

Subsistence strategies of unmarried women in *the Brugse Vrije* at the end of the *Ancien Régime*

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Introduction

An old-fashion expression says ‘To thrive one must wive’. Indeed, past societies did not seem to have been adapted for women to remain single. First of all, the professional activities of women were seen as a supplement to the income of their husbands. The concept of the ‘family economy’ constructed indeed the idea of the traditional nuclear family where husband, wife and children all have to contribute to the family income in order to survive. Moreover, the cliché-image of the past societies shows us a predestine life course for its members: people got born, married, had children and died. And finally – just as in our contemporary society – especially the single woman was saddled with a whole range of clichés: from the scary witch to the – literally – old maid. Spinsterhood was seen as ‘*a functionless role played out at the margins of other people’s lives without even that minimal raison d’être – the possibility of bearing children – which was supposed to comfort and sustain the married women*’ (Miriam Slater in Adams, p. 884). Wedlock seemed to be the only socially accepted form of life for women.¹

Nevertheless, during the early modern period a considerable part of the society – both males and females – remained unmarried. Together with a rise in age at first marriage, the rate of definitive celibate people rose too in the Southern Netherlands during the 18th century, to come to a peak at the end of the *Ancien Régime*. According to calculations by Vandembroeke (1984) the average age of women at first marriage rose from 25.3 years at the beginning of the 18th century to 27.5 at the end. In the first half of the 19th century, the age of marriage increased to 29.7 years. Not only were more people temporarily unmarried, more people

¹ *In a world predicated on the subordinate role of women, to live outside marriage and the family was almost inconceivable.* (Hufton, 1997, 60)

remained unmarried for their entire life. During the 18th century in the Southern Netherlands 28% of the women at age 30-35 were single; by the middle of the 19th century this had increased to 54%. The percentage of women older than 50 that never married increased from 15% at the early 18th century to 21% at the end of the century (Devos 1999, 105).

As a consequence, the contradiction between expected and real life course of this celibate female part of the society confronts the researcher with some questions. Namely, how could unmarried women survive in a society where economically as well as socially women were supposed to get married?²

The paper I will present here is the first inside into my Phd-research, *The subsistence strategies of unmarried and never married women in the Brugse Vrije between 1730 and 1850*, which I started one year ago. Conclusions drawn here are by consequence preliminary and open to change.

Subsistence strategies of unmarried women in the literature

The need for women to work – whether they were unmarried, married or widowed – existed in an urban as well as in a rural environment. Myriam Everard (2005) concluded for the Northern Netherlands that before the end of the 19th century it was impossible for a family to survive without the income of women. The fact that women were important contributors to the family economy is already largely accepted. (a.o. Hufton, 1975) But were women only contributors to a family economy or were there possibilities for women outside the family economy or women at the head of a family to develop independent economic activities? And furthermore, did these economic opportunities answer the need for a decent life or just for survival? If women only were supposed to contribute to the income of their husbands, how could single women with such a low income survive?

Research states that unmarried women had ‘a lot of different subsistence or survival strategies’. Sheilagh Ogilvie concluded this for early modern Germany (2003), Pamela Sharpe (1991), Tim Wales (1984), Amy Froide (2005) and Judith Bennett (2001) for early modern England and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk (2007) for the early modern Northern Netherlands. According to Wales, women ‘puzzled’ their lives together. They relied on different kinds of activities: different occupations, informal help, help from the (extended) kin, official poor relief, criminal networks... It seems that subsistence strategies were built on

² *The most important decision facing adolescents and Young adults in early modern Europe was the choice of a spouse, for this could determine their social and financial situation as well as their personal well-being and happiness.* (Chojnacka, Wiesner, 2002, 72)

economic opportunities and different kinds of social networks. The question arises whether we can talk about 'strategies'. Did unmarried women indeed develop strategies or did they just adjust their lives according to the situation they were living in or even more, did they passively accept their fate? According to Wendy Gordon (2005), unmarried women were everything except passive victims. She stated that unmarried women actively set up a broad social network in order to fulfil their needs. Van Nederveen Meerkerk defined 'subsistence strategies' as 'not always, but often conscious patterns in someone's behaviour'. (2007)

Whether unmarried women consciously developed their subsistence strategies during their life course is hard to find out. But we assume from the historical sources that unmarried women sometimes actively adapted their lives to the circumstances they had to cope with.

Thereby it is very important to stay aware of the *variety and difference among single women themselves* (Holden, Froide and Hannam, 2008, 324) Social class, age and household/family situation were the main differential determinants among unmarried and never married women. (Hill, 2001; Mulder-Bakker and Nip, 2004; Sharpe 1998; Ogilvie 2003)

Social status seemed to have been either an important obstacle or an opportunity for women. According to Hill (2001, 176), *if there were certain things all spinsters had in common there was a divide – if not always that clear – between middle- and labouring-class spinsters*. Single women from the labouring classes were most unlikely to be employed in agriculture. Also in manufactories, single women were excluded, except for the most badly paid and marginal tasks. Domestic work was, Hill concluded, the only acceptable occupation for single women. Labouring class single women who failed to pick up a job – mostly due to personal or overall crises – were sometimes involved in petty larceny or prostitution. Middle-class women, as a consequence of the 'gentility mentality' of the middle-classes in the early modern era, had other occupational restrictions. The only acceptable 'jobs' they could have been involved in, was as a teacher, a governess or as lady's companion. Despite all these restrictions and guild and legal boundaries, a surprisingly large group of single women, however, ended up as successful businesswomen.³ Amy Froide (2005) concluded the same in her study on never married women in early modern England. Some never married women played an interesting role in the economic and social life of early modern England. Because of the decreasing importance of the English guilds, unmarried women were gradually allowed to participate in

³ By 1750 almost 20% of all traders in Southampton were female and between 15 and 21% of all female traders were single women. (Hill, 2001, 52)

more economic activities. Moreover, according to Smith (2005, 122) *For urban families with unmarried daughters (including fatherless households) guild training and membership were viewed as employment options worth the payment of premiums.* As a result, unmarried women played an important role in urban centres as credit lenders or traders. Not only middle-class single women could sometimes build up a successful economic life. Pamela Sharpe stated that female work in the cottage industry stimulated the independence of single women. (Sharpe, 1991)

