

# Using qualitative data to unravel the life-course of unmarried and never married women in the early modern period

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## **Introduction**

Demographic studies mostly rely on quantitative data and quantitative methods. Quantitative data, however, are sometimes insufficient or, even more, inappropriate and very scarce in order to study a specific part of a historical population. More specific for the period my research is situated in, namely the century before the end of the Ancien Régime (and for a short period afterwards) for the Southern Netherlands, the quantitative data which can be used are very scarce. Moreover, if they exist, the information therein provided is limited and incomplete. Nevertheless, quantitative sources can be used in order to study a specific part of the population. But instead of answering the research questions, more questions arise.

My PhD-research which lays at the basis of this paper focuses on the specific ways of living of unmarried and never married women in the Bruges area at the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Up till now, few studies focussed on unmarried or never married women. More than two decades ago, the *Journal of Family History* already dedicated a special issue to 'Spinsterhood'. (1984) In this issue, Olwen Hufton (1984) drew some conclusions about the socio-economic situations of never married women in early modern England and France. Although she paid attention to the survival strategies of never married women from lower class, the middleclass and aristocratic never married women were studied more elaborately and detailed. In her paper *A choice not to wed? Unmarried women in eighteenth-century France* Christine Adams expressed the need to do more in depth study on never married women in order to overcome stereotypes around the 'spinster'. (Adams, 1996) She made this call more than ten years ago, but clichés about the 'spinster' and what should have been the 'normal' life course in the past, obviously still exist. For example, *The History of the Family* dedicated a special issue to the economic and social resources of women in *Broken Families*. (2007) Despite the need for

more research on the economic and social opportunities on life strategies for never married women, this issue only paid attention to widows and grass widows. The studies of Derosas and Oris (eds., 2002) and Janine Lanza (2007) also only focussed on the economic survival strategies of widows in early modern Europe where the latter challenged the concept of the family economy.<sup>1</sup> And, notwithstanding R. Wall's study in *The History of the Family* (12, 2007) was titled *Widows and unmarried women as taxpayers in England before 1800*, he could not make a clear distinction between women who were widows and the ones that were still unmarried. Finally, *Women's History Review* recently devoted (July 2008) a special issue to unmarried women, called *Winners or Losers? Single Women in History 1000–2000*. While Katherine Holden, Amy Froide and June Hannam, however, stressed in their introduction on this issue that there exists a need for more historical research on never married women, apart from other single women like widows, divorced women, and temporary young unmarried women<sup>2</sup>, none of the contributions of this issue, however, are dedicated to the early modern period. All articles, except one about the Middle Ages, focus on the mid nineteenth until the mid twentieth century. Nevertheless these limitations, researchers as Bridget Hill (2001), Amy Froide (2001, 2005) and Judith Bennett (2001) did insightful work on single women and never married women in early modern England.

This scarcity of studies related to never married women is – among other things – due to the fact that sources on these women are very limited.

For the Southern Netherlands – the geographic interest of my research – for example, the quantitative sources that can be used are very scarce. Only the censuses from the years 1748, 1796 and 1815, the parish registers of baptism and death (before 1796) and the population registers of birth and death (after 1796) can be used. These sources, however, are incomplete and do not provide sufficient information to make proper conclusions on the socio-economic activities and networks of unmarried women in this early modern period.

To counterbalance this problem, we have to rely on specific qualitative sources on unmarried and never married women. Nevertheless, difficulties also occur. First of all, not all single women are represented. The celibate females who appear in the sources are mostly women from the highest classes or from the lowest strata of the society. The first ones produced personal archival sources such as correspondence, wills and other authenticated acts. The latter ones sometimes tried to establish their lives through criminal activities and as a result some of them appear in the judicial sources. But the average single woman, who had no important belongings or was never in trouble with the law, hardly

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<sup>1</sup> *The idea of the family economy thus does not encompass the experiences of widows.* (Lanza, 2007, 224)

<sup>2</sup> While focussing on widowed, divorced or temporary young unmarried women, researchers still consider marital status as an obvious stage in a person's life course. Therefore, there is a strong necessity to concentrate on *never married* women in historical research.

left any archival traces. So a large part of the population we want to study – the ‘average’ part of this population – remains invisible and is likely to slip under the radar of historical research. Secondly, a large part of these qualitative data do not represent the daily activities of unmarried women. So we can only grasp their lives by exceptional events that happened during their life course.

