SPATIAL PRACTICES OF MARITIME WOMEN IN THE 19th CENTURY

AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THREE CASESTUDIES FROM THE ROTTERDAM REGION

AR1A066 I History Thesis I 2025-26 I Tutor Carola Hein

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Abstract

Maritime historiography has often marginalised women, reducing their roles to domestic responsibilities and overlooking their contributions to maritime society. This paper examines how women's spatial practices in the nineteenth century in the Rotterdam region were shaped by intersecting socio-economic, legal, and responsibility conditions. Combining a literature review with archival research and a comparative case study approach, it analyses three positions within maritime society: a shipyard owner, a woman on sea, and women in fishing communities.

The findings show that women were actively engaged in maritime economies in diverse ways, both on land and at sea. Spatial mobility did not directly correspond to socio-economic status or legal authority, but was shaped by life circumstances, professional roles, and childcare responsibilities. While greater wealth could enable access to a wider range of spaces, it often resulted in stronger spatial anchoring due to increased responsibility.

By looking through an intersectional lens, this research demonstrates that women cannot be understood as a homogeneous group, and that differences within gender are essential for understanding spatial practices. It contributes to a more nuanced interpretation of maritime and urban history by showing the complex roles of women.

Keywords:
maritime women – intersectionality - gendered spaces – spatial practice - port cities

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AI disclosure statement
During the preparation of this work the author used OpenAI ChatGPT-5.2 to harmonize text, improve writing style and check grammar and spelling. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women played an important economic, spatial and social role in the port cities and fishing villages of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In historical narratives, they are often reduced to the category of "wife of.." and portrayed as passive dependents (Zijlstra, 2025a). However, recent scholarship and exhibitions examples reveal that many women were economically active, socially engaged and deeply embedded in maritime society. They contributed to family businesses, managed households and finances during long periods of male absence or lived with their children on ships (Jacobs, 2025a)

The shipyard owner from Stormpolder Neeltje Pannevis, for example, immediately took over responsibility for their shipyard after her husband died. A transition she explicitly mentioned in his death announcement. Her ability to take over the business so quickly suggests long-term involvement and expertise rather than a sudden rupture ('Death Notice Arie van Giessen', 1840).

It is often assumed that women were not formally allowed to work in maritime professions. However, examples from fishing communities in Scheveningen and along the Dutch west coast show that women did work or at least did so informally. Many sailors' incomes were insufficient to support their families, making women's labour essential for financing childcare and everyday life within the home and its surroundings. Although sailors' wives were often prioritized as trustworthy receivers of wages sent home and were protected from agents such as "soul sellers" (business, which equips sailors, but get the wage in return) this income rarely reduced the need for women to earn additional money themselves(Van Der Heijden & Van Den Heuvel, 2007).

In contrast, women who lived at sea, either disguised as sailors or as the wives of captains, experienced maritime space in fundamentally different ways. The case of Cornelia Schmid shows how a woman lived with her husband on their ship. She chose to continue sailing even after becoming a mother, which indicates her own passion for sailing. As her children grew older, she settled in Rotterdam in a middle-class house (Deddes, 1916).

Together, these examples reveal intersectional differences in socio-economic position, legal authority, and spatial freedom, showing that maritime women cannot be treated as a single category. By examining women across these intersecting positions and geographical proximity, this paper argues that maritime society was structured by multiple layers of inequality.

> *On top of that, the supposedly less important status and role of women caused researchers to overlook women for decades when they delved into the archives, or brushed aside what they found as 'exceptions'. Research and publications have seriously undermined that image in recent decades.*
> *~ Irene B. Jacobs (2025b)*

Relevance and Urgency

Women's perspectives have often been marginalized in historical narratives, despite their central role in society and in maritime communities. Including women is therefore not only a question of representation, but a necessary step toward a more accurate understanding of how society and space functioned. Historical knowledge has largely been shaped by patriarchal narratives that explain the past through male experiences, thereby overlooking women's contributions, agency, and spatial practices (Criado-Perez, 2020; Schöler, 2024)

At a time when questions of gendered space, mobility and visibility are increasingly central in architectural and urban research, revisiting historical patterns of women's spatial practices becomes particularly urgent. Through this lens, the use of architecture and urban infrastructure reveals lived experiences that are otherwise overlooked. Such an approach shifts attention away from monumental and representational architecture toward everyday spaces, challenging dominant narratives centred on male architects and planners, and instead foregrounding women's spatial practices and influence (Lefebvre, 1997).

The paper also counters the persistent assumption that women in history were passive users of space or confined primarily to housekeeping. In maritime contexts, sailors' wives were often economically active, bearing responsibility not only for the household and childcare but also for income generation and trade (Van Der Heijden & Van Den Heuvel, 2007). Finally, by analysing these intersecting differences, this research demonstrates how gender, class, authority, and economic status together shaped women's spatial practices and agency, revealing patterns of inequality within gender itself.

This leads to the guiding question:
How did nineteenth century maritime women's socio-economic position, authority, and family responsibilities shape their engagement with urban, public, domestic, and maritime spaces in port societies, and in what ways did gendered and intersectional structures influence these spatial practices in the Rotterdam region?

Methodology

This paper analyses how Dutch maritime women of different socio-economic positions in the nineteenth century inhabited and navigated urban, domestic, and working spaces in port cities, drawing on three complementary theoretical perspectives in order to connect spatial production, social structures, and intersecting inequalities.

It uses Henri Lefebvre's concept of the social production of space (Fig.1) to understand how space is shaped through everyday practices, including dwelling, work, and social relations in maritime public spaces (Lefebvre, 1997). The concept of gendered space, developed by Doreen Massey and curated by Barras and Broadbent, situates these practices within socio-spatial structures, highlighting how public and domestic environments are organized by gendered and classed norms that shape access, mobility, and responsibilities in closely intertwined home-work settings (Barras & Broadbent, 2018). Intersectionality, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a framework to analyse how multiple social and economic factors, like gender, class, and legal status, intersect and produce different spatial conditions, showing that similar situations can lead to different spatial outcomes depending on their specific configurations (Censhaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2015). Together, these frameworks allow the analysis of space not as a neutral frame, but as a socially produced and unequal field of access, practice, and power.

The research is based on a combination of secondary literature, archival materials, and the Maritime Women exhibition at the Maritime Museum Rotterdam. The literature review provides the broader framework for understanding maritime gender roles, class relations, and urban-economic conditions, but remains largely abstract in relation to everyday spatial practices.

This limitation is addressed through a case study approach. This decision is based on the fact that women are rarely visible in official documents, which makes it difficult to reconstruct empirical archival evidence. Case studies therefore provide a way to access fragmented traces of women's lives and translate them into analysable spatial narratives. The selection of case studies was informed by conversations with the curator of the Maritime Women exhibition, Irene Jacobs, and guided by existing research, the availability of sources, and variation in socio-economic position, spatial surroundings, and legal authority, in order to capture different forms of lived experience. They are not intended to represent entire social categories, but to illustrate inequalities and differences in spatial practice.

