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Female labourers in early nineteenth century rural Flanders. What's in a name?

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Early modern research presents a rather gloomy picture of women's employment in the countryside. Agricultural labour was gender divided with regard both to the tasks performed and the wages received. Marital status, in addition, differentiated the lives of women. Many occupations employed single women as well as married and widowed women. Yet, the ideal for never married women was to be a servant, whereas married women were mainly working as agricultural day labourers. English evidence by Joyce Burnette (2008) for instance revealed that female agricultural labourers were more likely to be middle-aged and married mothers. Sheila Ogilvie (2003) on the other hand emphasized the importance of agricultural labour for single women in the German area of Württemberg, although in most cases the wage was not sufficient to survive.

Using early nineteenth century population listings we investigate in this paper the living arrangements of single women in the Bruges countryside. In particular we look at single women above the age of 30 who were working as day labourers. 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 households of these women as the region had diverse structural environments with specific opportunities and constraints linked to its economic, geographic and institutional particularities (different 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 from the linen industry. This paper will thus allow to provide a nuanced and varied picture of female labourers in the countryside. Looking at their age, property, household composition, and occupation of the head of the household we will examine the status of these female labourers in each agro-system. As such, this paper will permit to define more clearly the generic occupational title of 'day labourer' and assess the implications of wage labour for single women according to the specificity of the rural area.