

# Reflections on women's labour in museum narratives: the case of silk workers

## Abstract

Women became victims of poverty due to the Industrial Revolution and the consequent upheavals in economic life worldwide. This research aims to highlight women's work in the museum through the processes of sericulture and silk making, both domestic and industrial. The main case study was the Silk Museum of PIOP, in Soufli, in northern Greece, as a predominantly silk-producing center. The silk industry, in which the female contribution was decisive, shaped the character and contributed significantly to the development of the small town from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century.<sup>1,2</sup> In addition to the bibliography, the research was based on fieldwork at the Silk Museum and Soufli and interviews with female silk ex-workers and exhibition contributors. Field research was also conducted in museums with similar themes in Hungary and Greece, while materials from Sweden and France were studied to compare various exhibition practices to highlight the different aspects with which the work of women workers is presented in the contemporary museum as a conscious curatorial practice. The study concluded that the representation of women's labor in museums reflects broader social and cultural narratives, emphasizing their undervalued yet pivotal role in industrial and domestic sericulture and promoting a more inclusive understanding of industrial heritage.

**Keywords:** social roles, PAR (participatory action research), community, collective memory, affective curatorship, museum exhibition, gender studies, intangible heritage

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## Introduction

This article examines the issue of women's work in sericulture and silk production and its representation in the museum.<sup>3</sup>

It has been argued that Labor, as a concept, has historically been considered an exclusively male domain.<sup>4</sup> This is mainly attributed to historical narratives written by white men, which often underestimate or omit women's contributions. The absence of women from historiography, however, does not mean they were absent from shaping history.<sup>5</sup>

Based on Avdela and Psarra's<sup>6</sup> *her-story* to *his-story* counterpoint, the purpose of this research is to highlight how the industrialization of the means of production in the early 18th to the 20th century led women from the domestic to the factory work environment, in which they were called upon to face new challenges, in which sericulture and silk-making became an integral part of women's lives and work.

The Silk Museum<sup>7</sup> was founded in 1990. A revival of its permanent exhibition took place in 2009. It is the main case study of this research, as an example of how a museum, through its collections and the means of its exhibition, approaches the socio-economic context of a region and its emergence as an important silk-producing center from the late 19th to the mid-20th century. The contribution of women to silk production and processing, as well as to the local economy, along with their sacrifices and Labor struggles, is examined in how it is highlighted in the museum exhibitions. Focusing on the study of the permanent exhibition of the Silk Museum, the impact of work on women's lives and the contribution of women's work to society and the local economy are discussed. The aim is to examine the museum as a site of representation of women's work in conversation with the life of the local community.

The museum thus emerges as a 'third space', i.e. a place of gathering for the well-being, democracy and public life of citizens,<sup>8</sup>

in line with ICOM's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) for the foundation of human rights, through the integral contribution of local people, especially women (workers), to its collections and activities.

## Materials and methods

For this research, different fields had to be studied and linked together, each presenting different challenges. More specifically, the fields included sociology, technology (sericulture, silk processing) and museology. The research is based on qualitative survey including interviews with former silk workers and exhibition's contributors, in situ research, criteria for evaluating museum exhibitions and conducting comparative studies.

Regarding women's work, the research approach was shaped by a combination of methods, starting with a review of Greek and foreign-language literature and web sources. In order to better understand the specific context of the Soufli women silk workers, not only focus on sources related to Soufli, but also on those from the rest of Greece. In this context, study of similar female workers in other countries (French silk workers, Ovalistes and Canuts, Swedish Workers) helped to better understand the situation in Soufli, raising questions that might not have arisen otherwise. The comparative aspect in the case study made the Labor status of Soufli more transparent due to its own particular circumstances and shaped the way of thinking and perception around it.

Having the theoretical and historical background in the quiver, an on-site investigation carried out in Soufli, in the Tzivre factory and in other local museums and shops about silk, in order to understand the factors that led to the development of this particular occupation in this particular place. A major limitation of the research and writing was the remote location of Soufli and the inability to secure funding for travel. During the autopsy, a diary was kept to record the entire experience. In it, the impressions of the geographical area (harsh weather conditions, proximity to the river, as was customary for silk

factories), the train station (place of export trade), located within the town, the mulberry trees in all the courtyards of the houses and on all the sidewalks, the cocoon houses (known as 'koukoulospita'), which defined the architectural style of the area characterized by the trademark Brikas, and the shops-museums of the residents, all around the theme of silk, were described.