The focus on the Rotterdam region and time of nineteenth century was chosen because of its strong maritime transformation, which provides a relevant context for examining changing labour structures and spatial arrangements. Within this framework, primary sources such as administrative documents, newspaper articles, photographs, maps, material from the museum exhibition, and various archives were used to reconstruct evidence of socio-economic conditions, legal positions, and spatial practices connected to the selected case studies. Finally, a comparison analyses differences between the case studies, which makes it possible to reveal not only structural gender inequalities, but also inequalities within gender itself, showing how intersecting conditions shaped different forms of spatial practice and agency.

The structure of the paper follows this research logic: it moves from a literature-based framework on maritime gender relations, to the historical context of the Rotterdam region, and finally to the analysis and comparison of the selected case studies in order to identify layered inequalities in women's spatial practices.

Female slaves are excluded from this paper as a fourth socio-economic group. While their inclusion is important, it would introduce an additional and complex theoretical framework centred on colonialism, enslavement and unfree labour. Addressing this group adequately would therefore require a broader theoretical approach than the current scope of the paper allows.

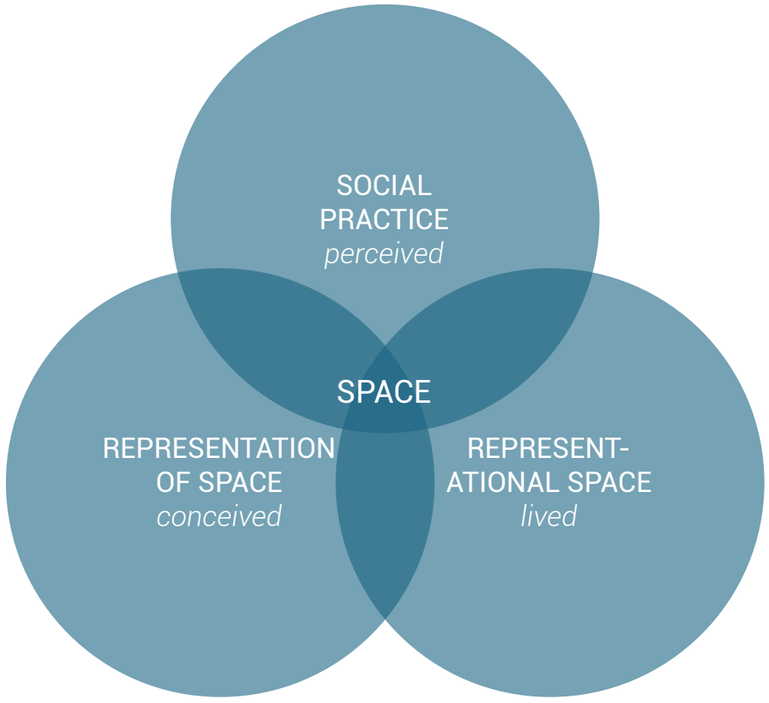


Figure 1
Lefebvres dimensions of space
Graphic by author, based on Lefebvre, 1997

2. INTERSECTIONAL INEQUALITIES OF MARITIME WOMEN IN PORT CITIES

In maritime societies, women's roles and visibility were shaped and limited by intersecting social, economic, and spatial structures across different port contexts and time periods. But what did this mean, and how was it spatially expressed? Understanding how these inequalities were produced and embedded in spatial practices provides the analytical lens through which the case studies can be read and compared.

Historiographical marginalization of women

Women have long been marginalized in maritime historiography. They were not directly documented in municipal or financial archives, since they held less formal responsibility, but their activities and presence can be traced in museum collections. Their labour contributions, including work connected to shipbuilding, trade, and port economies, often appeared only as side notes, while legal and social obstacles, limited financial means, and gender-based recruitment practices reinforced their perceived secondary status (Jacobs, 2025b). Traditional representations typically portrayed male seafarers and workers as historically relevant actors, with women shown only as observers (Zijlstra, 2025a). Yet port cities were not separate from urban society but deeply entangled spaces in which naval, civilian, imperial, and commercial spheres intersected (Biela, 2025; Jacobs, 2025b).

In these environments, constructions of masculinity and gender became visible and localized, shaping both social order and historical memory (Biela, 2025). The persistent image of the male maritime world therefore reflects not the absence of women, but long-standing structural and historiographical patterns of exclusion (Jacobs, 2025b).

Gendered structures in terms of socio- economic and legal position in maritime society

In Dutch maritime cities, women's roles were shaped by both social and legal structures. Wives of sailors and occupational widows often held formal authority to manage households, conduct financial transactions, and act on behalf of absent husbands, exercising legal powers rarely available to women elsewhere in Europe (Van Der Heijden & Van Den Heuvel, 2007).

Some women even owned shipyards and property, demonstrating significant economic agency within a male-dominated port society (Jarvis, 2025). Women's economic and social work extended beyond formal authority. They engaged in spinning, textile production, small-scale trade, and port-related labour, while also mediating wage distribution and navigating systems such as the soul sellers (people supplying seafarers and get transport letters as wage) combining survival strategies with risky entrepreneurial activity. Low societal power and limited financial ressources meant that these tasks were essential for household survival and the functioning of maritime economies (Van Der Heijden & Van Den Heuvel, 2007).

At the same time, cultural and imperial narratives framed women as passive observers or moral anchors to uphold the perceived virtue of sailors, reinforcing gender hierarchies and marginalizing their contributions. Yet, women actively participated in political associations, wartime production, and social organization within the city, showing engagement beyond domestic confines (Biela, 2025). Similar patterns are observed in international maritime contexts. Female-led boarding houses in the United States and Antwerp functioned not only as shelters but also as centres for labour recruitment, social networking, and supporting sailors' mobility. While these spaces were often negatively portrayed as fostering immoral behaviour, they were crucial to port economies and highlight the broader, transnational importance of women's work in maritime societies (Coudray, 2025).

Spatial boundaries, restrictions and capabilities of women in port cities

Women's spatial practices in maritime societies were shaped by both the public environment and gendered social structures. Cities often contained mixed residential–industrial uses, where living and working spaces overlapped and everyday life unfolded in close proximity to docks, warehouses, and maritime industries (Jacobs, 2025b). In elite social occasions, for example during official celebrations for returning naval troops, women were often physically separated from male-dominated political and military interactions and confined to galleries or observational spaces. At the same time, some women began to participate in political discussions and even organized or joined protests (Biela, 2025).

In contrast, working-class women frequently participated directly in the maritime economy. Many lived in districts near docks, areas often associated with social marginalization and carried out economic activities from their homes or in front of their houses (Jacobs, 2025b). Economic and legal structures also shaped women's agency. Women were formally excluded from guild-regulated shipbuilding, while widows and sailors' wives could temporarily gain legal authority to manage households, finances, and businesses in the absence of their husbands (Jarvis, 2025).

Some women crossed the strict spatial boundaries of maritime society by disguising themselves as men and working at sea as sailors or soldiers, gaining access to mobility and male-dominated environments otherwise closed to them, but also needed to face the risk to be discovered (Dekker & Pol, 1989).

