, as emotional caretakers, cultural producers, community builders, and not least as symbolic embodiments of the corporation's virtue, civilization and power. At the same time wives remained an unknown factor: "There was the thorny issue of whether they were inside or outside the jurisdiction of the company: whose 'responsibility' exactly were they?"[68]

24 Most research focuses on oil wives' mutual support networks, their social activities, and their lived experience. Yet, more than that, wives' activities were *work* essential to the oil industry through materially and symbolically contributing to the social reproduction of the male worker, the company, and thereby the imperial and capitalist projects oil companies formed an integral part of. For example, Bass notes that the work of oil wives in the US, "although most times uncredited, ... was vital to the success of

57 Endert-Baylé, *Improving career possibilities,* 1978, 8.
58 Ibid, 8.
59 Ibid, 14.
60 '*Women in Industry',* Southbank Shell Magazine, Shell Centre London, Nr 165, 1988; Archief Esser ATRIA
61 Sluyterman 2007, 290.
62 Endert-Baylé, *Improving career possibilities,* 1978, 8.
63 Kunz, *Expatriate*, 2023

64 Tremayne, *Shell Wives in Limbo*, 1984; Johnson, *Making the Invisible Visible*, 2004; Santiago, *Women of the Mexican Oil Fields,* 2009; Tinker-Salas, *The Enduring Legacy,* 2009; Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 2009; Bini, *Building an Oil Empire*, 2018; Appel, *The Licit Life of Capitalism*, 2019; Kunz, *A Business Empire and its Migrants*, 2020.
65 Walsh and Simonelli, *Migrant Women in the Oil Field*, 1986; Dobler, *Oil Field Camp Wives and Mothers*, 1987; Gauthier et al., *Women's Employment and Structures of Familial Authority,* 1996; Schrag-James, *Offshore Employment as Lifestyle and Culture*, 2002; Austin, *Women's Work and Lives in Offshore Oil*, 2006, *Doubly Invisible*, 2018.
66 Johnson, *Making the Invisible Visible*, 2004; Tinker-Salas, The Enduring Legacy, 2009; Vitalis, America's Kingdom, 2009; Shafiee, *Machineries of Oil*, 2018.
67 Though as Valerie Johnson (2005) also points out, female nurses too were employed in Anglo-Persian Oil Company towns from the beginning.
68 Johnson, *Making the Invisible Visible*, 2004, 19; see also Tremayne, *Shell Wives in Limbo*, 1984.

the home business, with wives as partners in the economic success of the family".[69] Feminist historians have long critiqued the idea of *actually existing* 'separate spheres', documenting important "differences between prescription and description" and showing that the concept of separate spheres "functioned primarily to obscure, discipline, and marginalize" women's work.[70] Like here, feminist scholarship has explored the diverse ways in which unpaid work rendered by women in the household and community is essential to the renewal of the waged labourer, of the corporation and of capitalism.[71] Patriarchal and capitalist dynamics are closely interconnected, as social reproduction is necessary for capitalism but mostly not organised by its logic.

25 The positioning of women as not working became particularly important to the performance of European middle-class status. The availability of a wife who dedicated herself fully to her family and to advancing her husband's career was a "critical signifier" of bourgeois status, until at least the 1980s.[72] Dorothy Smith argues that in post-WW2 corporate capitalism, bourgeois power was enacted through the role of the corporate manager. The manager and 'his' family come to "stand in the service of the corporation", which "'sub-contracts' to the family the work which must be done to and for the members of the corporation to keep it going, but which is not provided for within the corporation itself".[73] Within this managerial middle-class family, the corporation relies on women as its "'executives,' analogous to their husbands' positions as manager", to execute "an order whose definition is not hers".[74] As such, corporate profit generation is a 'parasitic' activity in that it depends on underpaid or unpaid socially necessary labour largely taking place outside its supposed boundaries.[75]

Throughout the 20th century, Shell's managerial 26 elite, its International Staff, signed up on the condition to accept mobility at Shell's behest. Hired directly by headquarters, usually from British and Dutch universities, International Staff rotated through the global business according to their skill set and business needs and, over time, rose in central Group management.[76] As 'company men' they expected lifetime employment and in turn identified first and foremost with the corporation. They provided a flexible supply of skilled labour and were in the process moulded into well-socialised managers who co-ordinated, integrated, and controlled the corporation. Indeed, one explicit purpose of mobility was to produce managers unified by personal relationships and shared identity. Female managers would have upset the gendered order of things and, hence, Shell's system of corporate management. Yet, in their role as 'Shell wives', women were essential to the project.