Researchers contacted old workers two of whom (Chrysoula Tsiamita and Koula Tsiantuka) were interviewed inside the factory site of Tzivre, where there was an opportunity to explain the reeling process in the remaining machines and to observe how it is used today for cultural events. The interview related to both their own and their mothers' experiences. An interview was also conducted with a worker (Despina Murika), who also appeared in a video of the Silk Museum, who conveyed her experiences and those of her relatives. Due to her personal health issues, the interview took place at her home. Through the lived experience of themselves and people in their close circle, aspects were explored and clarified, not only concerning working conditions, but also technical parts, such as the reeling process, and political/historical aspects around Soufli. In this part, earlier interviews of the same or other workers who do not live anymore were taken into account. Finally, through the participatory observation of the residents' way of life (cultural courses and event, discussions) the community's involvement became understandable and the importance of silk for them too.

The museological part was also based to a large extent on the bibliographical review, which served as a preparatory research. On-site research was carried out at the Silk Museum and discussions were held with its staff. A thorough observation and recording of the audiovisual material, the collections and primary material, the library and the café area was carried out, following the visitors' path and through their eyes. Subsequent visits were then carried out, characterized by museological criteria. The primary methodological tool used was direct observation, accompanied by an examination of evaluation criteria for museum exhibitions.<sup>9-11</sup> Key questions included whether visitors needed prior knowledge to understand the exhibition and its exhibits, and what the main message of the exhibition was. Other central questions addressed the thematic sections of the exhibition, which exhibits or types of exhibits were particularly highlighted and the criteria for their selection, the interpretive tools employed (e.g., wall texts, captions, graphic representations, audiovisual productions, models, etc.), and whether this method of presentation was also used in other museums or represented a distinct approach. For the latter, a comparative method was employed, involving comparisons with the previously and subsequently mentioned museums.

The reactions of school groups visiting the collection, including pupils and teachers, also observed. The visitors' comment book was reviewed, and clarifications were sought when needed. However, as the Museum is located in a small and remote area, conducting participant observation proved challenging. Criteria regarding the museum visit as an experience—such as whether the exhibition would be worthwhile for someone who does not frequently visit museums or what one could gain from visiting this museum—were more difficult to assess for the reasons mentioned above.

Field research was also carried out in museums abroad addressing similar issues, such as the temporary exhibition 'Hungarian Bride' at the Hungarian National Museum, at the temporary exhibition 'Charm of Seoul – What we wear, where we live' at the Museum of Ethnography (Néprajzi Múzeum) and at the temporary exhibition 'Charm of the Silk Roads: Auspicious Designs on Chinese Silk Art' at the Hungarian Agriculture Museum, and in Greek museums

(at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in the exhibition 'Time in my hands. Leda Papakonstantinou. Retrospective', at the Basil Papantoniou Foundation (BPF) -ex Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation (PFF) and at the Museum of Modern Greek Culture), in order to determine the criteria for controlling the way of exhibition and documentation of textiles, traditional costumes and representation of women's labor. An interview was also conducted with the curator of the 2009 revitalization, Alexandra Tranta, who presented the team's perspective and rationale around the curation of the Museum's collections and the promotion of women's work after the first exhibition, and a discussion with Nadia Macha-Bizoumi, who was a scientific researcher in the documentation of the Soufliotian costumes.

There was also important communication with museums in France and Sweden addressing with the subject of silk and women's Labor: Gadagne, Musée d'histoire de Lyon, Maison de Canuts, Lyon, Textilmuseet och Borås museum, Sweden and former factory K A Almgren sidenväveri & museum, Sweden. Contact was sought with other museums, which did not respond. Through online correspondence, the perspective of their contributors and material were provided, while social, political and historical elements of these regions were presented. The comparison of their official websites with that of the Silk Museum and PIOP was also a criterion for examining the exhibitions and the Museum's inclusiveness.

