

# Gender politics in fabrics: the history and change of fibre art from the perspective of feminism

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**Abstract.** This article primarily looks at the evolution of textile practices from traditional domestic labour predominately performed by women. It also studies how textiles have become an artistic and symbolic medium that expresses gender issues in a contemporary era. It reviews the history of how textile was integral to women's daily duty in Eastern cultures particularly in ancient China. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, women began to participate in textile manufacturing and played a major role in the field, signifying a shift from domestic to industrial labour and expanding their social roles. In the 1970s, due to a variety of social movements and growing attention of gender inequality in academic world, education institutions like the Bauhaus started to offer fibre art programs, providing female with more possibilities to access to creative and technical learning. Since then, fiber art also gained visibility as a form of feminist expression. Fiber art is a medium that helps women turn textile work into an art genre. This shift not only challenges conventional boundaries between craft and fine art but also encourages more woman to use fiber art to talk about their lives and gender roles in a society. The article follows these changes to show fiber art that not only helped women speak up through their work, but also displays a process of gender movements throughout its development.

**Keywords:** textile, fiber art, female roles in manufacturing industry, female craft labour

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## 1. Introduction

There is a close association between textiles as a productive activity and the image of femininity. In Eastern cultures, textile is associated with the maternal figure. In ancient China, men worked outside the home to provide financial support for the family, while women took more responsibility for caring for the family. In the family, mothers would sew clothes for their children and prepare embroidery and clothes for their married daughters. At the same time, weaving, as a skill, can be passed down through the female members of the families, from grandmothers to mothers and mothers to daughters. This is to say, textile becomes an important part of both women's labor and kinship.

With the development of the capitalist economy during the Industrial Revolution, the traditional cottage industry was gradually replaced by large-scale mechanized production. Women began to shift their family-oriented roles to participate in social production and work for manufacturing industry. The evolution of women's roles from predominantly domestic responsibilities to active participation in the social and public spheres, reflected both a structural shift economically and socially. For example, instead of making everything at home for daily use, people began to rely more on goods produced through factories. To sustain the capitalist economy, more women entering the labour market, especially in the textile sector. During the Industrial Revolution, women workers became the main labor force in the textile industry. Due to the long period spent working in textile factories, women workers became familiar with materials such as fabric, needles, and thread. The accumulation of these textile experiences made textiles a representative element of the social roles and gender identities of women workers.

Since the 1970s, changes in the social and cultural environment, regarding the second feminist movement and the development of the Bauhaus Academy, have provided more opportunities for women to enter the field of art. The second movement of feminism asserted that women should enjoy equal rights and opportunities with men in legal, social, political and economic terms, and encouraged women to pursue independence and autonomy [1] (NOW, 1966). Between 1919 and 1933, the Bauhaus, a pioneering art and design school, gradually opened up educational opportunities to women. A total of 462 women were admitted, making up nearly a third of the student body. With the establishment of the Fibre Arts Workshop, fiber arts, traditionally regarded as a 'women's craft', formally entered the education system. This provided systematic creative support for women.

From the Industrial Revolution in 1940s to the 1970s, the value of women's labor changed as different roles shifted. This shift encouraged women to actively generate social and cultural values. Textile as a medium has extended women's roles from the domestic towards the social sphere. Fibre art, as an art form originated from textile, is not only functionalized as a type of art, but also displays the process of gender movement throughout the evolutionary progress of fiber art.

Drawing on the timeline to structure the article. This article aims to explore how fiber art has been transformed from textile into an important medium for contemporary women artists. The article also explores how women artists have used this art form to express themselves and challenge social stereotypes about the undervaluing of women's roles and female labor. It further examines how contemporary women artists have opened up new possibilities for women's art practice through fiber art practice.