The partially positive picture of the English case, however, was put into an European perspective by other historians who paid some attention to the specific working conditions of single women in other countries. Domestic service was the most accepted and most frequent profession for single women in early modern Germany (Wiesner 1999). Wage labour was equally important. On the countryside unmarried mostly performed agricultural work or were involved in textile industry (spinning), in the cities a whole range of professions were available: as workers in manufactories (mostly as spinsters), seamstresses, maids, cooks, carers for the ill and elderly people, bath maids or even as prostitutes. Moreover, Wiesner stated that German women – although officially excluded from the guilds – sometimes produced or traded for the guilds. Oglivie has a more pessimistic view of the economic opportunities for unmarried women in this country. Due to the strong institutional control-organisms on single women, economic opportunities were heavily limited. In Venice, single women worked in the textile industry, in shops, in domestic service, the food industry and relied on charity (Chojnacka 1999). While women could find work in the German countryside, in the Nordic countryside the economic activities of single women were restricted. (Möring, 2003)

Returning to the Southern Netherlands, Verstappen (1984) could conclude that most of the active unmarried women worked as domestic servants, while another large amount worked as spinsters or seamstresses. In her studies on trade, and especially on retail trade, Laura Van Aert examined the occupation opportunities for women in the city of Antwerp in the Duchy of Brabant. Female labour force was high. She concluded that female labour participation in Antwerp was between 68.5 and 80.5% which was even higher than in Germany and the Republic (Van Aert, 2008). For Van Aert, this high female labour force proves that women needed to work in order to survive. But, according to Martha Howell's question if women were 'carriers or creators of poverty', she concluded that the Antwerp women – married, widowed or unmarried – were far more 'creators of property' than just 'carriers of property' (2007) even though they were legally incapable to act independently in economic activities

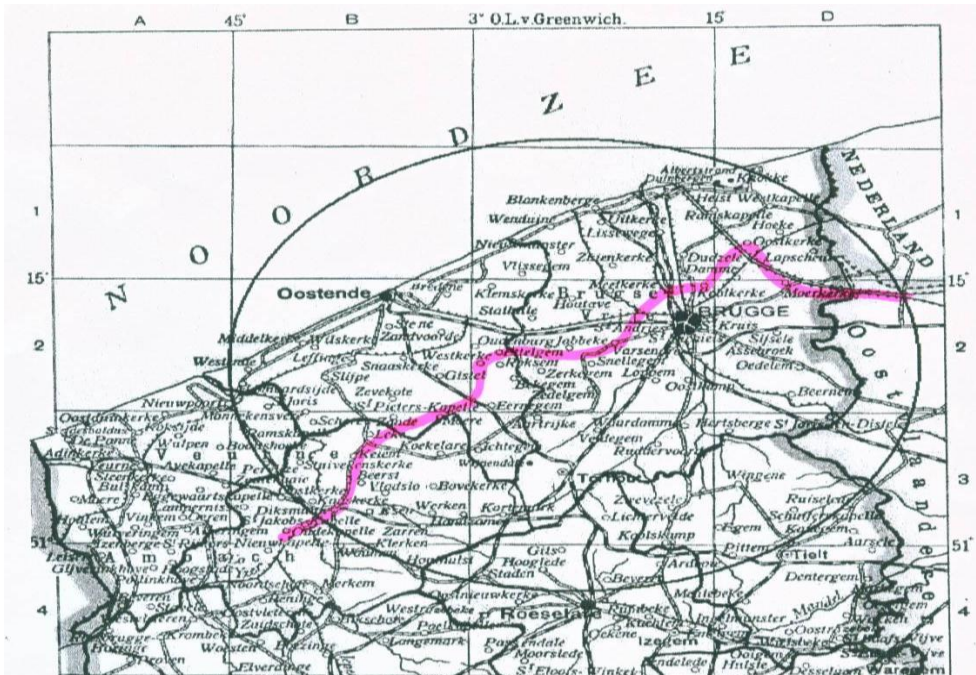
such as making contracts or signing other binding documents. Women were active in surprisingly different occupations. She could nevertheless conclude that the marital status of women was still a factor of distinction. Unmarried women were less frequently active in the food and catering industry (Van Aert 2008, Blondé 1999). Also the art crafts, transportation and industry (except textile industry) were sectors where unmarried women did not participate in. Guild's restrictions even prohibited unmarried women from certain professions. Independent working women, however, could be a member of the mercers' guilds. At the end of the 18th century 20% of the new members were females. (Van Aert and Van Damme 2005) Widows, on the contrary, were frequent in the catering industry, food production and manufacturing. The guilds did not accept female masters, but widows could continue the trade of their husbands (Van Aert 2005).