## Historical review

### Women's work in sericulture

The industrialization of the textile industry in England in the mid-nineteenth century, known as the 'golden age' of the factory, radically changed the economic and social context,<sup>5</sup> leading to an unimaginable social transformation, with clocks regulating the lives of workers, hitherto governed by the sun and the cycles of nature.<sup>12,13</sup> In the maelstrom of social and political change, factory girls emerged as the new working class, transcending the gender mores and social roles of the time, causing the first major crisis in the patriarchal system.<sup>14</sup>

As shown in the permanent exhibition of the Silk Museum, which will be analyzed below, the process of silk production occupied a maximum part of the daily life of the inhabitants during the sericulture period (June-September) and included domestic sericulture initially and later artisanal-industrial silk production, with the main spatial point, in its final phase, being the 'haretsi' (market), where the purchase and sale of cocoons took place,<sup>15</sup> which were sent to factories in Greece and abroad.<sup>16</sup> In 1928, from the 5.927 inhabitants, 1.060 were serologists. The 3.067 were women and from those the 560 were respectively serologists.

The breeding of silkworms was a family affair. The type of household production was self-consumptive. Commercial was only to enhance household income.<sup>17</sup> The production of cocoons brought seasonal income to the Soufli families and the work was developed in the context of a specific division of Labor, by gender and age.<sup>1</sup> Men were engaged in the cultivation of mulberry trees, cutting and transporting mulberry leaves - especially in the advanced ages of the silkworms - and trade. Feeding, leaf chopping and harvesting the cocoons as tasks within the household, were associated with the woman's need for care and supervision of the household, characteristic of 'female patience', i.e. a detailed and refined process. Children also contributed to the tasks.<sup>16</sup>

Through the interviews during the fieldwork, it became clear that women provided annual income to their families (rural and not) because the harsh winter hampered men's agricultural work. Seed

farmers hired female workers during the seed production and morus mating season. Seed hatching was initially performed by women in handkerchiefs, with 'maternal care'.<sup>1</sup>

Technological modernization led to the transition from cottage industry to craftsmanship, with the parallel evolution of social relations (disengagement from the domestic context and absorption by local industry). Although family income improved, women's work was not aimed at achieving economic or social independence but at securing funds for dowries, which would be a ticket to a new relationship of subordination.<sup>18</sup> Women in Europe in general, worked as indentured silk workers mainly in the period between adolescence and marriage, a stage of life known as 'service-in-husbandry'.<sup>19</sup> Women's work in the silk factories of the region reinforced the family's ties of dependence on the factory owners-traders, who found in them a permanent, cheap, and stable Labor force.<sup>1</sup>

Before industrialization, silk making in Soufli was predominantly a female, domestic affair. In the first type of processing, i.e. the pre-weaving stages, no skilled personnel were required. In the industry there is a clear division of skills: women carried out the reeling process, spinning, and weaving, and men the dyeing, tasks which until then were carried out by the women, who as 'keepers of secrets', were handed over to their daughters. Women continued to weave household fabrics and garments for everyday use, while the more elaborate and formal ones were woven by professional tailors,<sup>17</sup> as women emphasized in the interviews. The Greek textile industry in general made extensive use of female and child labor. Papastefanaki explains how the industries were the place where women's wage labor acquired its meaning, the meager wages combined with unhealthy working conditions, and the social and political reformers of the 19th century who turned their attention to these issues.<sup>20</sup>

### Female workers in Soufli

Concerning the female workers of the silk factories, from the bibliographical and field research in Soufli, as well as from the interviews we conducted with female workers, the following emerged:

The industries in Greece, consisting mainly of women, benefited from the influx of refugees from Asia Minor in 1922, consisting mainly of women and children.<sup>18</sup> The workforce of the Tzivre factory in Soufli was mostly made up of (470) women and girls aged 11-16 years working as 'patozia' (assistants). There were also 3 foremen, 3 craftsmen and 30 workers. They worked 10 hours on weekdays and 8 hours on Saturdays (280 days per year). The women workers who lived in areas outside the city slept in the factory, unable to return to their homes.

The wages of female workers in Soufli ranged from 18-35 drachmas per day, while those of men ranged from 40-50.<sup>1</sup> The schedule<sup>1</sup> of the Soufli women workers, as described by Tsiantouka, was as follows: 'The stoker came at 4 o'clock, he turned on the burner, we started at 07:30. At 11:30 we stopped for a break, 12:30 we started again, we finished at 16:00. That was after '36. In 1936 and before that it was sunrise to sunset.'