In the traditional family model, which usually involves men working outside the home as the provider of the family, while women are more likely to be housewife. Weaving is not only a central component of female's role within a family which refers to a figurative expression of motherhood and affection. For example, a poem in the Book of Songs describes a story of a wife who sews new clothes for her husband, who is satisfied whenever he goes out wearing the new clothes she sewed. When the clothes become torn, the wife mends them again to make sure that her husband comes home in new clothes every time. This reflects the integration of weaving in the daily lives of ancient women. Meng Jiao's "Song of the Travelling Son" describes a mother using the needle and thread in her hands to make clothes for her son who is traveling far away. The poem presents weaving as more than just handwork, it becomes a symbol of a mother's care and emotional devotion. Through descriptions of women making and repairing clothes for their families, the act of weaving is shown as an expression of love and care. The act of passing down textile skills from one generation of women to the next does more than preserve weave skills, it maintains the long-standing association between women and textile practices. This process also serves as a means of strengthening bonds between women, particularly within families, through the process of teaching and learning. In this way, textile becomes a medium that reflects kinship and gender identity. However, the idea of the textile as the labor associated with women does not come naturally; it is influenced by the gender division of labor under traditional societies, where men are responsible for productive labor and women are responsible for domestic work, child rearing and other duties. According to Butler [2] (1999, p.7),

The intrinsic nature of gender is not something we are born with. It is influenced by repetitive behaviors in our daily lives. These behaviors include how we dress, what we say or what work we do. Over time, these repetitive behaviors make gender roles seem natural, but they are not. They are socially and culturally constructed. Jobs such as caring or teaching, for example, are often seen as 'women's work'. But this is not because women are naturally better at these jobs. Rather, it's because history and social rules have told us this time and time again.

The shift in work space (from housework to factory) and the change in the mode of production (from home to social production) are triggered by industrialization. To some extent, this breaks the traditional pattern of gender division of labor and opens up new possibilities for women's participation in social production.

The Industrial Revolution of the 1840s led to a wave of industrialisation and urbanisation. Home-based forms of production were gradually replaced by factory production, which in turn shifted women's roles from unpaid domestic work to waged labor in industrial settings. During the Industrial Revolution, women's contribution to the socio-economic aspects of society increased. Take Korea as an example: The proportion of women in the labour force, for instance, jumped from 28.7% in 1960 to 35.2% in 1970 and it increased again to 36.6% in 1980 [3] (Economic Planning Board, 1963a, 1973a, 1983a, cited in Kim 2011, p.5). The rise in female labor force participation means an increasing number of women engaging in paid employment outside the home. This situation has expanded the country's productive capacity, and the increase in the labor force has also promoted national economic development. However, women still face unfair treatment at work. Even though they work longer hours than men. Women worked an average of 245 hours per month in 1984, as opposed to 241 hours for men. This meant that women worked 10.2 hours a day, well in excess of the official 8-hour working day, while men averaged 10 hours a day [3] (Park, 1993: 133-4, cited in Kim 2011, p.6).

Holding educational level constant, women workers in manufacturing received about 56% of the wages paid to their male counterparts in 1978 [3] (Kim, 1984: 65, cited in Kim 2011, p.6). This demonstrates that although women play a crucial role in the process of industrialization, they continue to face inequality in the workplace. Despite their increasing participation in industrial production, women are often subjected to unfair treatment, such as longer working hours and lower wages compared to men. At the same time, in pursuit of greater efficiency and higher profits, factories began to implement more specialized and segmented divisions of labour force. This shift not only intensifies the demands placed on female workers, but also further reinforces their association with repetitive and undervalued tasks. As a result, while industrialization opens up new opportunities for women, it also deepens existing gender inequality within the labor force. The long hours of intense labor required of women working in textile mills on assembly lines make textiles representative of women's professional identity. The rise of capitalism has increased the labor value of women. In pre-industrial societies, much of women's work, such as weaving, took place within the home and was often seen as part of their domestic duties rather than recognized as economic labor. However, with the development of capitalist economies, these forms of work began to shift into formal, and can get salary, such as working in the textile factory. Yet, despite this transformation, gender-based inequalities still exist. Women were still paid less than men and worked under worse conditions. In this situation, capitalist development restructured the location and form of women's labor but failed to bring about a corresponding change in the underlying ideology of gender, which continued to view women primarily as caregivers and homemakers. This unfinished transformation sets the stage for the 20th century's women's efforts to make textiles not only create

economic revenue but also imply and metaphorize social and cultural history including community and gender context through fiber art.