Despite these difficulties, it is nonetheless the aim of this paper to show by empirical evidence how quantitative and qualitative data can efficiently be used in a historical demography.

## 1 The single women in the early modern era

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. 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 18<sup>th</sup> century, to come to a peak at the end of the *Ancien Régime*. According to calculations by Vandenbroeke (1984) the average age of women at first marriage rose from 25.3 years at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to 27.5 at the end. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the age of marriage increased to 29.7 years. Not only were more people temporarily unmarried, more people remained unmarried for their entire life. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Southern Netherlands 28% of the women at age 30-35 were single; by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this had increased to 54%. The percentage of women older than 50 that never married increased from 15% at the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to 21% at the end of the century (Devos 1999; 105).

Researchers stated that unmarried women had a whole range of ‘survival strategies’ to cope with the fact they had to live without the income of a male. These ‘survival’ or ‘subsistence’ strategies varied widely from several economic activities and various social networks till criminal activities and poor relief.

While research about the English situation in the early modern period shows a broadly positive picture of the life chances and life course of the unmarried women (Froide, Froide and Bennett, Hill), put other historians who paid some attention to the specific working conditions of single women in other

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<sup>3</sup> *In a world predicated on the subordinate role of women, to live outside marriage and the family was almost inconceivable.* (Hufton, 1997, 60)

countries this into an European perspective. The latter stated that as a single woman it was very rare to create a decent life, while the English experience showed that a considerable part of the never married women ended up successfully. For example as important merchant figures in the urban society or women who held high social positions. These researchers, however, acknowledged at the same time that the majority of the unmarried women had to work very hard to survive or had to rely on family or other aid.

How was the picture in the early modern Southern Netherlands? Could single women end up successfully or were they poor spinsters living in the margins of the society?

## **2 Research question and hypotheses**

Petronilla Kesteloot lived from her birth in 1706 till her death in 1796 in the sandy region of the Franc of Bruges. At the moment of the census of 1748 she was living in the household of her sister and brother-in-law, but worked as *spinette op haer eigen*, as a *spinster on her own*. When she died, her assets contained *108 ponden Vlaams*, which can be considered as a more than adequate property for people from the lower classes. Nevertheless, she did not own any real estate and did not invest her money on some loan. It is rather exceptional that a woman like Petronilla, who never married, who had only a few possessions, never did any transaction and never was in trouble with the law, appears in the sources. Thanks to her minor heirs, however, the government drew up a probate inventory, through which historians can have a look into the life of an *ordinary* never married woman.

Although these never married women are very hard to find in historical sources, it is this kind of never married women which are under interest of my doctoral research.

The aim of my PhD-research is to analyse the economic activities and social networks of never-married women in various socio-economic and demographic circumstances. By examining these women in different geographical and temporal contexts I want to reveal the variety of subsistence strategies of this particular group of women. In other words, did never-married women in early modern Flanders simply survive or could they play a significant role in this society? And were never married women limited in their subsistence strategies as a result of being unmarried? Or on the contrary, could unmarried women profit from more favourable conditions than widowed and married women could? The hypothesis under research is that never married women constructed their lives in more or less the same way as other women from the same social class in the same geographical and temporal environment did. It is questioned if the impact of the factor 'remaining unmarried' would have led to either better or worse living conditions for these women. Consequently, we also ask the question if the life courses of never married women in different socio-economic constructed regions would have differed. Moreover, among never married women from different social classes this would also have differed.

The research questions fall apart in two parts. The first part answers the questions of who, what, where. Namely, which subsistence strategies could these women have relied on, in which households did they live, which economic activities did they had, what was the impact of the region they lived in and how were these variables related to each other?

There could have existed important factors that influenced the life course of never married women which are not related to the factors of being unmarried, social class, region or period. The second part of the research will answer these questions, namely, which factors could have been important to the fact that a never married woman either 'failed' or to 'succeeded' in her life course? What was the influence of the death of the parents? What was the influence of the household situation/ social network of the never married woman? What was the influence of the household situation on a specific moment in her life course?