Intersectionality within gendered society and spatiality

Intersectional inequalities within maritime societies reveal that women's experiences cannot be understood through gender alone, but must be analysed in relation to overlapping social, economic, and legal conditions. Women in port cities occupied diverse positions shaped by differences in marital status, class, and access to labour, ranging from financially active shipyard managers to poor, single, or migrant women navigating precarious urban environments (Jarvis, 2025; Van De Pol & Kuijpers, 2005). While some women were able to exercise economic agency, particularly as widows with specific legal rights, financial independence remained closely tied to legal status and access to work, demonstrating the interdependence of economic and legal structures (Jarvis, 2025).

At the same time, migration patterns show how young and widowed women moved to port cities, like Amsterdam in search of employment, yet often encountered marginalisation, with some being pushed into criminalised activities such as prostitution or theft due to limited opportunities and social vulnerability (Van De Pol & Kuijpers, 2005). These dynamics were further shaped by moral and social hierarchies, as women working in boarding houses or maritime service sectors were frequently stigmatised and racialised, despite their economic importance (Coudray, 2025).

In naval cities such as Wilhelmshaven around 1900, masculine identities were constructed around strength, control, and imperial power, positioning men as representatives of national and colonial dominance, while women were relegated to passive and supportive roles. This dynamic not only reinforced gendered divisions but also intersected with colonial attitudes, as practices of domination and violence associated with colonial contexts were mirrored in metropolitan spaces, shaping the treatment of women more poorly (Biela, 2025). Taken together, these examples demonstrate that women's spatial practices and opportunities in maritime environments were the result of layered and intersecting conditions, in which gender, class, legal status, and imperial power relations were deeply intertwined.

Structural continuities

Even today, maritime societies and economic clusters continue to exhibit gender inequalities. Despite Rotterdam's rise as Europe's largest port with high-tech container terminals, women remain underrepresented, earn less salary, and are often excluded from decision-making and administrative roles. Patriarchal norms and domestic responsibilities still limit women's professional opportunities, reflecting historical patterns of exclusion and marginalization in port economies (Kitada & Bhirugnath-Bhookhun, 2019; Van De Laar, 2021).

3. MARITIME SPACES IN THE ROTTERDAM REGION: ROTTERDAM, STORMPOLDER, AND SCHEVENINGEN

In order to understand how women's spatial practices unfolded within specific environments, it is necessary to situate the nineteenth-century Rotterdam region as a changing landscape shaped by industrialisation and maritime expansion, which produced significant social and spatial tensions. These structural transformations provide the context needed to interpret the case studies, as they help explain the conditions under which women made spatial, social, and economic choices. What did it mean to live in the Rotterdam region, Stormpolder, or Scheveningen in the nineteenth century?

Rotterdam

Rotterdam developed from a small settlement in the ninth century into a maritime town shaped by the construction of a dam in the river Rotte around 1270, from which it derived its name. City rights granted in 1340 marked the beginning of formal urban development, while expansion toward the river Maas in 1575 established its characteristic triangular form and early port functions (Stadsarchief Rotterdam, n.d.) Between 1550 and 1850, Rotterdam gradually emerged as a seafaring and trading centre, benefiting from its strategic position between Antwerp and Amsterdam (Van De Laar, 2021). Despite remaining smaller and less politically dominant than nearby Delft, the city developed a diverse and outward-looking population. High mortality rates and continuous migration resulted in significant demographic turnover, with a substantial proportion of inhabitants originating from outside the Netherlands. The targeted recruitment of skilled Flemish refugees further strengthened the economy and contributed to Rotterdam's reputation as "Little London" (Van De Laar & Van Der Schoor, 2019)

In the early nineteenth century, Rotterdam's growth remained limited due to the aftermath of the Napoleonic period and economic stagnation (Fig.2). However, from the 1870s onward, liberalization policies and the integration into global trade networks triggered rapid expansion. The construction of the Nieuwe Waterweg in 1872 created a direct connection to the North Sea and marked a decisive shift from a regional staple market to a large-scale transit port. Harbour expansions on the southern bank of the Maas, including Rijnhaven and Maashaven, reinforced Rotterdam's role as an entrepôt between Britain and the German hinterland). These infrastructural developments consolidated its identity as a "transitopolis" and a key node in international trade (Thissen, 2013; Van De Laar, 2021)

Rapid industrial growth after 1870 was accompanied by significant population increase driven by migration from rural regions and abroad. This arrival supplied labour for dock construction and urban expansion, while also producing high levels of mobility and a transient urban culture (Van De Laar & Van Der Schoor, 2019). At the same time, clear socio-spatial divisions emerged. Low-income labourers settled near the expanding docklands in Rotterdam South, whereas wealthier merchants gradually moved to less packed areas. These developments intensified the separation between industrial and residential spaces, reinforcing Rotterdam's identity as a "werkstad" (Thissen, 2013).

Stormpolder

Krimpen aan den IJssel originated in the Middle Ages as a small settlement along the Dutch IJssel, first recorded in the late thirteenth century. Initially characterised by farms along the IJsseldijk, its economy was based on arable farming, but environmental pressures such as peat subsidence and increasing flooding gradually shifted agricultural practices toward livestock farming (Stichting Erfgoedhuis Zuid-Holland, n.d.)

From the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, hemp cultivation became a key economic activity, supplying materials such as rope and sailcloth for the maritime industry, with nearby cities like Dordrecht, Gouda, and Rotterdam serving as important markets. Local industries also developed along the river, including brick production, rope-making, and reed mat fabrication. Following the decline of hemp production in the eighteenth century due to technological changes such as steam power, economic activity increasingly shifted toward shipbuilding. Work in shipyards along the river and in nearby Stormpolder expanded significantly, with some developing into large-scale industrial sites in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, further integrating the area into the broader maritime economy (Stichting Erfgoedhuis Zuid-Holland, n.d.).

Scheveningen

Scheveningen was first recorded in 1284 and emerged as a fishing settlement along the coast, with its present form documented from 1357 as demand for sea fish increased. Its location made it highly vulnerable to environmental conditions, with storms and floods repeatedly reshaping the village, especially in 1570 when large parts were destroyed. Until the mid-seventeenth century, Scheveningen remained relatively isolated, connected to The Hague only by a path through the dunes (Meijers Interactive, n.d.).

From the early nineteenth century, the settlement experienced a significant transformation with the emergence of seaside tourism and bathing culture. Developments such as the construction of the Kurhaus in 1884, alongside villas and country houses like Zorgvliet, introduced a new spatial layer oriented toward wealthy visitors. Bathing practices, including the use of bathing carriages and bathhouses, further shaped the coastal landscape. This resulted in a contrast between the traditional fishing village, which characterised by local maritime activity and the expanding seaside resort, where large hotels and elite residences developed, particularly to the northeast and east of the historic core (Meijers Interactive, n.d.)