The Brugse Vrije at the end of the Ancien Régime

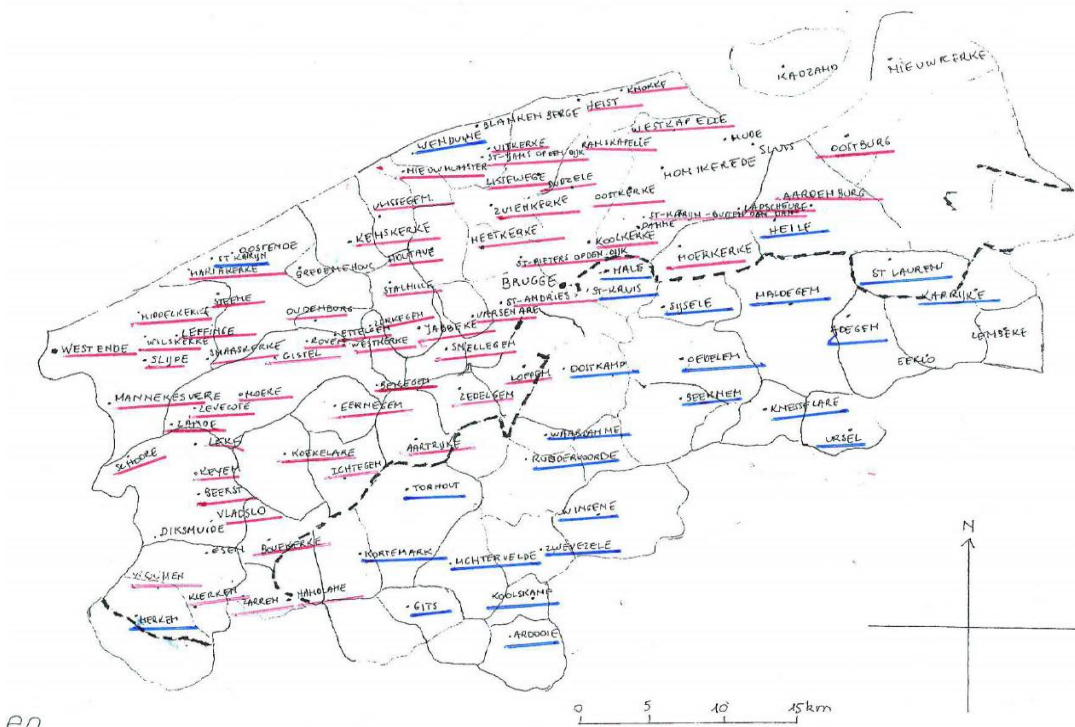
The area of Bruges was part of the County of Flanders which implied different legal and environmental circumstances. High urbanisation, economic specialisation and early proletarianism together with the West-European marriage pattern were, according to Schmidt, Van der Heijden and Wall (2007) important factors that played a distinctive role in the occupational opportunities for women in the Southern Netherlands. Moreover the legal advantages of adult unmarried women would have given this category of females some advantages to construct their lives. Namely, unmarried women and widows older than 25 had – in theory – full legal capacity in the County of Flanders. As a consequence they could control their own finances and run their own business. (Gillisen 1962; Heirbaut 2005) Secondary, women had the same inheritance rights as males, which could have provided them with extra incomes.

The region of the *Brugse Vrije* is an interesting one to study related to the economic opportunities for unmarried women. This region is namely divided into three different economically structured sub-regions as a consequence of different soil types. First of all the polder region was a rich agricultural region with big farms and little room for (unmarried) women. The sandy region was a region with smallholders and cottage industry as a supplement to the farmers' incomes which would have provided (unmarried) women with more occupation possibilities. And finally there was the city of Bruges which was traditionally seen as an attractive place for women to move there in order to find work. The latter however would not have been the case in the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. The

occupation opportunities in the sandy region would have had removed the need for rural women to move to the city.



Map 1: Region of the Brugse Vrije in the Southern Netherlands: between the North Sea, The Netherlands and France (Delahaye, 2005)



Map 2: The region of the Brugse Vrije with sub-regions: the sandy region (bleu) and the Polders (red) (De Soete, 1983)

To summarise, the economic and social activities and opportunities in the region of the *Brugse Vrije* – at least in some parts – would have give the opportunity to women to remain unmarried and construct their lives on different economic and social subsistence strategies.

The sources used for this paper are first of all the censuses of 1748 and 1815, which are incorporated in a macro-analysis. Beside these censuses, some cases of never married women will be present and finally some judicial and notarial acts where unmarried women are involved in are used to illustrate some of the main points.

From the quantitative sources, we selected all women older than 30 years old in order to estimate the maximum number of possible never-married women. We can assume that a part of the women of 30-year and older would marry after all. Nevertheless, Susan Cotts Watkins stated in her introduction *Spinsters* on the special issue of the *Journal of Family History* on spinsterhood (1984) that if researcher are interested in the way unmarried women construct their lives in the early modern period, it is preferable to consider unmarried women from the age of 30-35 as focus of the research. This was the age on which women who were not yet married, had to develop other subsistence strategies.

Before I will present conclusions on the occupation and the household situation of the unmarried women, there is one comment to make. A part the research group sampled from the censuses is assumed to be a widow, but could not be identified. This is especially the case in the rural area. A part of the women put into the database could be considered as ‘probably widows’. ‘Probably widows’ are defined here as ‘women living in a household where the head of the family could have been here (grand)child’ or ‘women who lived as head of the household with household members who could be her child(ren)’.

To overcome this ‘widow bias’, all probable widows are excluded from the databank. However, there is a strong chance that the purified database still contains widows. This has to be taken into account when making conclusions.

Unmarried women in the *Brugse Vrije*

First of all, this is the overview of the age structure of the unmarried women in the three different areas.

Age structure %			
Age	Sandy n=1444	Polders n=1279	City n=1277
30-39	40	43	33
40-49	26	20	22
50-59	11	12	18
60-69	8	12	14
70-79	6	9	9
80-89	1	3	3,5
>89		0,2	0,5

Table 1: Age structure of unmarried women

In both rural areas as well as in the city, the largest age group of unmarried women is the one of 30-39 years old. We can assume that a large part of those women would still marry. In the city, this group is less populated than in the two rural areas, but still is the largest one. In the city the age groups 50-59 and 60-69 are relatively larger than in the rural areas, while in the sandy region the age group 40-49 is larger than the two other regions. This can confirm the idea that unmarried women moved to the city as well as to the sandy region in order to find work. As a contrast, in the polder region, the 50-59, 60-69 and 70-79– the ages that are seen as ‘definitive celibacy – is larger than in the sandy region. In this case, however, we have to be aware of the widows’ bias and we can assume that a lot of these women in the polder region could be widows. The ‘unmarried’ women of these older groups are mostly labourers or spinsters. Only a few domestic servants could be counted.

Economic activities of unmarried women in the *Brugse Vrije*

Occupation unmarried women %			
Occupation	Sandy n=1444	Polders n=1279	City n=1277
Spinster	38	18	1
Domestic Servant	12	19	18
Labourer	4	20	0,4
Day Labourer	4	2	3
Seamstress/knitter	1,5	0,8	12
Lacemaker			45
Trade woman	0,4	0,5	1,5
Particular/living on interest	4	3	9
Not mentioned	29	25	6

Table 2: Occupation forms of unmarried women in the three different areas of the Brugse Vrije

The occupational structure shows a specific picture for the three regions. In the polders the unmarried women mainly worked as a labourer or as a servant, in the sandy region as a spinster and in the city as a lace-maker.