### **3 The Franc of Bruges in the 18<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

The area of Bruges was part of the County of Flanders which implied specific 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.

Debates about women's work in historical perspective polarized around two groups of researchers. The first group, with Alice Clark (1919) as predecessor and followed by Merry Wiesner (1986), Martha Howell (1986) and Louise Tilly and Joan Scott (1978), concluded that in the course of the early modern era, the industrialisation and capitalisation, the economic position of women deteriorated. Women were gradually pushed into the domestic sphere and occupational opportunities declined, especially in the formal economy. Not only on the economic side, but also in the cultural/social sphere, the society became, according to these researchers, a more and more patriarchal one. Most recently Beatrice Moring (2003) again stressed the worsened economic and social position of women as a result of the industrialisation in the Nordic past. A second group, however, opposed these propositions and stated that for the entire historical past, women had the most badly paid jobs at the lowest strata of society. These historians like Judith Bennett (1988), Olwen Hufton (1975) and Peter Earl (1998), stated that European society had always been a patriarchal one, where occupations were gender divided. Pamela Sharpe (1998) and Sheilagh Ogilvie (2003) provided a new perspective to this debate. The fact that women were conceived as one homogeneous group was challenged. They pointed out

that marital status, age and social class were important factors of differentiation when talking about women and work in the historical past.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Ogilvie (2004) pointed to the importance of the impact of the social and political environment women were living in. In Germany, she stated, the weakness of the governmental power and as a result, the strength of the guilds, excluded women from the formal economy and made them powerless. This prevented the German society to develop an *industrious revolution*, in contrast with for example the Low Countries, where she saw the increase of women's work as an important factor in this development at the end of the *Ancien Régime*.

Thus, the region of the Franc of Bruges is an interesting one to study related to the economic opportunities and socio-demographic behaviour of unmarried women. Moreover, this region is divided into three different economically structured sub-regions as a consequence of different soil types, which implied also different socio-demographic behaviour. Thoen and Van Bavel (1999) called this relationship the *social-agro systems*. In the Franc of Bruges there was the polder region which was a rich agricultural region with big farms and little room for (unmarried) women. Beside this region, there was the sandy region which 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 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The occupation opportunities in the sandy region would have removed the need for rural women to move to the city. Moreover, while occupation opportunities for single women in the sandy region rose, in the polder region they declined increasingly as they did in all rural areas in Nord-West-Europe. For the single woman, this was especially the case in the opportunity to live on her own agricultural incomes.

To summarise, the economic and social activities and opportunities in the region of the *Brugse Vrije* would have give in some parts (the sandy region and the city) the opportunity to women to remain unmarried and construct their lives on different economic and social subsistence strategies, while in others this would have been more difficult<sup>5</sup>. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, as in other European parts, opportunities in agricultural occupations strongly diminished for women and even in the proto-industrialised areas inside the Franc of Bruges, employment in the domestic industry decreased for (unmarried) women.

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<sup>4</sup> So, for the Northern Netherlands, recent research by Ariadne Schmidt (widows, 2001), Danielle van den Heuvel (female traders focussing on the not-so-well-to-do women, 2007), Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk (women and wage work, 2007), Manon van den Heijden (seamen's wives and married female traders, 2006) and Marjolein van Dekken (female brewers, 2003) focussed at the same time on the importance of women's work and on differences between women in the early modern period

<sup>5</sup> In the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century researchers stated that it became more and more difficult for unmarried women to act economically independently in the regions where big farms took in all the dwarf farms and common lands disappeared. (Hill, 2001) Moreover, the increased amount of young labour force from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century on, decreased the job security for young unmarried women (and men).

Thus, the unmarried and never married women we will do research on, were living in a transitional period, especially vis-à-vis the economic possibilities.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 *Possibilities of quantitative research on unmarried and never married women at the end of the Ancien Régime*

The first part of the research questions can be examined by a quantitative approach. The demographic source that is most suitable to construct a quantitative analysis on unmarried women in the early modern era in the Franc of Bruges is the census, more specific the one of 1748 and 1815.

This however can only be done for *unmarried women*, more specific all women older than 30 years old who were unmarried at the time the census took place.<sup>6</sup> I thus selected all women older than 30 years in order to estimate the maximum number of possible never-married women, and women older than 50 years old as the minimum number of women who remained single. The upper limit guards us from underestimation, the lower limit for overestimation (Kowaleski, 1999).