From the early 20th century, Shell's migratory 27 corporate management was a hetero-normative family enterprise that depended on the set-up of the nuclear family and on wives' multifaceted informal labour.[77] 'Shell wives' – which according to Tremayne included the wives "of Shell men *of managerial rank* who are *sent to work abroad*"[78] – were expected to follow their husbands even to remote locations.[79] These women were at the heart of the corporate organism, contributing to the central task of Group control and coordination. As one woman put it, "Employment with Shell, and particularly in an expatriate situation, is a whole family affair".[80] The conflation of the familial and corporate is reflected in the notion of the 'Shell family', a usefully ambiguous concept that denoted both Shell's cadre of elite migrants and the nuclear migrant family, and

69 Bass, *That These Few Girls Stand Together*, 2020, 3.
70 Harrison Moore and Sandwell, *In a New Light,* 2021, 18, 35.
71 Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory,* 2017.
72 Callan and Ardener, *The Incorporated Wife,* 1984.
73 Smith, *Women, The Family and Corporate Capitalism*, 1975, 74.
74 Ibid, 80.
75 Ibid; Enstad, *Cigarettes Inc*, 2018.
76 Kunz, *A Business Empire and its migrants*, 2020; van Overstraten Kruysse, *Graduate Manpower Requirements,* 1985.
77 Being accompanied by a wife and marriage itself were privileges granted strictly by seniority. Still in the late 1950s, Shell men were not supposed to get married during their first posting.
78 Tremayne, *Shell wives in limbo*, 1984, 120.
79 Life history interview, Nr 1.0047, SLP, EAC.
80 'The Shell wife I have been', Nr 1.0091, SLP, EAC.

sometimes even all Shell staff. As Jane recalls, in 1957, "I applied to Shell, to join the Shell family. We called it a family. And it was in those days. We were very loyal to the company... We were looked after, wherever we went....".[81] The idea of a 'Shell family' was still promoted by the company in the early 1990s, when one high-ranking Shell manager declared,

> The other important ingredient in our common culture is the people who work for the Group. They provide the corporate glue which in our decentralized organization are our greatest asset. At any one time, nearly 5,000 of our 135,000 employees are international staff, representing 70 different nationalities... Once again, the metaphor of the family comes to mind. Shared experience, common ideals and objectives, provide a more subtle appreciation of the overall company approach than can be provided by a stream of central instructions.[82]

28 One key task of the 'Shell wife' was to hold together this family, in its dual sense.

29 Shell's upper-echelon staff and their spouses constituted a de-territorialised 'closed community' defined by strict social roles.[83] The on-demand-mobility, sense of community and performative lifestyles that Shell relied on for its model of corporate control required women's social, emotional, and organisational labour. Though unpaid, wives stood in Shell's service as fully as their husbands. Within their nuclear family, Shell wives maintained a comfortable home through 'a life on the move', kept children well-adapted, provided emotional support to their husbands when needed, and retreated into the background when not. At community level, they built and maintained the network of elite employees whose shared socialisation and mutual recognition were central to Shell's system of management: they welcomed and integrated newcomers, socialised 'new' Shell wives, and fashioned community among employees through their social and cultural activities. Such activities were modulated according to husbands' level of seniority and location of service. Managers' wives especially were expected to entertain colleagues and visiting dignitaries, which was "very much" a job, as former Shell wife Edith recalls: "I was quite glad not to have to do any of that entertainment when I came back to England".[84]

30 Women were acutely aware of their role and responsibilities and becoming a 'Shell wife' was by no means automatic nor easy, as Tremayne examines in her part-autobiographical analysis.[85] One woman, whose story is featured in the Shell Ladies' Project recalls the initial years, when she "often felt really stupid"; another one similarly remembers becoming a Shell wife in 1960:

> Yesterday still teaching, now the 'wife of...'... the change was difficult for me. Nothing was expected from me any longer, except supporting my husband. For the rest I had to content myself with coffee mornings, bridge, swimming, parties. When you dared to stand up for yourself, you became an outsider.[86]