In the place where the reeling processors were working, the temperature reached 90°C and in the 'patozia' 100-110°C. There was a constant alternation of hot and cold water. As different workers reveal: '[...] I spent a week scalding my hands where it says boiling water. My hands were twisted [...] in there where the cocoons were boiling, we boiled the eggs [...] The moisture from the steam was so great that the face and upper part of the body got slime [...] we wore some sacks and when we took them off at the end of the day we were soaked [...]

the machines were cleaned once a week and at the end of it they were black'. To disinfect razor wounds, they first used their urine and then water and hydrochloric acid. The hands were permanently wrinkled, as if they had come out of laundry. The supervisor would hit them when they made mistakes and were full of blisters. Over the years, the hands became damaged, affecting their grip and dexterity.

Many of the former workers developed hearing problems because of the noise from the machinery. The unhealthy work and poor living conditions resulted in many workers, most of whom were 11 to 16 years old, contracting tuberculosis. Conditions within the factory changed from season to season, creating different challenges. 'With a little jacket [...] that they knitted themselves, they came in, they wore knitted socks and the traditional typical shoe called 'geletsa', as stated by Tsiamita.

During work, supervisors often made strict observations and remarks: '[...] if they didn't make you cry, they didn't go away', while no talking was allowed, only singing. There was competition and jealousy from the more experienced and older workers to the less experienced and younger ones 'hey, she's young, what does she know [...]'.<sup>1</sup>

Many girls were forced to abandon school to work, and relied on the father's discretion and character, as well as the family's financial situation, as to whether they would keep the money themselves.<sup>21</sup> Usually when a female worker in Soufli became engaged she stopped working,<sup>15</sup> because the husband wanted her at home '[...] my husband did not let me, I say I want to be at home when I come to see my wife [...]'] said Mourika.

With the reduction of production and the passage of the years, things became even stricter, since, as the worker Fani Koutsis remarks in audiovisual material of the permanent exhibition, 'Well, then they scolded us, they fired us. If they saw you eating bread, they told us to go home'.

The Silk workers' Union is founded in 1930. In 1933 a strike of 108 workers breaks out<sup>2</sup>, demanding an increase in wages and the implementation of an 8-hour shift, without results. In 1936 workers and sericulture workers paralyzed Soufli, succeeding partially, since the Metaxas dictatorship later lifted the concessions.<sup>15</sup> Through the interviews, it was understood that after the strikes and the establishment of unions, conditions improved significantly, as they were paid commensurate with their work, were insured in terms of health care and pensions 'before you would sit in your house and eat what God gave you'<sup>3</sup>, while the eight-hour shift ensured the girls' return to their homes in bordering villages.

Silk production undoubtedly led to the flourishing of the regions in which it was practiced. Its gradual decline weakened the economic power of Soufli, while many women lost their jobs, unable to find new ones, as they were trained in something very specialized. As women workers reported: '[...] you work and then the factory closes and they don't take you anywhere else, it's very difficult [...]',<sup>22</sup> 'Later, when we left, we ran out of cocoons [...]'. The difficult circumstances, long years of hardship and poverty were a motivation for many children to read and study. 'And yet Soufli was a "teacher's village [...]", it produced many scientists'. It became clear that many former workers do not want to talk about their life in the factory as they do not want to remember. Silence is a way of erasing the past. Those who do talk have not embellished or romantically approached the work of the past, despite the passage of years. Despite the harsh conditions, they all admit the importance of the silk factory in the regeneration of Soufli and in boosting incomes.

## Case study

### Community's contribution

The Silk Museum was first created in a period where in Greece until the beginning of the 20th century rural-modern life was not considered worthy of museum representation.<sup>2</sup> Ioanna Papanoniou held the first exhibition in Greece on this subject at the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, which was awarded the European Museum of the Year Award (EMYA) in 1981.<sup>23</sup> The destruction of the rural life of traditional communities, due to World War II, transformed the cultural evidence into museum objects, while urbanization, transformed people from producers to consumers of culture.<sup>24,25</sup> Tranta and Manesi-Kyriaki analyze the issue of the reduction of an object to a museum exhibit.<sup>26</sup>

The original exhibition<sup>2</sup> emphasized the process of sericulture, while the 2009 exhibition's revival particularly highlighted the parameter of women's Labor, according to the exhibition's contributors.