The fact that in the polder region more domestic servants appeared than in the other regions was due to the high amount of big farms that needed additional help. However researchers stated that this agricultural labour was mainly man-work, earlier research (Delahaye 2005) could conclude that because of the declining birth rates at the end of the 18th century, the child and adolescent labour work force was also declining, and so, females had to be employed too. Moreover, females were cheaper to be employed. In the sandy area, the predominance of the spinsters is clear. This confirms the idea that unmarried females could stay in their birthplace because of the occupation possibilities for females. The household situation indeed shows that many spinsters were living with their parents.

Relation spinsters - household Sandy region %	
n=574	
Head of the household	%
Parent(s)	30
Sibling(s)	20
No Related	25
Herself	12
Alone	9

Table 3: Household structure of unmarried spinsters in the Sandy region

In the city, the occupations of lace-making and sewing seemed to be strong economic subsistence strategies since about 65% of the girls working in these sectors in Bruges lived without anyone of their close kin.

Relation seamstresses, lacemakers and particular/living on interest - household situation in the city %			
Household	Seamstresses n=145	Lacemakers n=575	particular/living on interest n=120
Parent(s)	23	18	
Sibling(s)	15	27	31
Herself	17	20	36
Lodger	48	35	23
No related		9	10

Table 4: Relationship between occupation forms and household structure in the city of Bruges

It seems that the city provided economic subsistence strategies for unmarried women who had no family to rely on. This is the traditional picture: the city as a pull region for women who are moving in order to find work. In the Bruges region at the time of our research however, the sandy region removed the need for women to move to the city in order to find work. (see before) As a contrast, (unmarried) women who could not find work in the male polder region, would move to the more advantage female region, the sandy region.

Mobility unmarried women %	
	%
Sandy (n=397)	28
Polders (n=574)	44
City (n=183)	14

Table 5: Mobility unmarried women in three different regions

Indeed, only 14% of the unmarried females in the city of Bruges were born outside the city. Almost half of them was a cottage worker and only 13% lived with one or both of her parents. So we can assume – however they were few – that most of the immigrant unmarried females in the city of Bruges moved alone and in order to find a job to the city.

In the sandy region however, also only 28 % of the unmarried women were not living in their birthplace. In this region, 35% of the ‘immigrant’ women worked as a spinster and close to one quarter was a domestic servant. Only 16 % lived with one or both of her parents. So we can assume that a lot of these women moving to the sandy region did this in order to find a job. But we have to be aware of the widow bias. (see before and behind)

Immigrant women %			
Household situation	Sandy	Polders	City
Parent(s)	16	8	1
Sibling(s)	13	11	8
Herself	13	14	26
Employer	22	29	30
No related	26	26	8
Lodger	3	3	20
Alone	7	8	9
Occupation	Sandy	Polders	City
Labourer	8	24	2
Domestic Servant	22	31	32
Spinster	35	16	5
Particular/living on interest	4	2	12
Not mentioned	26	19	5
Seamstress			5
Lacemaker			19

Table 6: Household structure and occupation forms of immigrant unmarried women

The polder region shows a totally different picture. Here, 44% of the unmarried women lived in 1815 in a village that was not her birthplace. But we have to make two reservations. First, in the polder region villages were small and the distance between the villages were small too in contrast with the sandy region, so it is more obvious that people moved between two very

near villages. The second remark is the fact of the widow bias that is already stressed out. A lot of these immigrant women, I assume, would have been widows. Nevertheless, the immigrant females of the polder region came from villages further away than did immigrant women in the sandy region. 42% of the immigrant single-women in the polder region came from a village more than 10 km away, while in the sandy region, only 31% of the immigrant females moved more than 10 km. Moreover more than 30% of these female immigrants were working as a domestic servant, so it seems that unmarried women moved to the polder region in order to find work.

These conclusions, surprisingly, do not confirm earlier assumptions. The sandy region do not have seemed to be a strong pull centre for women to move there in order to find work in this 'female-friendly' area.

Moreover, women seemed to be able to find work, even in an area where work was assumed to be mainly male work. Nevertheless, how could women react when legal economic activities did not fulfil the needs of the celibate woman? In the judicial sources we could find female celibates who were among other crimes, condemned for robbery, for prostitution or for not paying for goods they bought. (see earlier research: Hill, Ogilvie...)

Cornelia de Bruijne for example stole a portrait in the house of Adriaen Aertsen in 1756⁴ and Elisabeth fa. Pieter de Poorter was also condemned for robbery⁵; Margriete Jonghbloet was accused for not paying back an amount of lend money⁶ and Roosa Bottekein did not paid for textile she bought from Pieter Braseur and Rosa Coucke eleven years before (!) and was accused by the brother of Rosa in 1781.⁷ Laurentia Vercammen was accused for prostitution⁸. Other women tried to earn money on a less honest way. Pieternelle de Keyserre for example required rent from Guillaume Naert without a legal lease⁹. And Brunona Maertens, a tradeswomen who also brought someone to court herself, was accused by Pieter Maeszoon because she would have sold assignats she forged.¹⁰ Judoca and Theresia Logghe did not pay back a considerable amount of money they lent from Francois Verplancke.¹¹

⁴ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 9545

⁵ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 4723

⁶ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 11100

⁷ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 248

⁸ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 7206

⁹ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 3719

¹⁰ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 7137

¹¹ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 2157

Despite occupation possibilities, some women were in a bad economic/social position. Isabella Rosseeuw for example was condemned to pay her back rents and was thrown out of her house.¹² Marie Anna Vermeersch, a domestic servant, was pregnant of an orphan who only was 22 years old and wanted to marry him. His guardians, however, required that the woman would revoke her demand because of the fact that the marriage would ruin the orphan. The pronouncement of this suit would prescribe that they were not anymore allowed to marry.¹³ Jeanne Vanderbrigge had debts in favour of Francois Teirlinck. Thanks to Philippe Bonnefaes who stood surety for the payment, her situation would probably get a little better.¹⁴

On the other hand, some women did not just embrace their lot, but fight for better living conditions. One of their strategies was to bring someone to court for several reasons. In these cases unmarried women illustrate the claim that they were not just passive victims who accepted their sad fate of not having a husband who – probably – could provide them with economic and social support and protection.