By examining these I have identified the general pattern of unmarried women in the early Bruges area. For this part two subsistence strategies of unmarried women are researched: their economic activities and the composition of the households they lived in. I also surmise that living and occupation conditions for widows and married women were probably different. Therefore I rely on a comparative approach based on a select sample. I perform an aggregated analysis of married, unmarried women and widows in the three Bruges regions based on two population censuses, these of 1748 and 1814/15. Thereby, I compare the data for unmarried women with these for married and widowed women and assume that their social and economic situation will differ by region and by period.

For the city of Bruges, the census of 1748 only mentions the name of the head of the household, not of the household members. Therefore the city of Bruges is not taken into account for the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in this aggregate analysis.

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<sup>6</sup> All unmarried women at the time of the census for which we can assume that they had a (strong) chance to remain single are selected. Around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the average female age at marriage was 26-27 years (Devos, 1999). Hence, we can assume that a considerable part of the women of 30-year and older would never marry. Susan Cotts Watkins stated in her introduction *Spinsters* on the special issue of the *Journal of Family History* on spinsterhood (1984) that if historians 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

Absolute numbers of women under research						
	Census of 1748		Census of 1814			
	Sandy	Polders	Bruges	Sandy	Polders	Bruges
<b>Unmarried</b>	124	104		1681	1513	1277
<b>Married</b>	346	198		86	242	588
<b>Widows</b>	73	39		11	30	192

Source: Burghgrave, G/ Dewulf-Heus, Romain L., *Volkstellingen 1814/1815, 1976-1989*. Cornette J. en Leupe A./ Dewulf-Heus (R.L.), *Volkstelling 1748. 1977-1989*

Remark: We took a geographic sample to select the married women and the widows.

Structure of the database:

Variables taken into account
Name of the unmarried woman
First name of the unmarried woman
Parish where she lives
Age of the unmarried woman
Birth place of the unmarried woman
Occupation of the unmarried woman
Whether the unmarried woman is the owner of the house
Head of the household the unmarried woman is living in
Relationship between the head of the household and the unmarried woman
Occupation of the head of the household
Whether the head of the household is the owner of the house
Other household members
Relationship between the head of the household and the other household members
The illegitimate children of the unmarried woman
Additional information

Which information can be derived from this database?

Mainly it can answer these following questions on unmarried women:

Which subsistence strategies could they rely on?

Which economic activities and social networks did unmarried women develop to maintain themselves?

E.g. did they have to rely on criminal networks?

How did living arrangements for unmarried women change during this transitional period? In which type of household did they live? Who were their household members?

Did never-married women in the countryside experience different ‘chances’ during the course of their lives than urban ones? Did the city indeed provide more opportunities for unmarried women? Or did specific circumstances such as proto-industrialisation enable unmarried women to construct a life in the countryside? How does this differ between the two different parts of the countryside (polder and sandy region)?

For example, table 1 shows an answer on one of these questions.

**Table 1: Occupation forms of unmarried women in the three different areas of the Franc of Bruges in 1815 (%)**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Sandy</b> N=1444	<b>Polders</b> n=1279	<b>City</b> 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
Farmer			
Artisan			
Not mentioned	29	25	6

Source: Dewulf-Heus (R;L.), *Volkstelling 1814, Deel I-XII, Brugge, Vlaamse Vereniging voor Familiekunde, 1977*

Also other questions as ‘what is the relationship between age, household situation, occupation?’ (see for example Table 2) can be answered.

**Table 2: Relationship between occupation forms and household structure in the city of Bruges 1815 (%)**

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

Source: Dewulf-Heus (R;L.), *Volkstelling 1814, Deel I-XII, Brugge, Vlaamse Vereniging voor Familiekunde, 1977*

Or: ‘how did these occupations and household compositions differ from these of widows and married women?’ (Table 3)

**Table 3: Occupation forms widows in three different areas of the Franc of Bruges in 1815 (%)**

Occupation	Sandy	Polders	City
Spinter	71	6	
Domestic servant			
(Day) Labourer		40	22
Seamstress/knitter			13
Lacemaker			30
Trade woman		6	7
Particular/living on interest	0.3	0.2	13
Farmer	7	27	
Artisan	7		3
Not Mentioned	15	21	7

Source: Dewulf-Heus (R;L.), *Volkstelling 1814, Deel I-XII, Brugge, Vlaamse Vereniging voor Familiekunde, 1977*

It is, however, very difficult to detect if all selected women are indeed unmarried women. 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)’.

