

2.1. Subsistence strategies of single women in the European countryside, 17th to the early 19th century

Panel organiser: Devos, Isabelle, Ghent University, Belgium

Since Alice Clark's pioneering study in 1919, many social historians writing about pre-industrial times have tried to shed light on women's work and the experiences. However, single women have only started to receive particular attention since the mid 1980s. Some researchers present a rather gloomy picture of their historical position. According to scholars such as Olwen Hufton (1984) and Derek Phillips (2008) unwed women had but limited agency and were a vulnerable group in early modern society because they lacked the privileges widows and married women derived from their marriages. In their view, the transition to capitalism and modernization taking place at that time was especially detrimental for the employment opportunities of single females since women's work was lower paid and of lower status than that of men (Bennett, 1988, 1993). Other authors advance a more optimistic interpretation of the position of single women. Pamela Sharpe (1996) for instance and, more recently, Amy Froide, contend that the opportunities available to lone women from the middle and higher classes increased during the eighteenth century: they set up businesses, became teachers or governesses, and were able to enter new and even masculine trades. In her 2005 book on unwed Englishwomen, the first devoted entirely to this group, Froide authoritatively establishes the self-reliant nature of their lifestyles. Furthermore, Dutch historians Manon van der Heyden and Ariadne Schmidt (2012) have lately argued that, although unattached women were undoubtedly less well-off than their male counterparts, the assumption they always led ancillary lives in pre-industrial times, needs revision. Bridget Hill (2001) examined early industrialization's impact on the lives of various groups of Englishwomen. She took a more intermediate position, stating that because the resultant changes were uneven, some – mainly middle class - women had more prospects, but others much less. However, despite the fact that research on single women has thus far been very fruitful, discussions of the opportunities and constraints in their lives have almost exclusively focused on urban populations and/or are based on qualitative material. Somewhat surprisingly, we know almost nothing about how their sisters out in the countryside managed their lives. In this panel we will explore the subsistence strategies of unmarried women in the European countryside.

Chair: Devos, Isabelle, Ghent University, Belgium

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2.1.1. Single women and the rural credit market in 18th century France

Dermineur, Elise M., Umeå University, Sweden

In early modern France, money, credit, investment, and negotiation are terms usually associated with the business sphere, and the common assumption is that this automatically excluded women, not only because of the weight of patriarchy but also because the legal rights of women were usually perceived to be restricted. But women had, nonetheless, the legal opportunity to borrow and lend money in the local credit market. In theory, single women who could sign contracts alone had to be at least twenty-five years old, the legal age to avoid the guardianship of their fathers or male relatives. In practice, one can find many of them – even minors – borrowing and above all lending money in the credit market. This paper intends to examine the participation, strategies and the social and economic role of single women in the rural credit market in early modern France from 1650 to 1800, using an interdisciplinary method of analysis. As a case study, I have selected a rural area located in the south of Alsace, on the border with the Swiss cantons, and only a few kilometers away from Basel. There, peasants traded, exchanged, and lived in traditional communities. The period selected is of critical importance, since the eighteenth century witnessed the delicate transition away from traditional forms of exchange and commerce, and a form of pre-capitalism, especially in the context of the credit market. Moreover, it is my contention that indebtedness provoked upheaval in the social tissue, profoundly affecting the old societal model of patriarchy.

2.1.2. Labor division in an early modern transhumance system: a Swedish case

Larsson, Jesper, Swedish University of Agriculture Sciences, Sweden

The question about who did what is essential to understand how agriculture was performed, and to shed lights on strategies within the household and the family are essential to understand society at large. In an agrarian economy dependent on animal husbandry performed as alpine transhumance, one of the most important task to be done is taking care of the animals; to tend them, milk

them, make dairy products, etc. In early modern Sweden women performed most of the work connected to animals. This is particularly true for the northern part of Sweden where the use of summer farms became part of the agriculture system during this time. The knowledge about these women has to a large extent been based on ethnological sources from the beginning of the twentieth century. By examining a record from the late seventeenth century about how people tended animals and connecting it with a catechetical examination register from the same time it is possible to unveil strategic choice of labor division within households. The paper will discuss how in an area with sparse population, labor division made it possible to use the vast forest, held as commons, for animal grazing and developing a transhumance system. Important questions are: what kind of strategies did the households use? How did the structure of community shape the workforce? What was the rational choice for families: e.g. who used a daughter, an in-law or a maid to tend the animals? What kind of institutions, formal and informal, were in place? To what extent was the labor division a result of institutions developed by the peasants?

2.1.3. Survival strategies of single women in the countryside around Bruges, 1814

Devos, Isabelle, Ghent University, Belgium

This paper explores the employment opportunities and strategies of unmarried women in two rural areas around Bruges on the basis of the census of 1814. This source enables us to offer an overview of the professions and household situations of nearly 3000 unmarried women above the age of 30. At that age, women exceeded the mean age of marriage and presumably had to develop very specific subsistence strategies. The rural surroundings of the city of Bruges provide an excellent case to study the strategies of such women as the region had different structural environments with specific opportunities and limitations linked to its economic, geographic and institutional particularities (social agro-systems). The polder area (north of Bruges) was a rich agricultural area with large holdings and commercially oriented farms while the south of Bruges, the inland area, had mostly smallholders and peasant households primarily occupied with survival. Intensive cultivation of the land was complemented by a constant search for additional sources of income which they found in market production through proto-industrial activities. For a large number of households, the linen industry, traditionally an industry with substantial female employment, provided an additional but essential income to the household budget. The 1814 census allows us to look at the registered occupations, but also at single women without a registered occupation. While these women were officially 'without occupation', they most probably did work. Information on household structures allows us to get an insight into the living arrangements and the activities of these women



Participants

Dermineur, Elise M.

Elise M. Dermineur is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Umeå Group for Pre-modern Studies.

Devos, Isabelle

Isabelle Devos is Senior Lecturer at the History Department of Ghent University.

Larsson, Jesper

Jesper Larsson is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Economics, Division of Agrarian History at the Swedish University of Agriculture Sciences.