Brunona Maertens for example, who was a trade woman, brought Guillielmus van Maele, a carpenter, in 1789 to court because of the fact that he did not paid for the goods Brunona delivered him.¹⁵ Joanne Elij, also a trade woman, demanded money for delivered textile goods to Guillaume Brael in 1791. Livine Joanne Benthuijs, a trade woman in ironmongery, brought someone to court because of not paying for ironmongery delivered by this unmarried woman in the year 1737 as well as in 1739.¹⁶

Godelieve fa. Pieter Vyncke brought in 1789 together with the guardian of her minor siblings Joseph Dhondt to court because of the fact he tended to own the whole wood of Roksem while he only was entitled for one quarter of the woodlands. The other part was in property of the father of Godelieve. After the death of Pieter Vyncke his children, who were his heirs, became the owners of this part of the woodlands. Apparently Joseph Dhondt tried to misuse this situation where a woman and her minor siblings were the new owners.¹⁷

Not only ‘prospered’ women tended to bring someone to court in order to defend their rights. Susanna fa. Pieter Van Quickelberghe, a domestic servant, for example required maintenance

¹² State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 5049

¹³ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 2963

¹⁴ State Archives of Bruges, Inventaris van het Oud Notariaat, TBO 132/1, Notarieel archief Notaris Morlion Jean Pierre, nr. 50, 17/01/1798

¹⁵ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 1909. As seen before she also tried to make money on less honest ways.

¹⁶ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 5296

¹⁷ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 6681

money for her natural born son. She got pregnant by the son of her employer after he promised her to marry her. At the moment he figured out she was pregnant, this man, Pieter Madoe Junior, enforced her to go to the city to deliver her baby and he married another woman, although Susanna lodged an objection to this wedding. Apparently, she did not acknowledge her defeat in missing a marriage and by asking money she probably found another way to survive.¹⁸ Isabelle Greijs also required money from the man who made her pregnant because he did not want to marry her¹⁹ and so did Marie Warmoes.²⁰

Marie Van Herswijnckele was condemned for buying stolen cooking utensils. She contest her sentence again for the court arguing that she did not know that the utensils she bought were stolen and that she has to take care of her 'child without a father'.²¹

Anne Marie Simoens was a domestic servant who did not get her full wage, so she brought her former employer, Jacob Wallyn, to court in the year 1731.²² Joanne Therese Lombaert did the same in 1747.²³

Maria Van Haverbeke required the payment of services she provided to her godmother, Anne Marie Herman. She brought Philippe van Steenbrugge, the only heir of Anne Marie Herman, to court in order to force him to pay her. We can assume that Maria would have expected she would also be one of the heirs of Anne Marie which was not the case, so she tried to collect possessions in another way.²⁴

Social networks of unmarried women

As can be concluded from this last case, unmarried women did not only rely on economic opportunities to construct their subsistence strategies. Subsistence strategies could also find their ground in social opportunities, in *social capital*. The case of Marie Van Haverbeke shows how unmarried women at least tried to take advantage of this social network.

The West-European marriage pattern would have had its consequences and influences on the social capital of the unmarried women. The practice of neo-localisation not only forced the age at first marriage to higher levels (Hajnal, 1963) but also made it possible for females to construct and build up not only economic savings during their several years of adolescents, but also strong social relationships before marrying, apart from their (future) husband. Women were not supposed to live in the family of their husband, so even after marriage their

¹⁸ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 3866

¹⁹ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 759

²⁰ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 1207

²¹ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 7356

²² State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 4315

²³ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 8446

²⁴ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 7160

social network remained important (Van Zanden and De Moor 2007). Even if women did not marry, at least they had a strong social network. Moreover recent research (Oris and Derosas 2002 and Oris, Ritschard and Ryczkowska 2006 most recently) made clear that in contrast with findings of Laslett, that a strong social network existed between close and extended kin and among friends and neighbours (Fuchs and Page Moch 1990, Chojnacka and Wiesner-Hanks 2002; Moring 2003 and Sharpe 1991) which was for the benefit of the construction of the social networks of the unmarried women. Explicit female networks could moreover be found in ‘spinster clustering’ (unmarried women living together in one household) (Hufton 1984) or in ‘*spinningen*’ or ‘*talko’s*’, opportunities where women came together to spin (Moring 2003, Cashmere 1996).

Both close and extended kin members would also have played important roles to build up social networks. Close kin was most likely to support the unmarried women with material and emotional support, while extended kin could shortly enter the lives of the unmarried females when needed. (Plakans and Wetherell 2003 and Fuchs and Page Moch 1990) Living in with aunts, uncles, parent(s), siblings or nieces and nephews could be a strategy to cope with the deficit of being unmarried. On the other hand, however, this cohabitation could also be ‘forced’ in order to take care of a family member which by its turn could have mortgage the chances to get married.

By examining the household situation where the unmarried women of the *Brugse Vrije* were involved in, a first indication of the social network can be given.

Household Structure %			
Head of the Household	Sandy n=1444	Polders n=1279	City N=1277
Herself	15	18	20
Employer	11	19	16
Unrelated	16	16	4
Mother	13	9	6
Father	17	13	8
Brother (in law)	17	11	9
Sister (in law)	3	2	6
Lodger	0,8	1	24
Other lodger	3	2	1
Alone	5	7	6

Table 7: Household structure of unmarried women.

It is remarkable that in the sandy region more unmarried females lived with close family (mother, father, sister, brother). The polder region and the city show more or less the same rate, but still there is a difference. In the polders more single women lived with one or both parents, while in the city more unmarried women lived with their sister or sister in law. Far less single-women lived with their employer in the sandy region in the middle of the 18th as well as in the beginning of the 19th century. In the city, a large part – one quarter – of single-women lived as a lodger, while in both the rural areas around 16% of all women lived in in a family where the head of the household had – at first sight – no family relation with the unmarried woman.