An integral part of the new exhibition was the involvement of the local population (mainly the workers), which transformed the museum into a space for dialog and meaningful interaction, in the context of participatory development, redefining its social role.<sup>24,25,27,28</sup> This participation took the form of valuable information and personal stories (intangible), as well as the women's dowry and other tools and machinery (tangible). The participatory action allowed them to show their love for their place and their active presence. By donating their collections, they helped preserve and disseminate knowledge, witnessing their everyday lives being transformed into a museum project, understanding the economic and social importance of the craft, which was inventoried for their lives.<sup>29</sup> A worker who appears in the museum's audiovisual media typically identifies herself in the interview as the 'mascot' of the village, considering herself an 'actor outside the museum context'.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, the museum was a common place for experts and the public, as a third place of memory, (the other two are the church (permanent) and the cemetery (transit), while it's reuse as a 'museum of itself' (formerly a cocoon house) preserves the memory of the community and smoothly responds to its contemporary needs.<sup>30</sup> '[...] the houses were built for sericulture. One room for the family and the other was a hall and a cellar for the cocoons', testifies Tsiamita.

### Highlighting women's work

The initial collection, as intended to 'produce knowledge', aimed at presenting the technique of sericulture and silk production, defining the urban planning of the city and the life of its inhabitants (integration into the international economic system, urbanization).<sup>1</sup> The exhibition revival, in line with the socio-political demands of its time<sup>31</sup> for women's effective inclusion in the events, purposefully highlights the contribution of women in sericulture. Otherwise, a neutral stance on the issue of women's Labor in the initial exhibition was pulled into a conscious decision with a social imprint. At the time of its first creation, the museum was again harmonized with the demands of its time, i.e. the promotion of modern life as worthy of museum representation.

Before the entrance to the Museum, in a room visible from the street, caftans are exhibited and 'converse' with the street and passers-by, aiming to address an invitation and thus convert them into visitors of the Museum. The main garment represented is the festive-bridesmaid's caftan, chamois (striped) with an incense apron exposed in contrast to the atlas with an atlas apron. The Museum, former cocoon house (koukoulospito) of Doctor Kourtidis, includes

an inner courtyard, which is used for Museum activities and houses the cafeteria.

On the first floor of the permanent exhibition, texts written in the Ekarv method<sup>32,33</sup> present the occupation of women with silk and the history of silk as a female affair, from antiquity to the 20th century. Ascending to the first floor, the visitor is invited to follow a circular path, but one that is interspersed with a free trajectory based on the constructivist model of learning,<sup>34,35</sup> with the supervision of the entire space and therefore of the technical process. It starts with the representation of sericulture and silk weaving with its outgrowth of weaving, following the life cycle of the silkworm and the role of women in these processes.<sup>29</sup> The space is overwhelmed by women's voices in the traditional song 'Sultana Soufliutuda', attributed to a local named 'Sultana', of the audiovisual medium, accompanied by photographs and personal stories of women workers<sup>4</sup> at home and in the factory. The presence of men is limited to scenes of carrying mulberry branches and leaves from the field and trade.

Continuing on the left with the process of sericulture, the way of writing the texts is not neutral and technocentric, but anthropocentric, i.e. it focuses not on the processes themselves, but on their implementation by the women workers. In this way, the visitor gradually becomes aware that silk and women are interdependent, leading one to the development of the other, while being introduced to the world of sericulture through primary (beds) and secondary components (texts) according to Hall's distinction.<sup>36</sup> The processes are understood not primarily as techniques, but through women's lived experiences, making their stories valid in their museum (Morales Lersch, 2019 as cited in Mairesse,<sup>28</sup>). Thus, the museum projected that women's contributions were prominent and not merely complementary.

In a video representing the reeling process, a worker is shown in the room with the corresponding tools, experientially explaining the process. In all audiovisual and interpretive media, the concept of women's work is embedded in different ways, unmediated, i.e. without the intrusion of the curatorial discourse.<sup>37</sup> The texts are based on both historical and archival research and women's testimonies, taking seriously in mind the Labor and other data of the time.<sup>29,31</sup>

All captions include the name of the donor, reinforcing the previous living action of the objects, interwoven with human Labor. Each object 'tells' a story, and with the songs, which are constantly playing, takes on life and meaning for the visitor. The objects are not just donated by a collector, representing the exquisite and the special from an artistic point of view. Instead, they run into protagonists of the lives of their predecessors, written as 'biography',<sup>26</sup> involving a special role, due to their previous living connection with the human being, with the vague history, running into concrete.

When the events represented are true, the obvious way of highlighting them is not required, but the museological approach becomes a witness to the events. Thus, beyond phrases such as 'feeding was a woman's business', the visitor perceives the contribution of women's work as a total 'sense' through the way and processes of silk production, which is determined by how visitors experience the space and by the way they approach it with its cultural composition.<sup>38</sup> Complementary to this in the guided tours, as figurative ways of introducing in the museum,<sup>39</sup> the contribution of women is emphasized in conjunction with the general museological approach of the exhibition.

