**Paper proposal**

**"Female harvest labourers in coastal Flanders (15-16th century)."**

Due to the leasing out of most large farms in 14th-century coastal Flanders, (female) wage labour is very hard to document. However, considering the gradual expropriation of peasants and the ongoing engrossment and commercialization of rural economy (coastal Flanders was one of the first regions in the North sea area that evolved to agrarian capitalism), historians assume a growing importance of wage labour in late medieval coastal society. Thanks to some recently discovered farm accounts of an institutional landowner, who kept at least part of the lands under direct cultivation, we can gather evidence about the participation of women in the agricultural labour market. In the 15th and 16th century, women worked as servants, but especially as harvest labourers on the large commercial farms of coastal Flanders. In this paper, the employment characteristics (remuneration and length of employment) and background (geographical origin and indications of familial landholding) of these female workers will be discussed. The remarkably changing position of female casual workers confirms the opinion that women functioned as a reserve pool of labour, to be called upon in times of scarcity and ignored when male labour was sufficiently available. However, in such times of scarcity, young, unmarried and travelling women had major opportunities at this free labour market.

Dr. Lies Vervaet

Department of History

Ghent University

lies.vervaet@ugent.be