31 The institution of the Shell family – situated at the core of one of the most powerful corporations of the 20th century – thus collapsed the private/public, work/home, corporation/family binaries on which capitalism ideologically depends. This speaks to the work of business historians like Nan Enstad, who rethink the boundaries and membership of the corporation itself.[87] Shell wives' reveal the household, cocktail parties and coffee mornings to be important domains of corporate activity. Not only have women's contributions been "hidden

81 Life history interview, Nr 1.0076, 1,7, SLP, EAC.
82 K.A.V. Mackrell, Royal Dutch Regional Coordinator-East and Australasia, 1990, cited in Cibin and Grant, *Restructuring Among the World's Leading Oil Companies*, 1996, 303.
83 Gordon, *The Shell Ladies Project*, 2008; Tremayne, *Shell wives in limbo,* 1984; Hindman, *Mediating the Global,* 2013; Kunz, *A Business Empire and its migrants*, 2020, *Expatriate*, 2023.
84 Life history interview, Nr 1.0047, SLP, EAC.
85 Tremayne, *Shell wives in limbo*, 1984, 120.
86 SLP, *Life on the Move*, 1993:129,121.
87 Enstad, *Cigarettes Inc*, 2008, 2019.

in the household",[88] but the household's central place in the corporation has been hidden, too.[89]

32 Volunteering and charitable pursuits play a big role in the stories collated by the Shell Ladies Project.[90] Not all women were happy to forego own careers, and many gained a sense of purpose and fulfilment by dedicating themselves to charitable causes. Yet, voluntary activities also had a symbolic function. Inasmuch as wives represented the corporation, their activities became politicised,[91] and especially given the widespread challenges to multinational corporate activities in the 1960s and 70s, wives' volunteering likely became a welcome addition to the corporate toolkit of socio-political soft power and appeasement. As such, wives' voluntary work might be viewed as an informal, and unpaid form of corporate social responsibility. In this way, as in others, the role of the executive oil wife had close parallels with role of the wife of the imperial and colonial administrator.[92]

33 In the Shell Ladies' project, many women expressed enjoyment of the exciting and often luxurious life that being a Shell wife afforded them. Yet, Shell wives also spoke of the challenges: loneliness, loss of agency, fear of failure, fatigue, stress, anger. Such emotions had to be 'managed (away)' in the service of the corporate family. Women are typically assigned moral responsibility for the physical and emotional functioning of their family,[93] and if the Shell worker or children did not adjust and perform, when careers floundered or children acted up, women were often assigned disproportionate blame. Some women felt unappreciated. In an account titled 'Shell wife fights back', one woman declares,

> So they imagine you're filling in your time nicely, being a Shell wife? It is an attitude you meet surprisingly often.... That 'filling-in' is your life and is definitely worth more respect. The term 'Shell wife' may conjure up that horrific image of the cliché expat female with antennae crackling to pick up the tiniest hint of gossip to be embroidered and passed on; eyeing the coffee morning crowd for someone more important than you to talk to in order to advance her husband's career!... heaven knows, she is definitely not filling in time; this lady is working 24 hours a day promoting or trying to get promotion for her spouse, however unlikely that may be!.[94]

34 Already in the 1970s, Shell's migratory management model was impacted by changing gender relations in Europe. One woman writes

> I had clearly missed the revolution which had taken place in Dutch society during the sixties and seventies...A Shell friend told me that at a dinner party on leave she shook hands with a girl and pleasantly asked her 'What does your husband do?' 'Why don't you ask what I do?' was her snappish reply. My friend felt utterly stupid and longed for the safety of their home abroad.[95]

35 Also Endert-Baylé noted that some Shell men were becoming 'immobilised' by their wives:

> An interesting new phenomenon is that many male applicants are stating nowadays that they do not want to be sent overseas, as their wives are working and do not want to quit their jobs. When an applicant does not bring up the subject himself, recruiters ask what the wife's opinion is about being sent overseas. When she is not positive the candidate is not hired.[96]

36 While Shell could still 'exclude' these social developments in the 1970s, they eventually caught up with the corporation in the 1990s and led to "a fundamental review of expatriation within Shell".[97] Yet, if Shell began to explicitly

