No, the Black Death did not create more jobs for women

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The plague known as the Black Death which tore through 14th century Europe is traditionally held to have had at least one upside. Women, the theory runs, were able to exploit the labour shortages of post-plague England to find themselves in a richer and more stable position than before. However the idea that women of the era were forerunners of the post World War I generation doesn’t stand up to much scrutiny, as new research shows.

Medievalists have long debated the extent to which women shared in the “golden age” of the English peasantry that followed the demographic catastrophe of the Black Death. The plague killed between 30% and 45% of the population in its first wave 1348-59. Recurrences meant that by the 1370s England’s population had been halved.

The silver lining, for the peasantry at least, was the dramatic increase in workers’ remuneration as landowners struggled to recruit and retain labourers. The results are apparent in a rapid increase in male casual (nominal and real) wages from about 1349.

Daily wages in England by decade. Humphries & Weisdorf

Some historians have argued that women’s gains were even more marked as they could find employment in hitherto male-dominated jobs, or migrate to towns to work in the growing textile industries and commercial services and so enjoy “economic independence”.

Others however have suggested that whatever the implications of the Black Death for male workers, the sexual division of labour prevented women from seizing the opportunities created by the labour shortage. As one account puts it: “Women tended to work in low-skilled, low-paid jobs … This was true in 1300 and it remained true in 1700”.

The debate has significant implications as optimists have gone further in arguing that women’s improved wages changed demographic behaviour by delaying marriage, promoting celibacy and reducing fertility, with the resulting so-called north-west European Marriage Pattern raising incomes and promoting further growth.

My colleague Jacob Weisdorf and I analysed newly available data on wages for women workers over the long run. This data not only shows a large and persistent male-female gap but also contrasts women’s casual daily or weekly pay with the day rates implicit in their annual contracts which often included perquisites like room and board.

This contrast supports the claim by both contemporaries and labour historians that medieval workers preferred employment on a daily or weekly basis because it offered higher returns and more leisure. Women in particular look to have lost out by accepting permanent contracts, and they often expressed their dissatisfaction by quitting prematurely.

So why did women continue to accept annual contracts when casual work paid better? Security of employment was one reason. If women were unsure of sufficient casual work they might be prepared to accept a discounted wage. But many young and healthy women might be persuaded that harvest, haymaking, and other seasonal demands for agricultural work along with occasional labouring jobs and opportunities in cloth production would see them through (and this is to ignore opportunities in subsistence agriculture).

But this is only half the story. To fully understand why women workers weren’t the big long-term winners from the Black Death, we must look at the legal response to the devastation.

Two regulations passed in the wake of the Death – the Ordinance of Labourers 1349 and the Statute of Labourers 1351 – represent the beginnings of English labour law. The measures included a ban on wage increases, a
requirement that every under 60 joined the workforce and restrictions on movement in search of work.

Women were hit the hardest. Labour scarcity should have opened up opportunities for females, but the regulations only added to their geographical and occupational immobility, pressuring them into accepting permanent service contracts and inhibiting their ability to work casually by the day. Hence low wages persisted among annual workers – and in fact women seemed less able than men to sustain the gains from the Black Death.

Our empirical data provides little support for the view that the plague created the demographic circumstances for increased female incomes and further growth. The idea that the Black Death created opportunities for young unmarried women able to exploit annual contracts that tempted them to delay marriage and reduce fertility turns out to be a myth.