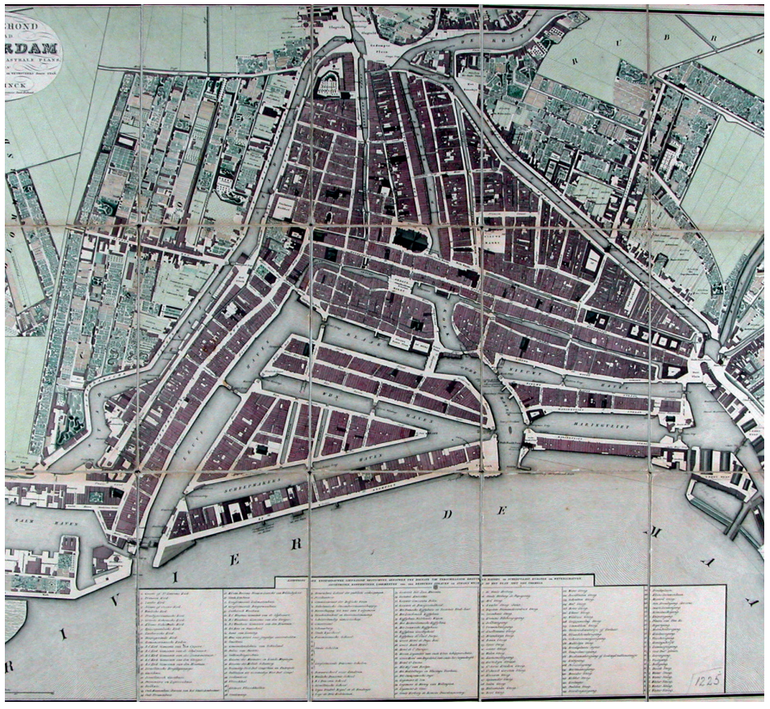


Figure 2
Plattegrond der stad Rotterdam
Koning en Brugman, Wed. 1839

Figure 3 (right page)
Death notice Arie van Giessen
Rotterdamsche Courant, 1840

4. NEETLJE PANNEVIS - A SHIPYARD OWNER

As a shipyard owner and businesswoman, Neeltje Pannevis represents women's involvement in the economic structures of nineteenth-century maritime society. Although such enterprises were often formally associated with male ownership, her case suggests that women were actively engaged in these businesses before becoming legally visible through widowhood. Her case is particularly relevant for understanding how socio-economic position shaped women's spatial practices, highlighting both extended authority and continued spatial anchoring within the shipyard environment

Early life and marriage

Neeltje Pannevis was born on 6 July 1798 in Ouderkerk aan den IJssel. She worked as a seamstress and, in 1824 at the age of twenty-five, married the shipbuilder Arie van der Giessen, who was nine years older than her. After their marriage, Neeltje moved to Stormpolder (Fig.6), a small settlement along the river IJssel consisting mainly of several shipyards and a brickwork company (steenbakkerij) (I. B. Jacobs, personal communication, 5 March 2026; van der Kun et al., 1860). The area functioned as a connected maritime community where family relations and professional networks were closely connected and concentrated around shipbuilding activities. Marriages often occurred within this professional environment, a pattern also visible in Neeltje's family, as her children later married into shipbuilding-related professions (I. B. Jacobs, personal communication, 5 March 2026).

Heden morgen, circa 6 ure, trof mij de allergevoeligste slag mijns levens, daar het God behaagde mijn geliefden Echtgenoot, ARIE VAN DER GIESSEN, in leven *Scheepstimmermansbaas in den Stormpolder, onder Krimpen aan den Ijssel*, in den ouderdom van ruim vijftig jaren, van mijne zijde weg te nemen, na eene gelukkige echtvereeniging van ruim zestien jaren. Wat ik en mijne drie jonge Kinderen verliezen, zal een ieder die den Overledene gekend heeft ligt beseffen.

Familie en Vrienden gelieven deze algemeene tevens als bijzondere kennisgeving aan te nemen.

Stormpolder NEELTJE PANNEVIS,
den 7 April 1840. Wed. ARIE VAN DER GIESSEN.

NB. De *Affaire* zal op denzelfden voet door de Weduwe, onder een goed toeverzigt, worden voortgezet.

It is likely that she started to to support the family enterprise after the marriage. The property combined domestic and economic functions: Neeltje and her husband lived with a servant in house number 110, while the shipyard was located on the same plot. Such proximity between home and workplace was typical for smaller maritime settlements, where residential buildings, workshops, and shipyards were closely integrated (Fig.5). A joint testament from 1825 further reflects Neeltje's connection to this setting, as it stipulated that the entire estate would be inherited by her (Jacobs, 2025a).

Schipyard ownership, childcare and economic responsibility

In 1840, Neeltje Pannevis's husband, Arie van der Giessen, passed away. The death notice (Fig. 3) published in the Rotterdamsche courant at the time also stated that she immediately took over the family shipyard, an action that indicates she was already involved in its management and that her authority was socially accepted ('Death Notice Arie van Giessen', 1840). This recognition is confirmed in the population register of 1851, where she is explicitly listed as scheepmaaksster (Bevolkeringregister Stormpolder 23, 1850). At that moment, her three sons, Cornelis (13), Arie (7), and Pieter (2), were still young, leaving Neeltje probably responsible for both household and childcare, as well as the operation of the shipyard. As a widow, Neeltje gained significant legal authority and economic independence (I. B. Jacobs, personal communication, 5 March 2026).

Dutch legal frameworks allowed widows to manage property, conduct financial transactions, and oversee employees. This legal status enabled her to run the shipyard for nearly two decades (Murray, 1950). The enterprise itself was modest but stable: by 1852 it employed approximately ten workers and consisted of two slipways, a crane, workshops, barns, orchards, and several houses located along the river outside the dykes (Jacobs, 2025a)

Despite this economic authority, Neeltje's spatial mobility remained relatively limited. There is no record about travels, so her daily life was probably closely tied to the shipyard environment and the surrounding settlement since she was the only responsible person. Stormpolder was located roughly seven kilometres from Rotterdam and functioned largely as a rural-industrial enclave within the wider maritime economy. The overlapping of home and workplace meant that her activities were concentrated within a small geographic area where domestic care, administrative tasks, and business management took place in close proximity (Fig. 6).

Sale of the shipyard and later life

From the early 1850s onwards, Neeltje's sons gradually became more involved in the business. Cornelis married in 1851, and the shipyard began to transition toward the next generation. In 1858, the shipyard was formally sold to her sons, who continued the company under the name "C. & A. van der Giessen." The property at that time included the shipyard infrastructure, workshops, barns, orchards, and several residential buildings, indicating a relatively valuable estate for the period (Jacobs, 2025a).

Even after transferring ownership, Neeltje retained legal influence over the property. Contractual arrangements required her sons to maintain the estate properly and prohibited them from renting out parts of the property without her consent. Should they fail to comply with these conditions, Neeltje retained the right to demand the remaining capital in a single payment (Jacobs, 2025a). These provisions demonstrate that she continued to exercise authority over the family properties despite no longer managing the business directly. In her later years, Neeltje lived with her son Pieter in house number 31, together with one servant (I. B. Jacobs, personal communication, 5 March 2026). This arrangement reflects both her continued economic security and the close interdependence between family members within maritime households. She stayed in the same local area that had shaped her working life and died there on 7 February 1873 (Fig.4).