88 Harrison Moore and Sandwell, *In a New Light*, 2021, 36.
89 Appel, *Licit life of capitalism*, 2019; Kunz, *A Business Empire and its migrants,* 2020.
90 SLP, *Life on the move*, 1993, *Life now*, 1996.
91 Tremayne, *Shell wives in limbo*, 1984.
92 See also Johnson, *Making the Invisible Visible*, 2005; Tinker-Salas, *The Enduring Legacy,* 2009.
93 Smith, *Women, The Family and Corporate Capitalism*, 1975; Tremayne, *Shell wives in limbo,* 1984.
94 SLP, *Life on the move*, 1993, 151.
95 SLP, *Life on the move*, 1993, 120.
96 Endert-Baylé, *Improving career possibilities*, 1978, 7.
97 Outlook 1994, 5.

recognise spouses as individuals with agency in the 1990s, it did so only when forced by societal changes that destabilised its model of corporate control and coordination.[98]

'Local' labour: women in the majority world

37 Recent oil labour histories have begun to pay attention to how labour and management were differentiated and stratified along racialised and national lines.[99] Yet, research on women in the oil and gas industry to date has focused largely on white women hailing from North America and Western Europe. Indeed, intersecting racialised, national and gendered discrimination has been constitutive of Euro-American oil industries and has meant that non-white women faced even greater barriers to (good) employment.[100] Yet, both within and outside the Euro-American 'home countries' of the oil majors, women of all backgrounds always lived and worked within the realm of the oil industry, for example, in the "free zones" adjacent to the refinery of the Anglo Persian Oil Company, in Caribbean oil towns, or in Mexico's early foreign-owned industry.[101] Myrna Santiago notes that Mexican oil camps "were full of women", including indigenous women, hacendadas of Spanish heritage or rural Mexican migrants, some of these women belonged to the Mexican elite, others were poor; and while they were rarely workers in the formal economy, they "performed all sorts of labor as well: domestic, informal sector, entertainment and sex work, as well as political, cultural, and ideological work".[102] Women's work, Santiago writes,

> was crucial for the success of the entire enterprise of oil extraction, the worldwide shift to a new source of energy, and the global capitalist economy. Women were also critical for the reproduction of ideologies and culture both in Mexico and abroad, sustaining patriarchal and class structures and identities across international boundaries.[103]

38 Women who worked directly or indirectly for the oil corporation never made up a homogeneous or unified group in terms of their labour, experiences, and self-identification. As Santiago further highlights, the shared category 'woman' "did not imply a unitary worldview or experience" and while Euro-American corporate wives "reaped material compensation, if not personal satisfaction, ...few Mexicans found monetary rewards and most suffered great losses".[104] While work in the oil industry was gendered within patriarchal and hetero-normative frameworks, it was further differentiated by class, nationality, and racialisation. In this context, also women's work as feminist, anti-colonial, anti-racist, and environmental activists, sometimes performed in explicit opposition to corporate activities, should be considered as part of the history of the oil industry, not least because it shaped gendered oil labour systems and life worlds.

39 Intersecting inequalities shaped women's corporate positioning, influence, and their often-ambivalent relationship with the corporation. Importantly, their social positioning continues to shape their relative (in)visibility in historical accounts and their presence and representation in oil archives. This last section examines the presence of 'local' women workers in Endert-Baylé's work for Shell and the Shell Ladies' Project (SLP) anthologies. Doing so, the paper reflects on the politics and limits of its archival sources, and calls for expanding the archival field and methodologies. At Shell headquarters, Endert-Baylé's brief was critiqued by some: "In the beginning there has been much criticism of the fact that my mandate has been limited

98 Kunz, *A Business Empire and its migrants*, 2020, *Expatriate*, 2023.
99 Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 2009; Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 2011; Shafiee, *Oil Machineries*, 2018; Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 2019; Kunz, *A Business Empire and its migrants*, 2020.
100 Lewis et al., *Women, Work and Family*, 1988, Miller, *Frontier Masculinity in the Oil Industry*, 2004, Austin, *Women's Work and Lives in Offshore Oil Industry,* 2006, Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 2009, Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 2019; Bass, *That These Few Girls Stand Together*, 2020.
101 Ehsani, Social Engineering, 2003, 393; Katayoun Shafiee, Machineries of Oil: An infrastructural history of BP in Iran (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018); Santiago, *Women of the Mexican Oil Fields*, 2009; Chelsea Schields, *Offshore Attachments: Oil and Intimacy in the Caribbean*, 2023.
102 Santiago, *Women of the Mexican Oil Fields,* 2009, 87.
103 Ibid, 88.
104 Ibid, 88.