In the 1970s developments in the social and cultural environment provided women with more opportunities to create social/cultural value, regarded as in theories about equality in law and policy and the development of fiber art in the field of art. For example, the National Organisation for Women (NOW) in Second-wave feminism announced:

NOW in its founding announcement states that the constitution to the civil rights of all individuals, must be effectively applied and enforced to isolate and remove patterns of sex discrimination, to ensure equality of opportunity in employment and education, and equality of civil and political rights and responsibilities on behalf of women, as well as for Negroes and other deprived groups [1] (1966,p.3).



**Figure 1.** Tank-Cozy, facric installation (Marianne Jorgenson, 2009)

In the field of art, textiles as a medium, have gradually evolved into an art form known as fiber art. fiber art can transform textile into "artistic" expression, changing the traditional impression that textile are merely sewing with thread or looms, and encouraging more women artists to use textiles as a medium for their artistic creations. For example, female artists have used fiber art to reflect on social issues such as gender stereotypes. Danish artist Marianne Jørgensen has created a work called "cozy-tank". The artist covered a tank with hand-sewn pink fabric to discuss Denmark's involvement in the Iraq war. In this artwork, Jørgensen does not reject the association of knitting with femininity. Instead, she draws on the cultural meanings connected to the color pink—such as femininity, softness, a perceived lack of authority, and nostalgic links to domestic life. By doing so, she uses these associations to undermine and challenge the symbolic power of the tank [4] (Pentney, 2008, p.3).

The artist creates a contrast by covering military tanks with pink fabric. The soft texture of the fabric and the color pink are traditionally associated with femininity, care, and domestic life, while the tanks—made of hard metal—symbolize masculinity and military power. Through this contrast in color, material, and gender symbolism, the work challenges traditional gender roles. The artist chose to cover the tank with fabric, making the work a clear and powerful way to talk about social issues.

Also, the repetitive action of the textile process is given a new meaning through the creation of female fiber artists. According to Esquivel [5] (2019, p.121).

Sheila Pepe's work—both in its making and its unmaking—deploys repetitive fiber work as a potent anti-philosophy. Repeating the crochet stitch connects the present moment temporally to that which preceded it and virtually to those stitches that will succeed it.

Pepe's work uses the repetitive nature of textile technique to link the present with the past and future, embodying the continuous flow of time and labor. The process of weaving involves a lot of repetitive action, requiring repeated threading of the needle. It takes a lot of time and effort for woman to complete a textile, and these efforts often go overlooked by people. Pepe's work makes the process of textile clear through the repetition of the fiber art practice.

Fiber art also can reinforce community's solidarity. Rather than being executed by individual artists, many fiber art projects engage women from the community in the creative process.



**Figure 2.** Knitted womb, knitting craft (MK Carroll, 2007)

For example, In early 2005, a group of knitters came together through LiveJournal, a blogging platform, to form a private online community called Knit4Choice. The group encouraged fellow knitters to use a pattern by MK Carroll to craft knitted wombs. These creations were intended to be placed on the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court as a symbolic protest against efforts to limit abortion rights and as an expression of continued support for the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling [4] (Pentney,2008,p.4).