Conclusion

Neeltje Pannevis' life illustrates how widowhood could create opportunities for legal authority and economic agency within nineteenth century maritime communities. As the owner and manager of a shipyard, she held significant socio-economic power, yet her spatial practices remained largely anchored to the shipyard settlement of Stormpolder. Her case therefore demonstrates how legal status and economic responsibility could expand women's authority while their everyday spatial freedom remained closely tied to local family and business.



*** Heden overleed, na eene korte ongesteldheid, onze geliefde moeder, Mejufvrouw NEELTJE PANNEVIS, weduwe van den Heer *A. van der Giessen*, in den ouderdom van ruim vier-en-zeventig jaren.

STORMPOLDER, gemeente *Krimpen a/d. IJssel*, 7 Februarij 1873.

Uit aller naam, Cs. VAN DER GIESSEN. A. VAN DER GIESSEN. P. VAN DER GIESSEN.

Algemeene kennisgeving.

*** Heden overleed mijne geliefde echtgenoote



Figure 4
Death Notice Neeltje Pannevis
Opregte Haarlemsche Courant, 1873

Figure 5
Oudste afbeelding van werf De Hoop,1905
Murray, 1949

Figure 6 (right page)
Kaart van de rivier de Hollandsche IJssel van Gouda tot IJsselmonde, in drie bladen
van der Kun et al, 1860

5. CORNELIA SCHMID - WOMAN ON SEA

Cornelia Schmid represents a distinct form of women's spatial experience within maritime society, shaped by mobility at sea and later domestic life in the urban environment of Rotterdam. Her case is particularly relevant because it demonstrates how high levels of spatial mobility do not necessarily correspond to increased legal or economic authority.

Marriage and life on the ship

Cornelia Schmid (Fig.7) was born on 9 July 1842 in Rotterdam. She grew up in a relatively stable urban household. Her father, Johannes Christiaan Fredrik Schmid, worked as a pork butcher and was the son of a German immigrant who had settled in Rotterdam in the early nineteenth century. The family belonged to middle class (I. B. Jacobs, personal communication, 5 March 2026).

On 19 January 1865, at the age of twenty-two, she married Evert Deddes, who at that time was captain of his own sailing vessel, the Poseidon (Fig.8). Shortly after their marriage, Cornelia joined her husband on board and accompanied him on voyages for approximately two and a half years. During this period the couple sailed through the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean and to North America (Deddes, 1916). Life on board created a spatial situation very different from that of urban households. The Poseidon was a relatively small vessel with a crew of about ten sailors in addition to the captain's family, which meant that the available living space was extremely limited. The ship itself therefore was a clear spatial restriction.

At the same time, Cornelia's role as the captain's wife allowed her to participate in maritime mobility that was otherwise uncommon to most nineteenth century women. The couple's first children were born during this period, and the family initially lived entirely on board. The care of children was partly shared within the ship's crew. Her Husband described later to their daughter that the sailors often helped to look after the young son, illustrating how everyday life at sea changed conventional household roles. This arrangement reduced some of the domestic responsibilities typically expected from women on land, although the confined environment of the ship still limited privacy and spatial autonomy. This lifestyle ended abruptly in 1867 when the Poseidon was shipwrecked in America, forcing the family to Rotterdam (Deddes, 1916).





Settlement in Van Brakelstraat 37

After the shipwreck, Cornelia settled in Rotterdam while her husband continued his career at sea on other vessels. This marked a significant shift in her spatial situation. Whereas her early married life had been characterised by maritime mobility, she now assumed a more stationary role centred on the urban household. The family grew rapidly, having nine children, two of whom died young. With the increasing number of children, travelling on ships became both dangerous and impractical, and Cornelia only occasionally accompanied her husband on later voyages (Deddes, 1916).

During this period the family lived at Van Brakelstraat 37 (Fig. 11) in Rotterdam, a street located near the Leuvehaven and the Vestingkade in one of the newly developed urban districts outside the former city walls (Fig.13). The neighbourhood had been built on the site of a former sugar refinery and reflected the expanding urban fabric of nineteenth-century Rotterdam (Fig.2; Fig.10).

Although the family lived there as tenants, their household included three servants, indicating a comfortable middle-class lifestyle supported by Deddes' income as a captain and later merchant. Spatially, Cornelia's daily life was now largely structured by domestic responsibilities. While her husband remained part of global maritime networks, her role focused on managing the household and raising the children within the urban environment of the port city. Nevertheless, the location

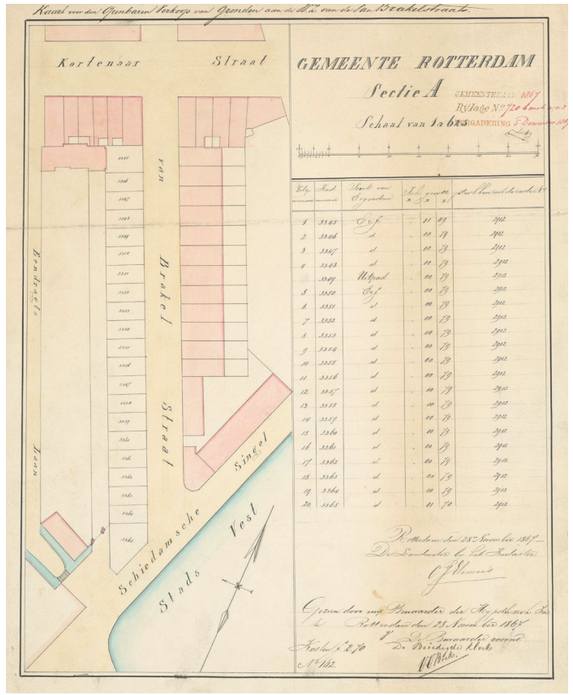






Figure 7 (left page)
Photo of Cornelia Schmid
Deddes, 1916

Figure 8 (left page)
Schoener „Poseidon"
Deddes, 1916

Figure 9 (top)
Kaart voor den Openbare Verkoop van Gronden aan de W.Z. van de Van Brakelstraat
Gemeentearchief Rotterdam, 1867

Figure 10 (top)
Schiedamsesingel bij de Vredesteinlaan
Jaap, 1867

Figure 11
Gezicht op de westzijde van de Schiedamsesingel, vanaf het dak van een huis aan de Westzeedijk
Dieten, 1889

of the house near the harbour maintained a connection to the maritime economy that shaped the family's livelihood (I. B. Jacobs, personal communication, 5 March 2026).

Move to Charlois and later life

On 5 May 1879 the family moved to Charlois, which at that time was still a village-like settlement on the southern bank of the Maas (Fig.12). As the city expanded and became increasingly crowded with migrant workers, middle-class families who could afford it often moved toward quieter districts at the outskirts (Van De Laar & Van Der Schoor, 2019).