to looking after the high-potential employees (mainly graduates). This was considered to be a policy in favour of a small 'elite group' only".[105] While the recruitment and retention of women in higher functions became the subject of corporate research and activity, the vast majority of women – like the majority of men – worked in lower-echelon functions, and in many cases far removed from the corporate headquarters were Endert-Baylé carried out her task. In my research, I did not find accounts of attempts at Shell headquarters at the time to consider and potentially improve the working conditions of non-graduate women, beside an observation by Endert-Baylé that "My female colleague, who is paying special attention to the careers of women in the lower Job Groups in The Hague, tells me that the motivation of women in those groups is generally speaking still unsatisfactorily, but has improved definitely over the last five years".[106] The reports of this colleague, if there were such reports, are not included with Endert-Baylé's sources.[107]

40 Outside Euro-America, especially pre-Regionalisation but also after the 1950s, 'local', 'national' or 'regional' staff were frequently positioned apart and below Euro-American international staff.[108] Not all workers employed on 'local' terms were necessarily local to their place of work. Local, like 'native' before it, rather denoted a racialised and classed category of labour.[109] Similarly, as Tremayne notes, the social category 'Shell wife' did not include all wives of Shell workers. Within company towns, for example, the wives of 'local staff' had a different relationship to the corporation. Still in the early 1990s, a Shell handbook for 'expatriate' staff posted to Nigeria specified that "most Nigerian Shell employees have working wives. They are not likely to drop in to greet newcomers. They probably leave the house long before you awake, and return after you have left the office".[110] In contrast to international staff, the salary of a Nigerian Shell employee was not necessarily sufficient to sustain a family and a non-working wife. Yet, while she is materially and symbolically excluded from the category Shell wife, the behaviour and responsibilities of the wife of a Nigerian employee are nevertheless articulated and assessed in relation to that of the 'Shell wife'. As Smith critiques, rather than a universal form, the Euro-American middle-class family is a "specific response to the organization of the political economy under capitalism".[111] Yet, implicitly or explicitly, oil corporations like Shell exported European bourgeois family models as norm and normative – while also reproducing the material inequalities that made their fulfilment difficult if not impossible for 'local' staff'.

41 Another category of 'local' worker that is constitutive of many SLP stories, yet not formally employed by the corporation, is domestic staff employed in Shell expatriate households. Bhattacharyya argues that to locate "the hidden, dirty, and endlessly essential work of replenishing bodies and lives...only in the home and in the battle between the sexes serves to occlude the complex structures that have enabled the global reproduction of capital".[112] Within racial capitalism, she notes, the demarcation between work and lesser or non-work is not only gendered but also racialised, and the exploitation of women, nature and the colonies structurally connected. If the 'Shell family' was a flexible concept, it was rarely taken to include those who daily served and sustained all versions of this 'family': the domestic and service workers tending to Shell households and their communities. Jane recounts living in Trinidad as a Shell teacher in 1957, where she had "A lady to clean. A lady to the washing and ironing. A lady to do the cooking, of course, which was very, very special". In 1964, she and her husband moved to Ankara and,

105 Endert-Baylé, *Improving career possibilities*, 1978, 11.
106 Ibid, 12.
107 But see report *Position of women in Shell Canada*, 1977, Archief Esser-Bronic ATRIA.
108 Kunz, *A Business Empire and its migrants*, 2020, Sluyterman 2007; van Overstraten Kruysse 1985.
109 Tinker-Salas, *Enduring Legacy*, 2009; Vitalis, *America's Kingdom,* 2009; Menon, *Narrating Brunei*, 2016; Shafiee, *Oil Machineries*, 2018; Kunz, *A Business Empire and its migrants*, 2020.
110 Memoir, Nr 1.0018, 125, SLP, EAC.
111 Smith, *Women, The Family and Corporate Capitalism*, 1975, 59.
112 Bhattacharyya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 2018, 41.