These knitted wombs support abortion rights in a gentle, soft textile medium. Combining 'textile' with 'social issues' to signify women's ownership of their bodies, the Knit4Choice community organizes individual, geographically dispersed knitters through online blogs and shared patterns. The creation of each knitted womb is both an individual event and a collective symbolic act that strengthens the solidarity and emotional community building of the women's community. From the three generations of women in the family (grandmothers, mothers and daughters) to women's labor groups to contemporary women's communities, textiles are often associated with sharing and emotional communication. This shows that fiber art is not only about individual emotional expression but also carries the power of community and public practice. The female artists and art community such as Marianne Jørgensen, Sheila Pepe and Knit4choice demonstrate that fiber art transforms textiles from a technique to an artistic language. The language expresses women's self-identity through material characteristics and through the process of creating the artwork.

## 2. Conclusion

In summary, the article examines women's roles in the historical and cultural context through the evolution of textile practices. In the nascent stages of textile in Chinese history, weaving is not only a craft but also the method of women in maintaining their families and passing on their skills to the next generation of women. The article analyzes ancient Chinese poetry to show how textile imagery symbolizes kinship, love, and motherhood. For instance, the practice of women sewing clothes for their husbands or children is regarded as a symbol of emotional care and the responsibility of women. The connection between women and craft further solidified the belief that textile work was not simply a mundane task, but rather a manifestation of ideal womanhood representing female's characters regarding qualities such as patience, elegance and exquisiteness.

As a result of the social and economic changes brought about by the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, production shifted away from the domestic sphere and became concentrated in factories. Women's participation in the labour force increased. While this change created new opportunities for women to participate in the public economy, it did not inherently result in equality because as the article points out, even with high education levels and workloads, female's wage was significantly lower than male. These disparities highlighted the entrenched gender hierarchies that devalued women's labor—both in the domestic and public sphere.

Textile has gradually transformed from representing domestic roles into a medium for resistance and socio-political engagement via artistic approaches. This shift indicates a recognition of how textiles expands the understanding of the scope of fine art from painting or sculpture to more diverse art genres. It also revealing changes of gender divisions under the immediate social structures and on the labor market. Textile, once relegated to the private sphere of the household, has evolved to serve as a medium for documenting women's lived experiences.

The article points out that the connection between women and textile work was shaped by social expectations. These judgements included the belief that women were naturally suited to housework, and that textile-related activities such as sewing

and weaving were professionally overlooked. Fiber art makes it possible to reexamine how gender roles were historically constructed and reinforced gender roles. At the same time, it offers a way to challenge those roles by redefining the meaning and value of textile work.

In the 1970s, the development of fiber arts promoted to the evolution of textile practice. During this period, women artists began to use textiles as a form of creative medium for expressing themselves. Individual artists and artist groups like Marianne Jørgensen, Sheila Pepe, and Knit4Choice used fiber art to turn traditional textile practice into a way of expressing ideas. Instead of seeing knitting as just a housework, artists treat it as a form of art. Their works used fabric to display their concerns on identity, gender, and social issues. For example, Marianne Jørgensen employs knitting as a medium to address the topic of war and Knit4Choice uses textile to support reproductive rights. Through simple materials and techniques, they invite people to see fiber art in a new way.

Looking back at the main idea of this essay, textile is not just reflects women's role in history. It has become a medium for women to question and change gender stereotypes. By creating fiber art work, women get the initiative of weaving, they no longer knit for family or factory. Now, they use it to share their own stories and experiences regarding gender, power, and social issues. Therefore, fiber arts will continue to develop in the future. It will trigger more and more discussions on the gender inequality, and women will be more aware of their needs and protect their rights and positions in society. This growing awareness has contributed to the expansion of feminist artistic expression, including fiber art practices. There may be more fiber arts projects organized by women's groups or online communities. This helps to increase the participation of people from different cultural backgrounds, connecting personal experiences to the social group and having greater impacts.

In conclusion, textiles serve as a medium for recording the history of women's labour and reflecting the development of gender movements. It brings traditional craft techniques into public spectrum, which redefines the boundaries between art and craft as well as private and the public spheres. As more women artists use textile to express viewpoints, question stereotype, and build collective networks, fiber art has become an important medium for engaging with current social issues in both individual and community-based practices. Through fibre art, women will tell their stories and create new narratives for future generations.

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