Another factor may have been Evert Deddes's new position as captain with the American shipping line, and later as director of the Zeemanshuis, which was located nearby (Deddes, 1916). In Charlois the family maintained a household with three servants, confirming their continued socio-economic stability. The spatial environment differed considerably from the dense urban neighbourhood of Van Brakelstraat (Fig.13). Charlois still had a more rural character with a main street and scattered houses, offering a quieter residential setting while remaining connected to the port economy (Fig.14). Cornelia probably continued to manage the household and care for the family while her husband pursued his maritime career, later becoming the director of the Zeemanshuis (Deddes, 1916).

Cornelia Schmid's life shows the contrast in spatial experiences between life on board and on land. In the early years of her marriage, she travelled internationally, where the physical limits of the vessel imposed clear spatial restrictions. At that time, she was relieved of many traditional household responsibilities, which allowed her a certain freedom within her role as a woman. After the growth of her family, her spatial practices became increasingly anchored in the urban and later suburban domestic environment of Rotterdam. While life on land offered more potential mobility and engagement, the responsibilities of managing the household and raising children restricted her.

Conclusion

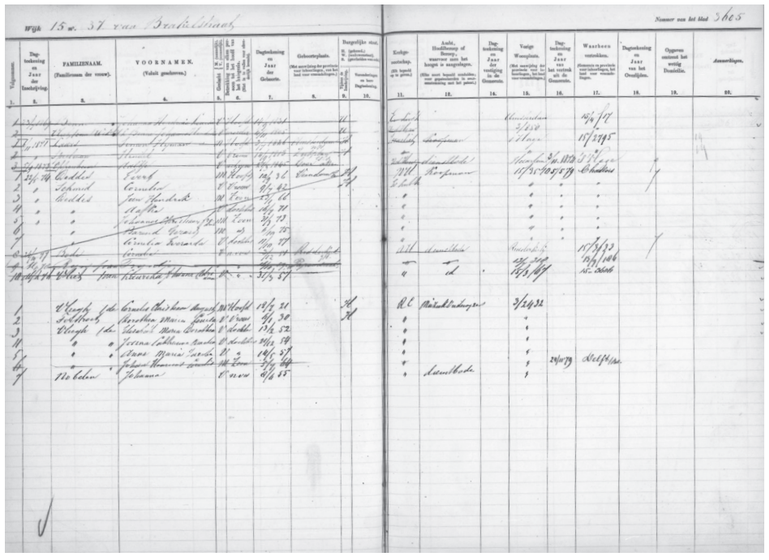


Figure 12
Bevolkeringsregister Van Brakelstraat 37
Gemeentearchief Rotterdam, 1889