In the polders, especially the single-women without an occupation mentioned lived with their parents (51%). But, still, in the sandy region relatively more unmarried females without an occupation lived with close kin, with more than 67%.

A considerable part of the single women could live alone in the sandy region as well as in the polder region. Most of them had to work in order to survive. In the sandy region most were spinster, in the polders, most were labourers. In both regions however, few were living on interest or had no occupation. Even so, in the city none of the unmarried women living alone were living on their interest. They all had to work, mostly as a lace maker. We can see that the economic subsistence strategies of the unmarried women could only rely on limited alternatives, but were necessary to live.

Relation women without occupation mentioned - household situation %			
Household	Sandy	Polders	City
Parent(s)	45	45	26
Sibling(s)	22	16	23
Herself	15	3	4
No related	15	32	6
Other family	3	4	
Old peoples home			41

Table 8: Household structure of women without an occupation mentioned.

Nevertheless, a lot of single women could live without an occupation, but with support of close kin. Indeed, for young celibate females the family support of father and mother was crucial, while older unmarried women lived with brothers or sisters. The latter was especially in the city the case. Moreover in the city the ‘spinster clustering’ was remarkable.

While a considerable part of the unmarried women could rely on their family members to construct their life in a positive way, other unmarried women were sometimes saddled with problems other family members made, but even then, they did not hesitate to defend their rights in front of the court. Joanne Van Wijnsberghe for example required from Beernaert Nulleveert rents that he had to pay in favour of her brother for the use of a piece of land.²⁵

Anna fa. Cornelis Reubens did not reconcile herself to the fact the husband of her half sister confiscated all the goods her dead father left behind. She required him to give her the part of the inheritance that belongs to her.²⁶ The case of the three unmarried sister Anne Marie, Monica and Joanne Abramé shows also the fact that male members of the society not always found it logical that unmarried women inherited at the same level they did. The stepfather of these three sisters Abramé confiscated all the goods of his wife and her former husband, the parents of the three sisters. Anne Marie, Monica and Joanne Abramé however brought their stepfather to court and demanded a considerable amount of money as their part of the inheritance.²⁷ Another example of a case where an unmarried women was hindered to take full right on her inheritance was that of Theresia De Brabander whose former guardian did not want to return to Theresia the inheritance of her dead brother.²⁸

Marie fa. Pieter Parmentier however is saddled with the debts of her mother and is therefore brought to court.²⁹ Even so, Marie fa. Bartholomeus Contalis was the only heirs of her mother and is forced to pay back a loan her mother lent. This last case is an example how family could be supportable but on the other hand could also make trouble for the unmarried woman. Namely, the mother of Marie fa. Bartholomeus Contalis and her husband could profit from her fathers goodwill to live on a farmland he possessed. Moreover this couple also lent a considerable amount of money from their father(-in-law). Apparently they never paid for their lease, neither paid any rent or interest. After the dead of this couple, the mothers father brought his granddaughter, Maria Contalis, to court to pay back all the back rents and

²⁵ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 4942

²⁶ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 8629

²⁷ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 11208

²⁸ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 1908

²⁹ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 5674

interests.³⁰ Clara Courtois is also saddled with debts from a dead family member. Namely, her sister did not paid delivered goods by Paulus Feijts and Clara is brought to court because of her dead sister's debt.³¹ Marije Josepha fa. Pieter de Ruijsschere brought Francois Taelmans to court because he did not paid for the *Diksmuidse boter*, butter from Diksmuide, which her mother delivered.³²

Other women tried to take advantage of their family or social network, although they did not had the right to. Pieternelle Proseel for example tried to hold the goods from Francois Junior Meijers after being creditor at the time the father of Francois Junior died.³³

Agnes Boutellie did not want to make the probate inventory of her mother's belongings. Her brother in law however brought her to court to force her to complete this. We can assume that Agnes wanted to keep the whole inheritance of her mother and did not want to share it with her sister and the latter's husband.³⁴

Despite negative outcomes, family still seemed to be the closest social network of unmarried women. Jeanne Therese Dumon for example, founded a partnership with her two also unmarried brothers (with whom she lived together) in which they give each other the full rights on each others property.³⁵ In some cases of wealthy unmarried ladies (see behind), we also will see that family was one of the most important social networks. The females mainly left their inheritance to family related members. See for example the cases of Joanna Ampe and Isabelle Baeckelant (behind) and Magriete de Conynck who pronounced in her will that she left a part of her property to her widowed sister after her death.³⁶ Furthermore, they lived together with family and had close contact even with nieces and uncles who lived a considerable distant away. The sisters Marie Eleonore and Francisca Van Hamme for example had frequent contacts with their nephews and nieces who lived in Ghent.³⁷

³⁰ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 4920

³¹ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 95

³² State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 11706

³³ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 11370

³⁴ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 4617

³⁵ State Archives of Bruges, Inventaris van het Oud Notariaat, TBO 132/1, Notaris Morlion Pierre Jean, nr. 46, 9/03/1797

³⁶ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 1866

³⁷ State Archives of Bruges, INV 53, Familiearchief Van Hamme, Deel I, V, Maria Eleonora Van Hamme, nr. 321 Briefwisseling Maria Eleonora Van Hamme 1753-1796

But also friends and other acquaintances could enter into the life of an unmarried woman. Joanne Polygel for example got, together with two other male friends, the full rights on the property of Pieter Six on the conditions that he could stay in the household of Joanne and that she till his dead will take care of him, even if he became very ill.³⁸ Jeanne Vanderbrigge could rely on Philippe Bonnefaes who stood surety for here debts.³⁹ Laurentia Vercammen could live with her two bastards in the house of Jacob Gardebeke and his wife Jacquemine. Unfortunately this went wrong and Jacquemine left the household while Laurentia was accused for prostitution.⁴⁰

Like stated before, especially in the city the spinster clustering was prevalent. Not only sisters or unrelated unmarried women, but also widows or a combination of these categories 'clustered' together. 41% of the widows from a sample taken from the census of 1815 of the city of Bruges, lived together with other widow(s) or with unmarried wom(e)(a)n. Of all unmarried women from the city in this census of 1815, 31% lived with an unmarried sister, another unmarried woman or a widow or a combination of these.