Moving from the domestic to the industrial process, the interviews are projected with the women workers narrating the conditions in the

factory: unions, dismissals, unhealthy working conditions and wages will be the main subject of re-enactment.<sup>1</sup> The already known worker from the video of the reeling causes embarrassment to the visitors, who see her talking about painful working conditions. The escalation thus becomes more pronounced, since from neutrality the worker now explicitly takes a position.

The silk production process is completed with the costumes donated by the inhabitants, as an outgrowth of it. They acquire their own 'voice' and become evidence of cultural expression, associated with economic behavior and social and technical practices, making the Museum a 'locus' for the preservation of the community memory of the objects it has collected. As the curators of the exhibition explained, the aim was to highlight representative specimens as complete sets. For this reason, simple men's accessories have only been included in temporary exhibitions, as 'parts', which in themselves do not highlight the costume.<sup>29</sup> The exposed caftans 'converse' by showing audiovisual material with social (i.e. strike in front of the Tzivre factory) and cultural events, as well as personal moments of the inhabitants (weddings, school life), highlighting the embodied 'experience' of the once utilitarian object.

### Temporary exhibitions and Museum activities as a means of disseminating the museum's message

The Museum's temporary exhibitions and its actions on the subject of women's work play an important role in the disseminating of the Museum's message.

The temporary exhibition 'Like Silk' (10/10/23-4/3/2024) allowed residents to get to know the intangible and material elements of Japanese culture.<sup>40</sup> The contribution of women is dominant from beginning to end, with color woodblock prints that successively show all the stages of sericulture, with Japanese women farmers as protagonists. The image seems more idealized than it was, with Utamaro presenting a more refined depiction of female occupation, with the workers groomed and wearing luxurious kimonos. Through the world of the geisha and the rural world of sericulture, the permanent and temporary exhibition came together around a common meaning, etching the visitor's experience, highlighting the importance of the patterns on the surface of the kimono as symbols of personality, 'mirrors' of the gender, age and social status of the person wearing them. The themes have symbolic connotations and complex meanings.

Sandell<sup>41</sup> illustrates the individual-community-society interdependence, arguing that museums have a responsibility to help combat social inequalities, with a common way of approaching such issues being the use of personal testimonies. In the context of a vivid representation of the use of the loom, women from the community narrate stories about their lives and working conditions, while using it, conveying memories of the past, triggering questions about the present. Mason<sup>28</sup> in her approach to communities includes several elements such as shared historical or cultural experiences. In this regard, the context in Soufli is shaped by historical events and demographic elements (e.g. the Asia Minor disaster and the subsequent arrival of refugees, mainly women and children, who formed a major part of the workforce, strikes at the Tzivre factory).

According to McGhie, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is also a museums matter<sup>5</sup>. This is why ICOM in 2019 set 17 objectives for museums to work towards at a practical level, through the 'Human Rights based approach' for the foundation of human rights.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the museum must relate, serve and interact with the community and through its actions, define it. One of the key principles of the Silk Museum is to renew its actions<sup>31</sup> and to

understand its audience through 'interpretive communities', identified by their shared frames of mind, according to Hooper-Greenhill.<sup>34</sup> One of the examples it encapsulates in its social activities section is the 'Machalalas' (neighborhood), i.e. regular women's meetings at the museum. Through the process of peer teaching, women of all ages learn the techniques of embroidery and knitting, turning the museum heritage into a living contemporary creation.<sup>29</sup>

The museum plays a leading role in the cultural events of the city, supporting the economy of the local community and making the 'everyday heritage' more visible, since in local museums local people develop collections and narratives for themselves, making them particularly important for the community.<sup>28</sup> In the context of museums' active participation through the way they display their collections, the term 'Curatorial Activism' has been developed, defined as: attempts by individuals to engage with, represent and often contribute to social and political protest and reform movements. These actions primarily, but not exclusively, take the form of collecting and curating the ephemera and 'artifacts' of activist work and, thus, directly or indirectly support such work.<sup>28</sup> Part of it, are feminist campaigns against the lack of works by women artists in museums. Going a step further, this exhibition meets the criteria of 'affective curatorship', i.e. it uses means that aim to emotionally awaken the visitor.<sup>43</sup> The temporary exhibition 'Morus' (20/12/23-30/6/2024), as a result of women creators, provides the ground for the introduction of women artists into the museum space, whose works converse with the museum objects of the permanent exhibition, approaching the artistic, social, historical and ecological dimensions of silk to highlight the intangible cultural heritage through elements of the material culture of the region, such as the clothing choices of the inhabitants.<sup>44</sup> Women artists are included as active subjects rather than just passive art objects, and high art is now separated from the more manual Labor of women after industrialization.<sup>28</sup>