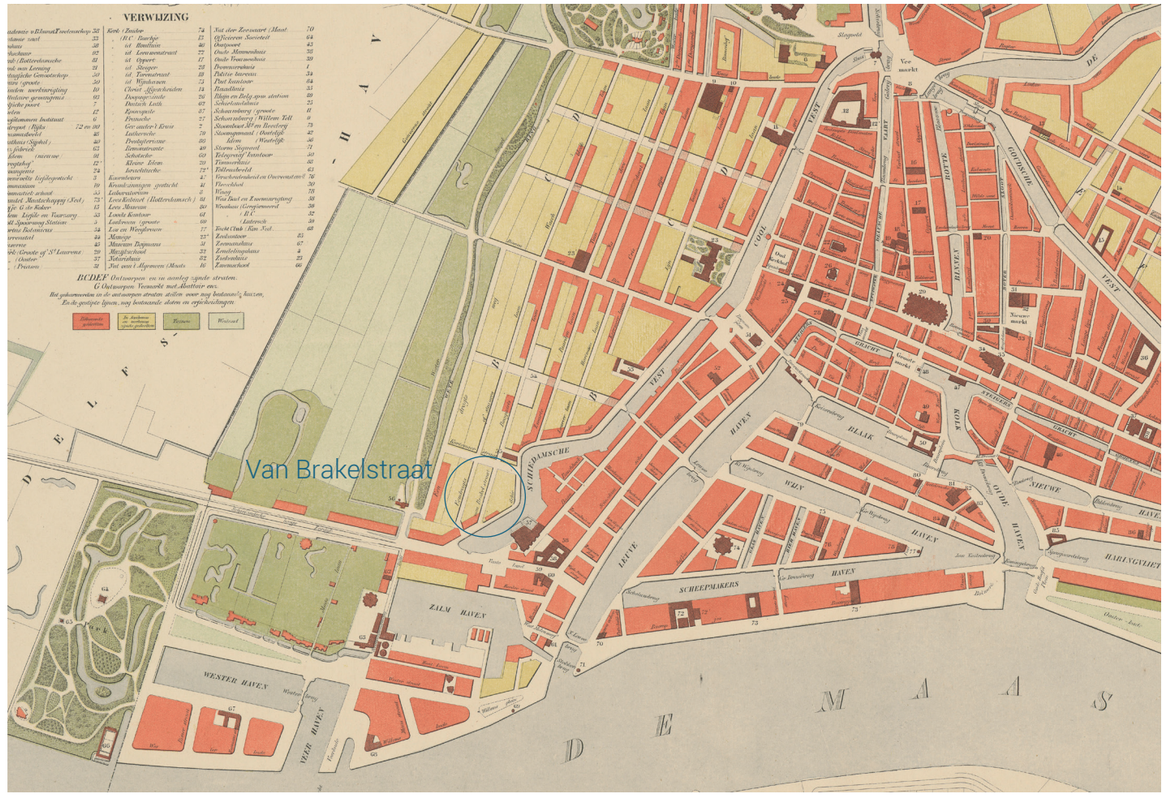


Figure 13 (right page top)
NIEUWE PLATTEGROND DER STAD ROTTERDAM
Nijgh, 1865

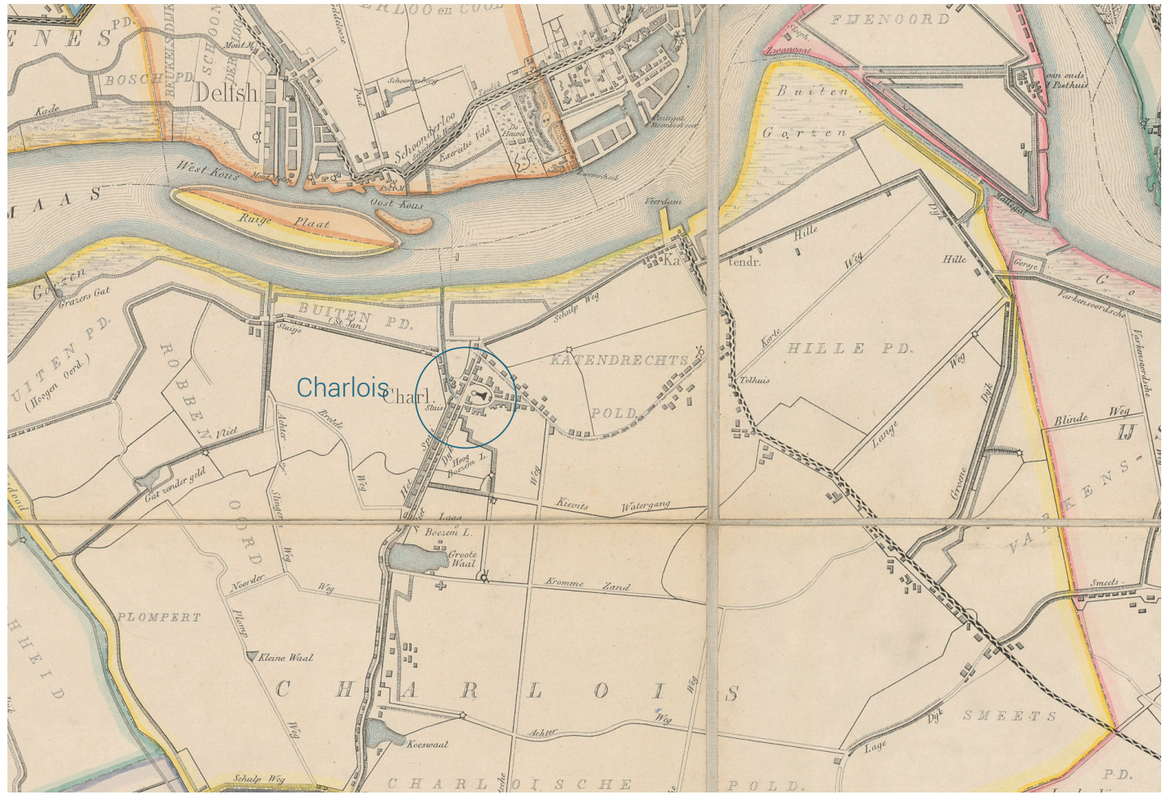


Figure 14 (right page bottom)
KAART | VAN | ROTTERDAM EN OMSTREKEN | met inbegrip van de Steden | DELFT, VLAARDINGEN, SCHIEDAM | EN DELFSHAVEN.
Görlitz 1851

6. FISHERY WOMEN – LOW-CLASS WOMEN

Low-income women in maritime fishing communities are a less visible group in historical records, as they rarely held formal legal positions and therefore left few individual traces in administrative or personal archives, making it difficult to reconstruct individual biographies. Nevertheless, their role is essential for understanding the functioning of maritime economies, This case study therefore does not focus on one identifiable individual, but rather on a social group, which is used to create a contrast with higher socio-economic case studies and to highlight differences and similarities in spatial practices.

Socio economic legal role

In contrast to business owners or captains' families, low-income women in maritime communities are less visible in historical records. Because they rarely held formal positions, fewer personal documents or administrative records survived that would allow the reconstruction of individual life histories. Instead, their roles can mainly be traced through collective descriptions, visual sources, and references to typical activities within the fishing economy. These activities illustrate that women were deeply integrated into the economic structures of port and fishing communities rather than being confined solely to domestic responsibilities (ZijIstra, 2025a).

For fishermen's wives in particular, everyday life was marked by economic uncertainty. Their husbands often spent long periods at sea, leaving women responsible for maintaining the household and securing additional income. Therefore, many fishermen's wives participated directly in the fishing economy. They sold fish, peeled shrimps, repaired nets, produced baskets, or inspected fishing equipment. Some even owned small fishing boats or carried baskets of fish from the harbour to local markets (Jacobs, 2025a).

Visual sources further illustrate these practices. While women often appear only as bystanders in maritime paintings (Fig.17), closer analysis reveals that they frequently performed essential labour behind the scenes (Gefantaseerd Strandtafereel, 1890; Zijlstra, 2025a).



Figure 15
Schreveningen Buurtje
AKON Ansichtkarten Online, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, n.d.

Spatial Restriction and freedoms

Many women lived in small fishermen's houses located along narrow streets, often built closely next to each other. These modest dwellings formed dense neighbourhoods within fishing villages. Photographs and paintings (Fig. 15) show rows of small, gable-fronted houses where domestic life and economic activity were closely intertwined. Much of this work took place within or near the domestic environment, blurring the boundaries between household space and economic production. Within these homes, women often combined childcare with income-generating labour (Postcard Scheveningen Buurtje, n.d.; van Koningsveld, 1870).

While men were at sea, women raised children, repaired nets, prepared fish for market, and organised household tasks within the limited space of the dwelling. Their spatial practices therefore remained strongly tied to the immediate neighbourhood and the coast environment. Their daily activities were concentrated within a small radius connecting home, harbour, and market (Jacobs, 2025a).

Conclusion

Low-income women in fishing communities played a crucial but often overlooked role in sustaining maritime households and local economies. Although their work was essential for family survival, their socio-economic position limited both their legal authority and spatial mobility. Their activities were largely confined to the domestic environment, nearby streets, and harbour spaces.



Figure 16
De Keizerstraat Schreveningen
AKON Ansichtkarten Online, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek 1905



Figure 17
Gefantaseerd strandtafereel
Gemeentearchief Den Haag, 1890

7. COMPARISON OF THE THREE CASE STUDIES

The three case studies reveal how women's spatial practices were shaped by differing social, economic, and legal conditions, resulting in both contrasting and overlapping patterns of mobility, responsibility, and spatial use. Through comparison these layered inequalities become visible, demonstrating how intersectionality operates not only between gender, but also within gender itself by shaping diverse forms of spatial practice and agency.

Legal authority and spatial control

Authority and spatial control differed significantly among the three cases and did not necessarily correspond to greater spatial freedom.

As a shipyard owner, Neeltje Pannevis held substantial legal authority, giving her a high degree of spatial control over the shipyard and its associated spaces of production and dwelling. However, it also anchored her to this specific location, as responsibility for both the business and her children limited her actual mobility beyond it. In contrast, Cornelia Schmid, as the wife of a ship captain, held comparatively little formal authority, as her husband managed most economic and legal matters. But her participation in life on board enabled a high degree of mobility across maritime spaces, even if this movement was structured by her husband's profession rather than her own control. After settling in Rotterdam, her spatial practices became more centred within the domestic environment, where childcare responsibilities reduced her mobility. Fishery women occupied an even more ambiguous position: while they lacked formal authority, they often assumed temporary control over household and economic spaces during their husbands' absence at sea. This form of "temporary authority" allowed them to manage local workspaces such as markets and homes, but their spatial practices remained strongly tied to the immediate environment and the cyclical return of their husbands. Overall, these cases show that authority and spatial control were not directly linked to spatial freedom; rather, widowhood or temporary "widowhood" through absence could expand women's authority, while formal control over space increased the expectations of caregiving restricted their mobility or spatial movement.

Socio-economic position and access to space

Socio-economic position shaped not only women's financial stability but also their access to and use of space in distinct ways.