Single women and their role in the early modern era

As can be seen, unmarried women in the Brugse Vrije indeed were involved in different social and economic subsistence strategies. But beside being involved in different subsistence strategies to support themselves, unmarried women also could play both socially and economically an important role in the early modern society, especially in the English case. (see before: Amy Froide, Bridget Hill) In other countries this did not seem to have been a widespread phenomenon.

In the *Brugse Vrije* the macro-analysis does not show a very favourable position for the unmarried women. Few women ended up as a business women or trade women. (contra Hill's conclusions) Even so, few unmarried women could live on their interest.

In the qualitative analysis we can nevertheless find some examples of unmarried women who seemed to play important roles in the early modern Bruges society.

Isabella Baeckelant for example was born as 'Isabelle Backelam' in 1700 in the city of Bruges at the Saint-Salvator parish and died 52 years later, on the 14th of August 1752, in the same

³⁸ State Archives of Bruges, Inventaris van het Oud Notariaat, TBO 132/1, Notaris Morlion Pierre Jean, nr. 75, 11/04/1801

³⁹ State Archives of Bruges, Inventaris van het Oud Notariaat, TBO 132/1 Notaris Morlion Jean Pierre, nr. 50, 17/01/1798

⁴⁰ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 7206

city at the parish of the Our Lady (O.L.Vrouw). She died as *jonghe dochter ende poortresse* (young lady/maiden and burghess of the city of Bruges). A few months before, she drew up her will.⁴¹ Due to the fact that she had no children or husband, she divided her legacy among several heirs. On the one hand the heirs were family-related, namely her sister, aunts, uncle and nephews, on the other hand, she split up her belongings between other persons and institutions: her executor, his two daughters, his sister and her family, her goddaughter, other widowed women and men – probably friends – a religious woman and her last maidservant. This single woman seemed to be involved in charity, as she also handed out a part of her legacy to the poor – *aerme maegien en aermen vanden disch* – and to local educational institutes for poor boys and girls, *aerme stedeschool maeghdekens en aerme knechtjens stedeschoole*. Furthermore, her religious beliefs were expressed in gifts to several convents and monasteries and to chapels and priests. Most of the wills in Bruges during the second half of the 18th century, however, contained similar charity and religious gifts as part of the salvation of a person's soul. (Nowé, 1980)

Joanna Ampe also died as *jonghe dochter end poortresse*, on the first of September 1763, at the age of 86, in the city of Bruges, at the Saint-Anna parish. Her inventory was drawn up on October the 26th. Her heirs were all family-related, although some were distant family. Interesting was the fact she lent a considerable sum of money to her brother and possessed a Spanish ducat.⁴²

A final example is that of the sisters Marie Eleonora Van Hamme, who died in the city of Bruges at the 14th of October 1800⁴³, and Francisca Josepha Van Hamme who died in 1806. Both were daughters of Fredericq Joseph Van Hamme and Maria Mahieu and lived at their castle in the parish of Jabbeke together with their uncle, the canon of the parish of Saint-Donaas at the city of Bruges. At the death of their parents, the canon only was guardian to Francisca Josepha Van Hamme because she still was a minor, Maria Eleonora was heir herself. Although they lived with an older man of their close kin in their household, the ladies themselves ran the household strictly. They controlled their finances and managed their

⁴¹ Municipal Archives of Bruges, Testamenten tot 1794, B 1753, nr. 11468, Baeckelant Isabella. Doopregisters stad Brugge, parochie St. Salv. 1ste, Isabella Baekelam, 28/10/1700.

Overlijdensregisters stad Brugge, OLV parochie, Isabelle Baekelandt 14/8/1752.

⁴² Municipal Archives of Bruges, Boedelbeschrijvingen tot 1794, Ampe Joanna, B 1763, nr. 12105. Doopregisters stad Brugge, parochie OLV. 3de, Johanna Hampe, 12/11/1677

⁴³ Municipal archive of Bruges, Registers van de Burgerlijke stand, Overlijdens 1800, Gestorven te Brugge 14-10-1800, Akte 0082

properties. Beside managing their rural estates – which were spread all over the Southern Netherlands – they were also in touched in running their own household. For example, they ordered not only ‘female goods’ as jewellery, several clothes and fine textiles, a golden watch, a balance and other utensils like different spoons, knives..., but they also ordered several times carpenters, bricklayers... to fix their castle. Moreover they not only possessed many landed properties and gave a lot of loans whereby they earned money (rents and interests), but they also paid taxes themselves. Francisca Van Hamme for example paid *eeuwighe cheynsrente* – an interest in perpetuity – in favour of the parish of Oudenburg because she owns the castle and the rural estate in the parish of Jabbeke. Another tax she paid was in favour of the city of Bruges. Marie Eleonora also had to pay several taxes in favour of the parish of Oudenburg and of the city of Ghent. Both the sisters had an enormous property of lands, houses, woods, collected through different inheritances. These rural estates were leased out by the sisters, which provided them with a high amount of rents they received year after year. This huge amount of cash money provided them moreover to give many loans of which they received also many interests. Beside their important role as credit providers, they were also involved in charity. For example, four years long, they gave – through a lawyer – two poor young men money for clothes, food and other ‘maintenance’. Moreover they left letters which shows the relationship with their brother, nephews and nieces in the city of Ghent.⁴⁴

The cases of these four wealthy unmarried ladies show the researcher how unmarried women could – and are allowed to – play a role in the society of the early modern period. They were important as moneylenders, as charity providers and as property holders. They paid taxes, collected rents and interests, spent much money on clothes and textiles, household goods and the house itself. To put it in other words they helped to keep the economy of the early modern period going. Furthermore they also show how important family was as a social network for the unmarried women.

