Research Question:

To what extent did the industrial revolution lead to the breakdown of the family economy and the beginning of gender roles in northwest Europe?
Abstract

The industrial revolution drastically changed the family economy and the way the family functioned because work was moved out of the household into factories, with the wage economy replacing the family economy. In addition, it changed the typical gender roles in the household with the amount of time parents spent with their children, and it turned the family into the basic unit of consumption, instead of both production and consumption. The introduction of the machine into factories led to the Proletarianization of factory workers and the gradual loss of skills. Male workers became the breadwinners in the middle class with women seen as the leaders in the home as the mother, wife, and household runners. The children’s was more disconnected as they began to work in factories, spending much of their time during the day away from their parents in factories or schools. Because work was moved out of the household, the means of production was taken away from the family unit.

Outline
Research Question: To what extent did the industrial revolution lead to the breakdown of the family economy in northwest Europe?

I. Introduction

Thesis Statement: The industrial revolution drastically changed the family economy and the way the family functioned because work was moved out of the household into factories, with the wage economy replacing the family economy. In addition, it changed the typical gender roles in the household with the amount of time parents spent with their children, and it turned the family into the basic unit of consumption, instead of both production and consumption.

II. Transition to the Wage Economy
   A. Impact of Machine
   B. Proletarianization
   C. Loss of Skills

III. Women and Gender Roles
   A. Early Life to Marriage
   B. Factory Work
   C. Life After Marriage/ Relationship to Children

IV. Men and Children
   A. Men as wage-earners
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Introduction

The idea and organization of the family has changed significantly during two different revolutions in the history of man. The first was the Agricultural Revolution, during which the beginning of planting and harvesting lead to the idea of staying in one area instead of being nomadic. The second revolution was the Industrial Revolution, which was the implementation of the factory and factory labor. This led to the wage economy and the division of work and home, drastically changing the way work was divided among the family.

In the centuries before the industrial revolution happened, in northwest Europe, the family economy dominated with the family was both the basic unit of production and consumption. According to David Kertzer, the family economy consisted of the household as “the principal means of organizing production,” and could be in the form of “farms, artisanal shops, or other enterprises.”\(^1\) The economy was largely agricultural with both men and women working in the fields. Consumer goods were largely produced by skilled artisans living in cities. The classes in society were generally a lower class and an upper class with no significant middle. However, after the industrial revolution a middle class was formed changing society in major ways. The purpose of this essay is to explain the extent that the industrial revolution led to the breakdown of the family economy, which had dominated northwest Europe for centuries and the beginning of gender roles.

The industrial revolution drastically changed the family economy and the way the family functioned because work was moved out of the household into factories, with the wage economy replacing the family economy. In addition, it changed the typical gender roles in the household.

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I. The Transition to the Wage Economy

The Loss of Skills and the Impact of Machines

Lenard R. Berlanstein suggests that during the industrial revolution and the onset of capitalism, the amount of skills produced for workers, greatly outweighs the skills lost\(^2\), but such was not really the case. While some new skills were gained from new technologies, many of the specialized artisanal skills were lost to the power of the machine in factory. The once complex jobs, which required many skills, were broken up into smaller tasks that most often required very little skill. *Family Life In the Long Nineteenth Century 1789-1913*, edited by David Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli, emphasizes that the “onset of capitalism necessitated low wages and an unskilled workforce\(^3\)” which lead to the mass migration into cities. With this change of family to migration to cities, a housing crisis ensued, which in turn lead to many working class families living two or three families, with boarders, to a house, drastically changing the simpler families in rural areas, as Wally Seccombe contends in *Weathering the Storm*\(^4\).

Even so, the impact of machines such as the steam engine, mechanization of textile and garment work and increased iron production, lead to more consistent and standardized goods. This made the goods cheaper and more available to the middle and sometimes working classes, changing the way families consumed goods and spent money. The family became the chief unit of consumption because there were a disposable incomes and cheap consumer goods to buy.

\(^3\) Kertzer, 26.
Proletarianization

In addition to this change in technology, it has been argued that proletarianization has brought a better life and standard of living to the working classes, but even with this higher standard of living, Wally Seccombe states in his book, *Weathering the Storm*, “the status of early industrial proletarians among the laboring population as a while was extremely low.” The people no longer had the ownership of the means for production, which led to less control over their working conditions and eventually the end to the family as being a unit of production. The bourgeoisie held most of the new wealth because they were the factory owners and managers shown through Kertzer’s and Barbagli’s claim that “small enterprises, run primarily by family members in their own homes, gradually gave way to larger, capitalist enterprises, dependent on much greater capital investment.”

II. Women and Gender Roles

Women in the Workforce

Before the industrial revolution occurred and the family economy was still widely accepted, it was perfectly normal for wives to work. As Jean-Louis Flandrin notes in his book *Families in Former Times*, women had “an important role to play in the economy of the household; if they were unable to fulfill it, the entire family business ran the risk of collapsing.”