> "Out of the Shell camp for the first time, which you do notice in the beginning that you've got to do everything yourself. You don't ring up camp services if your chair's broken. You have to attend to it (laughter), whereas we've been rather spoiled...".

42 When eventually they moved to The Hague, Jane found adjusting difficult: "Well, it was a shock, put it mildly (laughed). I used to say to my husband, 'Where's the maid? Where are the maids?'". As she explains, they 'only' had a cleaning lady and Jane did not like it, "I went to Trinidad as a single person to avoid all this cooking and shopping".[113]

43 Domestic servants feature many accounts of Shell life abroad. Women – and to a lesser extent men – describe their varying experiences with domestic employees in accounts that range from the thankful and tender to the patronising and disdainful. Domestic servants provided physical but also social and emotional labour to Shell men, women and children. They could act as cultural translators and guides and proved important in constructions of Shell identities: many Shell wives narrate having to get used to having servants on their first posting as part of the social transformation and elevation that becoming a Shell wife implied. A Dutch Shell wife recounts life in Brunei in 1982:

> As usual I am in a hurry. Fortunately Nuripah, our amah, knows perfectly what her duties are: with family guests her workload, like mine, is heavier. Early this morning we had discussed the programme of another busy day. I don't have to worry about my household when I put four-year-old "master" in his chair on the back of my bike....[114]

44 In another story about a farewell party for a retiring Shell wife in 1992 Brunei, the narrator suggests how it is not the group of "loudly chattering" bridge ladies, who evidently could not care less, but her "softly crying amah" who seems most upset about the imminent departure of the retiring woman.[115] Yet, if this amah cares for the woman, or is simply upset about losing her employment, we do not know. Similarly, my mental image of Nuripah secretly rolling her eyes at little "master" and his mother is my own projection. The thoughts, feelings and experiences of domestic employees like these two women have gone mostly unrecorded. What remains is their silent presence in photographs, anecdotes and memoirs.

45 This is not to suggest that domestic staff were victims or without agency, even given the vastly uneven power relations structuring the oil industry. Domestic workers, both women and men, like their employers, navigated the opportunities for work and social mobility that the oil industry provided within deeply unequal gendered, classed and racialised parameters. Given the power of the corporation, working for Shell families could – relatively speaking – imply social status and material gain. This is suggested at least by one account of a steward working for a Shell family in 1960s Nigeria, whose well-to-do family background is suggested by the fact that she had a brother who was head of Nigerian customs, another who was head of the Lagos police, and a third who studied medicine in Russia. Her position of relative privilege is further revealed by her attempts to pressure her employer's "house boy" into doing additional unpaid work for her, including ironing her clothes.[116] However, also this steward's story, as we know it, needs to be treated with caution. It is recorded only in a handful of letters she sent to her employer and the employer's annotations of these letters. Hers is thus not an unmediated account told on her own terms. The few fragments we have about her life further confirm that intersecting racialised, classed, and gendered inequalities continue to shape our archives today.

46 As Bass reflects on her research, "the segre-

113 Ibid.
114 SLP, *Life on the move*, 1993, 88.
115 Ibid, 124.
116 'Correspondence from Nigerian house staff', Nr 1.0049.1.1.01.7, SLP, EAC.

industry in the first half of the twentieth century ... excluded Black women and other women of colour from official and unofficial networks that will be described in this work".[117] Exclusion from networks and clubs back then means exclusion from archives and research now. Relatively privileged women were most likely to have had their experiences and voices recorded in archives; or to have had the resources to record their own stories like in the Shell Ladies' Project.

CONCLUSION

47 Work in the oil and gas industry has been, and arguably continues to be, profoundly gendered. Further research needs to examine the mechanisms by which women were excluded generally and from higher-echelon roles in particular, the paid and unpaid work women did render and the ways in which their work was systematically invisibilised and devalued. We also need to better understand the structural similarities and differences in the labour arrangements of different oil corporations, sub-contractors and support industries, over time and across imperial, regional and national contexts. Moreover, 'women' never constituted a homogeneous or unified category or workforce. Gender has been a powerful tool for moulding and disciplining oil workers and enacting structural inequalities, but gender has always been co-constituted with inequalities of class, nationality, and racialisation in ways that demand further attention. Locating and exploring women's multifaceted work in the oil and gas industry also implies critically rethinking the boundaries and political functions of concepts like 'work' and the 'corporation'.[118] Finally, this work requires a sustained engagement with fields such as feminist political economy, social and cultural business history, and post- and decolonial critiques of historical knowledge production, in order to bring histories of oil production into dialogue with histories of gender and race, and their constitutive social institutions like marriage and mobility.