For the temporary exhibition 'Brides'. Stories of Silk' (18-25/09/2018) (18-25/09/2018), the occasion was each wedding dress and how it 'tells' stories of the woman who wore it and of her era<sup>6</sup>. Through the exhibition it became clear how wedding dresses keep up with fashion trends, the rich people's dresses were exhibited next to the farmers', the traditional ones of Soufli and some Muslim ones.

### Other museum practices for highlighting women's work

The contribution of museums is so important that people in the cultural sector often claim that museums can influence political, economic and legal change.<sup>28</sup> Nowadays, curatorship, accompanying the evolution of museums, is no longer intended to be a mere display for the sake of impressing, but rather to educate and train, to provide the skills that will create a society based on the principles of *democracy* and *equality*.

The 'Maison des Canuts' housed in the headquarters of the Syndicate of Weavers and Similaires in Lyon, details the organization of the Lyon factory and the Canuts rebellions in 1831 and 1834 (Maison de Canuts), promoting equality, social justice and human rights, which is essentially defined as activism.<sup>28</sup>

At the Textil Museet in Sweden, the permanent exhibition 'Textile Power' unravels the thread of the textile industry, starting from industrialization with reference to social transformation. Revival of working conditions, ecological issues, women's and child Labor nowadays and the shaping of Labor rights are the subject of discussion (J. Daun, personal communication, October 28, 2023;<sup>45</sup>). Parallelisms with today and the questions to the visitor seem to be the approach of

the Museum of Modern Greek Culture, as found on-spot research. The corresponding exhibition dedicated to women's work, being newer obviously, invites the visitor, not only to perceive the existence and contribution of women, but also to ask questions about this work in the present compared to the past.<sup>46</sup>

'Almgren Silk Factory & Museum' in Sweden illuminates women's stories in the textile industry, producing innovative educational activities for schools and preserving the knowledge of weaving on Jacquard looms for the future.<sup>47</sup>

In the exhibition 'Time in my hands. Leda Papaconstantinou. A retrospective.' in the part about women workers at the Daskalaki Textile Factory the audiovisual material of the interview and the political documentary are combined with the composition of the working card templates collected by the artist during her autopsy. Finally, the Musée d'histoire de Lyon discusses women's occupations related to silk, presenting the work of young girls in boarding school factories such as that of Jujurieux, mentioning the Ovalistes strike and the careers of feminist trade unionists (C. Gotterand, personal communication, June 26, 2023).

## Results

In the present research, the issue of women's work was studied in a multiprismatic way, with 'warp' and 'weft' from different sciences (History, Sociology, Folklore, Museology), in order to finally 'weave' their derivative.

As it emerged from the research, the interweaving of sericulture and silk weaving with the female gender is approached by the Silk Museum right from the beginning already in the sections on the history of silk. The Museum presents domestic reeling and sericulture not only as technical processes, but as interconnected with women and as an integral part of their lives. The exhibition approaches the above through the testimonies and narratives of the women presented in the audiovisual productions, accompanying texts and captions, which are not limited to a simple description of the process, but in relation to the women, at home and in the factory, who are the protagonists in the visual material (photographs).

At the household level, women's domestic work (introversion) was based on their position of protecting the household, the detailed work of cutting mulberry leaves in the early stages of the silkworm's life, linked to their physical formation and socially accepted virtues. Although the women did not admit to a clear separation, it was nevertheless informal and intimate. Through a combination of primary, secondary and additional material, it is presented to the visitor that the intrusion of one gender into the other's business was only in case of extra help, while trade (extroversion) was a purely male affair, with no mention of female involvement in it, creating this contrasting dichotomy.

The women's costumes on display donated by locals, carrying the embodied experience and are exhibited as a result of the silk production process in conversation with the projector, which presents photographs of everyday life in Soufli. Although there are men's costume components these are not exhibited, possibly because they are not complete sets like the women's.