Moreover, the conclusion that can be draw from these sources, are too limited to draw overall conclusions on the subsistence strategies of unmarried and especially these of never married women. Therefore, a second analysis, namely a qualitative-quantitative analysis is necessary.

#### **4.2 A Quantitative analysis on the basis of qualitative sources**

The final aim of this research is to reveal how *never married* women constructed their lives in the early modern era in a specific area of East Flanders.

Quantitative sources from which the researcher can select never married women and draw conclusion, however, do not exist. So it is necessary to also consult qualitative sources. To construct a quantitative research that is based on qualitative sources, it is important to focus on a specific number of *never-married*, married and widowed women who are selected on the basis of the qualitative sources.

Which sources are suitable to select never married women for a quantitative research purpose? As mentioned before, I have to rely on qualitative sources.

Probate inventories, for instance, can give us a better view of the wealth and social network of never-married women who had young children. Wills can provide information on their economic situation, and their social and familial networks. Through judicial sources we can also learn something more of possible criminal activities and profession of the women (e.g. prostitution). Furthermore, these sources

can also shed a light on the mentality towards never-married women during the early modern period. Economic sources as grain censuses or poor lists can give important information on the overall economic position of the never married women. Finally, personal sources are scarce but welcomed sources.

First of all, I select a sample of parishes from the three different regions. All archival records left from these parishes are consulted. From these sources, I select all women who probably could have never been married. Thereafter the registers of funeral/death (parish before 1796 and civil register afterwards) gave the decisive answer whether this woman indeed remained married during her entire life. Following, the registers of baptism/birth of the female individual, the censuses, the registers of baptism/birth, marriage and funeral/death of the parents and if possible also of the siblings are consulted.

I select women on the fact that they died after 1748 (first census) and before 1850 (end of the period under research). For the parish of Lichtervelde, one of the larger parishes, 20 never married women, who died between 1748 and 1800 are under research. Based on this number, I assume that the total database will contain around 200 women. Below, an example of this database is given

I actively look for the never married woman and will bring every piece of information on this particular individual in one database.

This database contains for each never married woman I select her name and surname, her birth place, date of birth, place and date of death, the different residence places she had in her life, her occupation, the household situation at the time of a census, the name of her father and mother, their occupation and date of death, the specific events happened in her life which are left in the archives and additional information.

It is also the purpose to include the siblings of the never married women. This can be interesting to answer the question which role the order of siblings played in the fact that one of the female children remained unmarried.

Example from the database on qualitative research:

<b>Id</b>		
<b>Naam</b>		
Ampe		
<b>Voornaam</b>	<b>Geboortedatum</b>	<b>Doopdatum</b>
Isabella Fransisca		4/12/1704
<b>Geboorteplaats</b>		
Lichterfelde		
<b>Archiefbron G</b>		
Klappers West-Vlaanderen, doopakten PR, blz. 2		
<b>Verblijfplaats 1</b>	<b>Verblijfplaats 2</b>	<b>Verblijfplaats 3</b>
Lichterfelde		
<b>Archiefbron V</b>		
<b>Sterftedatum</b>	<b>Sterfteplaats</b>	
29/6/1774 (begraafdatum)	Lichterfelde	
<b>Archiefbron S</b>		
Klappers overlijdensakte, PR,		
<b>Beroep(en)</b>		
spinsters/geestelijke dochter		
<b>VADER</b>	<b>beroep vader</b>	
Ampe Joannes	winkelier in stoffen en 'pinnewarie'	
<b>sterftedatum vader</b>	<b>Archiefbron vader</b>	
	Telling 1748	
<b>MOEDER</b>	<b>beroep moeder</b>	
De Busschere Angelijne		
<b>sterftedatum moeder</b>	<b>Archiefbron moeder</b>	
vóór 1724 (dan man tweede huwelijk)	boedelbeschrijvingen Lichterfelde Nr. 1690	
<b>Huishoudelijke situatie volkstelling</b>		
woont bij vader en stiefmoeder, samen met halfzussen		
<b>Event 1</b>	<b>archiebron</b>	
19/10/1754, erfgename boedel halfzus	boedelbeschrijvingen Lichterfelde Nr. 1690	
<b>Event 2</b>	<b>archiebron 2</b>	
is geestelijke dochter in boedelbeschrijving halfzus	boedelbeschrijvingen Lichterfelde Nr. 1690	
<b>Event 3</b>	<b>archiebron 3</b>	
<b>extra</b>		
#Naam?		