48 The paper also asks what histories we can tell and what experiences account for, given the intersecting inequalities structuring not only labour but also the archive of the oil industry. When researching the historical role of women in the oil and gas industry, keeping in mind Michel-Rolph Trouillot's 'four silences' seems crucial:

> Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance). ... [these moments] help us understand why not all silences are equal and why they cannot be addressed—or redressed—in the same manner. To put it differently, any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly. [119]

49 To focus on the third silence, the uneven (un) availability of sources fundamentally shapes oil analyses and recovering the gendered history of oil centrally requires opening up corporate archives. This paper has been able to glean snippets of women's multifaceted work for Shell because women like Esser-Bronic and the Shell Ladies Project organisers recognised that their personal experiences have broader relevance, and ensured they were available via publicly accessible archives – rather than disappearing in privatised corporate archives.[120] Their archives allow us to problematise not only received accounts of the oil industry, but also the privatisation of historical documents. The preservation and publication of documents of government policy making are rightly recognised as central to democracy. Corporate policymaking, too, is of such public interest. This is the case especially for oil corporations who have been

117 Bass, *That These Few Girls Stand Together*, 2020, 18.
118 Enstad, *The "Sonorous Summons"*, 2019, 93. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 2001.
119 Trouillot, *Silencing the past*, 1995, 26.
120 See also Bass, *That these few girls stand together*, 2020, 14, for US industry pioneers, who made a concerted effort to preserve and make publicly available the archive of women in the US oil and gas industry.

among the most powerful economic and geopolitical actors of the 20th century, more so than many governments. These corporations powerfully shaped gender relations and the (working) lives of women and men worldwide. Oil and gas corporations also handled some of the most consequential natural resources, the commodification of which is itself a contested historical process rather than a natural development, and which demands rethinking in the face of anthropogenic climate change. A feminist approach to energy history must thus include a call to make publicly available corporate archives.

50 However, beyond opening up corporate archives, we need methodological interdisciplinarity and pluralism to uncover the experiences, agencies, and contributions of a more diverse – and representative – cast of oil workers. The oil industry was and remains bound up with imperial and colonial projects, is deeply gendered and racialised. These power relation structure the production and assembly of corporate sources and complicate analyses that rely solely on them: "documents preserved in the archive emerged from the very social relations under investigation and cannot stand apart from, be an impartial witness to, or adjudicate the facts of their own emergence".[121] Especially the activities, experiences and achievements of marginalised, oppressed and exploited workers thus remain obscured and misrepresented also due to "the reticence of many scholars to accept forms of evidence other than 'script penned on paper'".[122] Indicatively, like this paper, much existing research on women's work in the oil and gas industry has relied on oral history and non-corporate archives.[123] Going forward, such research should innovate even more boldly and can find inspiration by engaging pluralistic critical approaches, from the Subaltern Studies Collective, to women's studies and the Black radical tradition that read the archive 'against the grain', draw on "nontraditional evidentiary sources" ranging from court records and wills to art and folklore,[124] and work toward archival reconstruction and reorientation. This 'methodological plurality' should serve as an inspiration for a feminist history of energy. Recovering the history of women's work in the oil and gas industry is not only a task of revisiting the archive but also one of actively building it.

121 Sluyter 2012, cited in Watkins and Carney, *Amplifying the Archive*, 2022, 10.

122 Hawthorne 2010, cited in Ibid, 10.

123 Austin, *Women's Work and Lives in Offshore Oil*, 2006, Bass, "*That these few girls stand together*", 2020, Ponton, *Breaking the Gas Ceiling,* 2019, Williams, *Wildcat Women,* 2020.

124 Watkins and Carney, *Amplifying the Archive*, 2022,10; Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*, 2008.

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