Other examples of unmarried women who played important economic roles in the society show up in the judicial sources. Isabella de Burck for example, brought Pieter De Graeve, shoemaker, to court because he failed to pay the interest on money he lent from Isabella.⁴⁵ Catharina Bellengier required J.J. Vandermeulen, a cooper, to pay her back the lent money

⁴⁴ State Archives of Bruges, Familiearchief Van Hamme, INV 53, Deel I, V: stukken betreffende de kinderen van Frederick Joseph Van Hamme, B. Maria Eleonora Van Hamme, nr. 321, nr. 324, nr. 323, nr. 322, nr.320, nr. 328, nr. 327, nr. 331, nr. 325

⁴⁵ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 9919

with interest.⁴⁶ Even so, Marie Joanne Josepha Rossignol⁴⁷, Marie Van Wallegem⁴⁸ and Anne Marij fa. Melchior Verdolaghe⁴⁹ brought someone to court whereby she required to return the loan they gave or to force them to pay the interests.

Finally, Marianne de Corte, *Vrouwe van Oostende*, Lady of Ostend, forced Nicodemus Verlinden to sell his household furniture in order to be able to pay back rent.⁵⁰ Isabelle Olleviers also forced Francois van Toers to pay his back rent.⁵¹

Comparison with widows and differences among unmarried women themselves

Widows and unmarried women

As seen, both unmarried women and widows lived together with other unmarried/widowed women or sisters. More similarities between unmarried women and widows can be found. The occupation forms unmarried women had, were more or less the same occupations where the majority of the widows were involved in. For example, the most important occupation form for widows in the sandy region was the cottage industry. 71% of the widows there were spinsters. In the polders, 40% were (day)labourers and in the city the main occupation form for widows was that of the lace makers. Nevertheless, differences can be detected too. More widows were artisans or trade women in the rural as well as in the city region. We can assume that they continued their husbands business.

	Occupation Widows 1815 %		
	Sandy	Polders	City
No Mentioned	15%	21%	7%
(Day)Labourer		40%	22%
Farmer	7%	27%	
Domestic servant			
Spinster	71%	6%	
Trade woman		6%	7%
Particular/living on intererst	0,3%	0,2%	13%
Seamstress			13%
Artisan	7%		3%
Lace maker			30%

Table 9: Occupation forms of widows.

⁴⁶ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 9920

⁴⁷ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 6159

⁴⁸ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 4689

⁴⁹ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 11862

⁵⁰ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 454

⁵¹ State Archives of Bruges, Database Akten West-Vlaanderen, Processen Brugse Vrije, nr. 11713

	Head of the Household widows % 1815		
	Sandy	Polder	City
Herself	79%	80%	54%
Mother	7%		3%
Unrelated	7%	6%	
Employer			0,5%
Sibling(s)			4%
Son (in law)		6%	5%
Lodger			31%

Table 10: Household structure widows.

Unmarried women could rely on their family. Especially in the rural areas and in the sandy region, parents seemed to be important as support network. As a contrast, in most of the cases in the rural areas widow were head of the household themselves. In a rare case they lived in their mother's house or in the house of their son (in law). Only in a few cases they lived in in a house where the head of the household had no family connection with the widow. In the city also, half of the widows were head of the household. 31%, however, were lodger in a household which had no family connection with the widow. Just as being a lodger also was a popular living form for the unmarried women, in some cases widows also lived with their sisters or other unmarried/widowed women. (see before)

Differences among unmarried women

The subsistence strategies of the majority of the widows did not strongly differ from these of unmarried women. Among unmarried women themselves however, subsistence strategies differed. Age was a considerable factor of differentiation.

Domestic service was an occupation form especially for the young⁵² unmarried women.

	Domestic servant 1815	
Age		%
30-39		59
40-49		21
50-59		14
>60		10

Table 11: Age structure domestic servants

⁵² Young unmarried women = women between 30 and 49 years old, so before the age of definitive celibacy.

Beside domestic service, living with one or both parents was – logically – a living form for the ‘young’ unmarried women. It is no surprise that also women without an occupation mentioned were young unmarried women and lived with parents or siblings. (see before)

Unmarried women living with parent(s) 1815	
Age	%
30-39	77
40-49	19,5
50-59	3
60-69	0,3

Table 12: Age structure unmarried women living with parents.

Unmarried women with no occupation mentioned 1815	
Age	%
30-39	53
40-49	21
50-59	9,5
60-69	6
70-79	6
80-89	3

Table 13: Age structure unmarried women without an occupation mentioned.

In most of the occupation forms, the rate of unmarried women living with family followed the rate of the percentage of young unmarried women, although, there always were relatively more young unmarried women than the amount of women living with family. The occupation forms where the relation age – household situation did not followed the ‘normal’ pattern, was that of the lace makers and seamstresses in the city. Although 73% of the unmarried women working as seamstresses were between 30 and 49 years old, only 38% lived with parent(s) or sibling(s). Moreover, 48% of the seamstresses lived as a lodger. 56% of the lace makers were between 30 and 49, while only 34% lived with close kin.

Unmarried women between 30-39 years old 1815	
Occupation	%
No mentioned	27
Domestic Servant	22
Spinster	18
Seamstress	5
Lace Maker	10
(day) Labourer	10

Table 14: Occupation forms unmarried women between 30 and 39 years old.

Young single women found employment in domestic service or as a spinster. While elderly single women still could find work as a domestic servant, but more find an employment as a spinster or a labourer.

Conclusion

Since this paper just is a first inside of a work in progress, the conclusions here written down are preliminary and open to change.

Nevertheless, some 'trends' already can be detected. Family and especially close family were the most important social networks of unmarried women. In regions where young females could find work in the spinning industry, they stayed longer with their parents. In the city, many women lived together with their siblings and especially with their (unmarried) sisters.

While a few unmarried women could rely on their family estate or became a business woman, the majority of the celibate women had to work in less attractive occupation forms like spinning or domestic service or try to rely on family support. These subsistence strategies however, were more or less the same occupations where the majority of the widows were involved in. Moreover the differences between the unmarried women themselves were important too. More research however, has to confirm or enfeeble these first conclusions.

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