Neeltje Pannevis, as the owner of a shipyard with multiple employees and valuable property, held a high degree of economic independence and control over productive space. However, this position also spatially anchored her to the shipyard in Stormpolder, limiting her movement beyond this rural working environment. In contrast, fishery women, despite operating on a much lower economic level, experienced a similar form of spatial anchoring: their need to secure daily income tied them closely to the immediate surroundings of home, harbour, and market. Although their socio-economic positions differed significantly, both groups remained spatially localized due to work-related responsibilities. Cornelia Schmid, by comparison, occupied a relatively privileged socio-economic position through her husband's income, which allowed her access to a broader range of spaces, including international maritime routes and later urban domestic environments in Rotterdam. Her residence in a house with several servants further indicates access to more comfortable and differentiated domestic space. Moreover, while Neeltje and Cornelia shared a similar socio-economic standing, their spatial contexts differed: Neeltje's rural location limited access to urban infrastructures and social networks, whereas Cornelia's urban life provided greater access to amenities and services.

These cases demonstrate that socio-economic position influenced spatial access in complex ways, not only through wealth but also through location, dependencies and profession.

Responsibilities and spatial anchoring

Care responsibilities played a central role in forming women's spatial anchoring across all three cases, linking reproductive labour directly to limited mobility and a strong bond to the home. All women were responsible for childcare and household management, but the extent and spatial implications of these responsibilities varied.

After the death of her husband, Neeltje Pannevis combined full responsibility for her children with the management of the shipyard, effectively merging domestic and productive spaces and anchoring her daily life to a single location. Her continued co-residence with her son Pieter into adulthood further reflects a long-term responsibility centred on the household. Cornelia Schmid, in contrast, initially experienced a more flexible domestic arrangement while living on board, where childcare was partially shared with the crew. However, as her family grew, domestic responsibilities increasingly tied her to a settled home in Rotterdam and later Charlois, reducing her mobility. Fishery women faced the most constrained conditions: without access to hired help, they combined income-generating labour with childcare, often working in or near the home and integrating children into daily work routines. Their spatial practices were therefore closely bound to the direct environment of house, village, and harbour. Across all cases, domestic responsibilities anchored women spatially and restricted their everyday movements.

8. CONCLUSION

An intersectional approach reveals that women's lives in maritime societies were shaped by overlapping social, economic, and legal conditions rather than gender alone. While gender acted as a primary dividing factor, differences within gender, such as class, authority, and responsibilities, produced diverse spatial practices, even as shared experiences like marriage and motherhood created similarities. This interplay between variation and structure is key to understanding the case studies and their broader implications.

Rethinking women: inequality and internal differentiation

This paper shows that women in maritime society were structurally unequal to men, but cannot be understood as a single, homogeneous category. Gendered inequalities were evident in the limited legal authority, economic dependency, and primary responsibility for childcare and household labour that shaped women's everyday lives. The research demonstrates that "women" must be understood through an intersectional lens. Even within a limited set of examples, significant differences emerge in socio-economic position, legal authority and everyday agency. While many women shared experiences such as marriage or motherhood, spatial outcomes vary a lot. Spatial practices were unfluenced by context, revealing that gender alone is insufficient as an explanatory framework. Rethinking women as multilayered and relational is therefore important for a more accurate understanding of both social and spatial structures.

Intersectionality and the production of spatial practices

Examining women's spatial practices through an intersectional lens reveals the diversity of their mobility and spatial engagement. Spatial freedom was shaped by overlapping factors: socio-economic status, legal authority or family responsibilities. High mobility could coexist with limited legal or economic independence, while substantial property ownership involved significant control but tied women closely to a specific location. Domestic and reproductive responsibilities acted as consistent spatial restrictions, despite wealth or legal authority.

> *Although initiatives to advance gender equality are in progress, the sector still faces considerable challenges in fostering a genuinely inclusive atmosphere. Consequently, maritime women remain invisible and unknown to many and thereby become unexpected.*
>
> *~ Irene B. Jacobs (2025b)*

The comparison of shipyard owners, women on sea, and fishery women demonstrates that the reasons behind movement restrictions and opportunities varied: economic necessity, household duties, or professional obligations all intersected to form distinct spatial practices. This layered perspective challenges simplistic assumptions that wealth or status alone determined women's mobility or access to space.

Limitations and directions for further research

Despite these insights, this research is limited in scope. It focuses on three Dutch women and does not explore the experiences of unmarried, childless, or women from diverse backgrounds. Addressing these groups would add significant depth but would require a broader, more comparative study, particularly considering the intersections of race and colonial contexts. Future research could examine these dimensions to better understand how different life circumstances and backgrounds shaped women's access to space, legal authority, and economic agency in maritime societies. Such work would expand the historical record and provide a more inclusive view of urban and architectural practices in port cities.

This paper demonstrates that women in maritime contexts were neither passive nor uniform. Their spatial practices, mobility, and engagement with urban and domestic environments were shaped by complex, layered factors that intersected across reproduction, economic, and legal dimensions. Recognizing this multidimensionality allows architectural and urban histories to more accurately narrate the lived experiences of women and take it into account for the future.

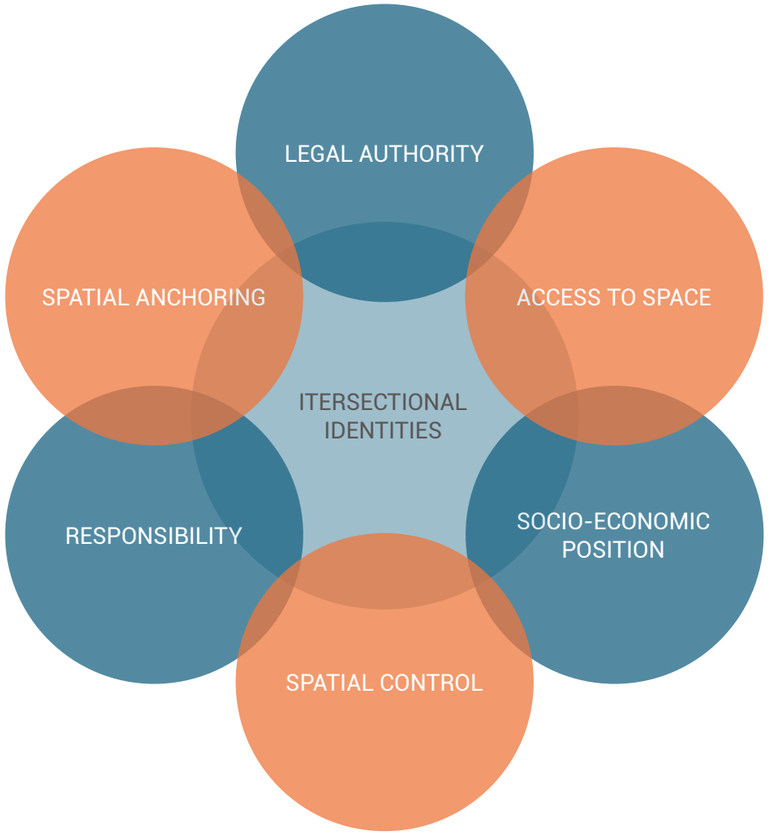


Figure 18
Dimensions of Intersectionality in maritime society in the 19th century
Graphic by author

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I would like to thank Irene Jacobs for her time and support. In particular, her guidance in selecting the case studies and her sharing of notes and archival materials from the Maritime Museum were invaluable to this research.

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