At the craft level, the industrialization of the means of production led to the industrialization of the way of creating the workforce, determined by strict working hours, exceeding the eight-hour limit and unfavorable working conditions for health. The urgent need to improve the quality of life was met by workers' struggles. Thus,

sericulture and silkworm making could be described more as work intertwined with female Labor than as work of the female gender. They were linked to everyday life and at the cottage industry level were used to create the dowry, with silk being the most valuable element of it. In Europe, work before and after marriage was aimed at strengthening the family household, hindering the creation of a work consciousness with an impact on the assertion of Labor rights.

Through the former workers' testimonies, visitors receive another comprehensive and general view of the working conditions in Tzivre (tuberculosis, wages, accommodation within the workplace, child Labor, foremen, hot water, etc.), an element that also activates them emotionally. The loom on display is used in demonstrations by women workers during activities in the museum, combining representation with their personal narratives. The community's involvement, not only through donations, but also through general assistance (information, testimonies, etc.) has turned the Museum into a space where experiences are intense, and the knowledge of the experts is not just taken as a third party's view, but they become the vehicle between the community and the visitor, for the transmission of knowledge and experience.

Both the temporary exhibitions and the museum's actions accentuate the contribution of women from the overall message of the exhibition, while the museum's actions aim to educate, to transmit knowledge about industrial archaeology and to fill the gaps in formal education, involving entertainment, giving the community an occasion to embrace the site and the project, bringing the city to life by forming social and cultural identities within a museum context and a sense of belonging.<sup>41</sup>

The museum can be the means to keep communities alive and to preserve, evolve and shape history and culture through the cooperation of experts with its audience. The Silk Museum offers a fertile ground within which testimonies can be extracted, for discussions about folk tradition, community strengthening, and preparing young people for their integration into the adult world and the world of work. With a creative spirit, solidarity and an open mind, the people of the museum can elevate it to the heart of the community; a heart that holds knowledge, memory and strength.

Future research could focus on expanding the comparative study to include additional museums worldwide, examining how women's labor is represented across diverse cultural and historical contexts. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could explore the impact of museum practices on community engagement and education, particularly in younger generations. Finally, integrating digital technologies, such as virtual reality or interactive platforms, could offer new ways to present and interpret the role of women in sericulture and industrial heritage, making the research more accessible and engaging for a global audience.<sup>48-52</sup>

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No potential conflict o

(Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup>In Jujurieux, France: They woke up at 5 a.m. and started work at 6 a.m. Rest and soup: 8.30-9 am. Work again at 9-12 pm. Lunch: 12-12.30 p.m. Recreation: 12.30-1 p.m. Work: 1-4 p.m. Rest, snack: 4-4.30 p.m. Work: 4.30-7.30 pm Dinner: 7-7.30 p.m. Recreation: 7.30-7.45 p.m. Finally, prayers and sleep (Schweitzer, 2002).

<sup>2</sup>The Ovalistes strike is interesting, as through it there were abundant outbursts of anger and misogyny from police spies, newspaper journalists and local officials, who adopted the view that the 'libertarian' behavior of women was a direct consequence of the moral debauchery that must result from factory work - especially the mixed workplaces of the factories (Hilden, 1986 p.813).

<sup>3</sup>In Sweden, Almgren's son Oscar founded a small shop where weavers could buy food at a discount and a personal pension fund for the workers. According to Swedish law, a worker had to have a letter of recommendation from his employer to receive pension money from the state. They usually continued to work in the factory until they were 80 or even 90 years old (T. Karlsson, personal communication, October 3, 2023). Karlsson informs us that these conditions did not only apply to the Almgren factory, but also to the Casparsson & Schmidt silk factory, as many had worked in both, and so often the interview material is a little blurred.

<sup>4</sup>Similarly, at Almgren, the visitor is confronted with the same practice of photographs that converse with the other primary exhibits, giving rise to a discussion of women's work, not only in the past, but also in the present, acquiring a more dynamic, energetic and contemporary attitude (K.A. Almgren silk factory & museum, n.d.).

<sup>5</sup>Under the declaration, more treaties have been ratified: Convention to End Discrimination Against Women (1979), Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (2018).

<sup>6</sup>In December 2023 the National Museum of Hungary opened the exhibition 'Hungarian Bride', starting from the same concept, presenting social conditions with a feminist aura through personal objects, children's drawings and a digital archive with all the photographs of the contributing citizens. Each wedding dress was a story of the woman who wore it.

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