With the consideration of women in the workforce after the industrial revolution, a difference between the classes appears. In the new middle class, or bourgeois, were contented to live in their homes with relatively few of them working in the labor force, most of them taking

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7 Kertzer, xv.
on domestic roles in the household. The "peasant wives worked with their husbands in the fields," Rosemary O'Day asserts, "but this scandalized the bourgeois."^9

The middle class women were able to do this because the increased wages of their husbands and the decline in birthrates afforded more disposable income than ever before. Charles More agrees, stating, "children's earnings predominated over women's by a large margin"^10 because there were more children in the workforce and they stayed at home longer to contribute to the wages for the family.^11

Factory Work and Women

Women in the workforce during the industrial revolution were employed generally in the textile and garment industries. "In its earliest forms," Kertzer and Barbagli declare, "factory industrialization, in providing paid employment for women and children outside the home, had many serious negative effects."^12 Women had to contend with dangerous workplaces because of fast moving machines and poor lighting. However, Kertzer also declares that the predominance of women and children in textile work was because of the very low levels of skill and the repetitive motions necessary to complete their jobs.^13

In addition to other negative aspects of women's work, their low skill jobs often did not pay well because it was assumed that they could be supported by a male figure in their lives, mainly a father or a husband. Albert Craig and his fellows assert "Employers continued to pay women low wages because they assumed, often knowing better, that a woman did not need to

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^11 Craig, 786.
^12 Kertzer, xxxiii.
^13 Kertzer, 26.
support herself.” O’Day claims, “Poverty was the result of the parents’ failure to teach good values and appropriate work habits, to impose moral and physical discipline.” This claim reveals that good parenting and good work ethics were highly valued and considered the way to achieve a household with a domestic working wife and a breadwinning husband.

**Women’s Early life and Motherhood**

As stated earlier, most of the time a woman could depend on the income of a husband or father. However, this does not mean that the lower class girls did not have to work. They still often moved away from the household to be employed in a servant job to help support themselves and the family as a whole. Kertzer asserts that “by the end of the nineteenth century servants were overwhelmingly female and dedicated to household labor among the elite and rising middle class.” This type of employment for girls was not a drastic change from the type of servitude common during the time of the family economy.

However, there was a drastic change in the perception and role of motherhood. A “mother’s quality” Kertzer asserts, “came to be defined not by how many children she bore, but how well she could care for those she had” This idea goes along with the cult of Domesticity, which according to Craig was where the “home was to be a private place of refuge form the life of business and the marketplace.”

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14 Craig, 785.
15 O’Day, 222.
16 Kertzer, xxxiv.
17 Kertzer, xxvi.
18 Craig, 788.
this time who might help their husbands in their labor. "The supportive role of the wife was emphasized by the physical distance to the home from the workplaces"\textsuperscript{19}, as O'Day declares.

III. Men and Children

Men as Wage Earners

As most historians would agree, industrialization was a "movement away from the family as a work group... to a capitalist system in which work and family are separated"\textsuperscript{20}, Kertzer and Barbagli declare. This new system saw the separation of work and home as it had never been seen before. The men were enabled, with new technologies such as steam engines and trains, to travel daily over distances that would have never been attempted before. Much of this movement was due to proletarianization, as Seccombe puts it in \textit{Weathering the Storm}, "Gradually, by fits and starts, proletarianization disentangled the social relations of capitalist production from the domestic relations of workers’ families."\textsuperscript{21}

Children and Industrialization

Children during the Industrial Revolution had different lives that those who had lived before them. John R. Gillis this definition of youth: "a very long transition period, lasting from the point the very young child became somewhat independent... to the point of complete independence at marriage."\textsuperscript{22} According to this definition, youth would last from about seven or eight years of age to the twenties.

There were many changes in the working conditions of children, even during this time, because of the onset of major child labor and then the implementation of child labor laws and

\textsuperscript{19} O’Day, 204.
\textsuperscript{20} Kertzer, xxxi.
\textsuperscript{21} Seccombe, \textit{Weathering the Storm}, 29.
mandatory education laws. Kertzer and Barbagli contend, "in early textile factories, in particular, children at age eight or nine worked long horrendous conditions, often ...away from family members." Other negative situations for children occurred in the working classes where mothers would have to leave in order to work where "babies were left alone at home" reports Kertzer, "and [were] often prone to accidents because of fires." In addition, Gillis contends that the "figures of the young student and ragged street urchin" have stuck in the minds of people because of the effects of labor laws and educational laws seen in the art of the time.

Children and Family Ties

In reaction to the degree that child labor was spread, many different changes were implemented. First, "workers were concerned about the treatment of factory children because discipline was no longer being exercised by parents over their own children" Craig points out. In addition to this, Kertzer, along with many other historians, points out "transformations involved not only limitations on child labor ...but the introduction of compulsory public schooling." With the onset of the Industrial society, the adults were concerned with the bringing up of children and their discipline because changes of this kind had never occurred before and parents wanted to ensure that their increasingly more valuable children were able to make it in the new industrial society.

Conclusion

The industrial revolution broke down the family economy in many ways. The family no longer was the primary means of production and often the worker no longer owned the
means of production. Women became predominantly domestic and men became the primary breadwinners in the new middle class families. Work was moved away from the home and greatly influenced by machines such as the steam engine and improvements in the production of textiles. This industrialization led to the domination of many European countries over the rest of the world. In the scramble for Africa and Asia, this domination was seen. Even in the twenty-first century, the world's largest economies have mostly industrial bases, which allow for the continuous and ever building growth seen in these countries. The families in these economies are based on the wage earning system necessary for this growth. If the industrial revolution had not happened, the modern world, with its ever-growing economy would never have been seen.
Bibliography