How will this quantitative research on the basis of information derived from qualitative sources be constructed?

#### **4.2.1 A Life Course Approach on never married women**

In her article *Mixing methods in a qualitatively driven way*, J. Mason stressed the need to *a qualitatively driven approach to mixing methods* (2006; 10) to overcome a too strictly qualitative/quantitative; micro/macro; collective/individual divide. Moreover, this would overcome that researchers only stress research questions which are strongly influenced by the methodology the researcher wants to use. Most of the advantages of this method that she brings into the picture are characteristics of the methodology of the life course approach. In specific, these are the importance of the interaction between individuals, the interaction between micro and macro, the influence of the context on the particular, to see through the micro the macro... and to see the particular through the generalisation

Thus, we can provide an answer to some of the research questions by using and can find a solution to combine quantitative and qualitative sources in the method of the life course analysis. According to the scheme Giele and Elder (1998) constructed, the life course of individuals is influenced by four key elements which are linked together. First of all, there is the social and economical context, *the location* that influenced the behaviour of the individual. Their second concept of *linked lives* refers to the social interaction between individuals, institutions and groups. Hence, people with different social backgrounds will have different courses of life. Besides these two elements that influence the life course of an individual, the life course approach acknowledges also *human agency* which refers to the fact that a person pursues his or her own goals. However, this does not imply that individuals cannot take decisions in function of their entourage. *Timing* constitutes for these three concepts the determining factor. The act of an individual at a certain time is considered as a strategy that corresponds on the one hand to external events and on the other hand to personal goals.

Because of socio-economic and cultural changes, it is important to distinguish different cohorts (people born in the same period). Namely, each cohort experiences its own unique combination of possibilities and limits influenced by the connection between a specific social context and the age of this cohort at that moment. Nevertheless, it still is important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of a cohort (Kok, 2000).

For my research, however is it not possible to distinguish cohorts before consulting the sources, since I do not start with the birth of an individual, but with the death. Thus, cohorts can only be constructed afterwards.

Moreover, there are some methodological problems. For a life course approach, well documented longitudinal sources are needed. The most suitable source for this method are population registers. These registers exist in every Belgian commune since 1846 (Van den Eekhout and Vanthemsche, 2001). For some cities such as Bruges, however, population registers already exist since 1790 (Dhondt 1995). Although these first registers could be an exceptional opportunity for life course analysis, they are not well documented. (e.g. it is unclear who belonged to which household and the migration of individuals is underreported) Moreover, for the rural area of the Franc of Bruges population registers are not available before 1846. Therefore, we have to rely on other sources. In order to reconstruct the life course of never married women, vital sources such as the parish registers (before 1796) and civil registers (after 1796) are used. The life course approach usually starts with the birth of an individual, continues with marriage and ends with death. For our research, we cannot follow this chronology. The only time we know for sure that a woman never married is at the time at death. So, our starting point will be the death registers. With only the date of birth and date of death of the never married women and their family members, there is not enough information. Therefore, the censuses of 1748 and 1814/15 are taken into account. Moreover it is also the purpose to include qualitative data, especially the probate inventories, which is, however, not an ideal source for a life course approach (see below), but it is one of the most systematic ones that can be used for the early modern period.

While vital facts have almost exclusively been used in terms of family reconstruction approaches, researchers could demonstrate that a life course approach is possible on vital facts. (cf. Gutmann and Alter 1993) Nevertheless, they still were faced with some problems, for example, the problem of losing individuals as a result of migration.

For the Franc of Bruges, this *migration-problem* can (partially) be solved. Namely, the State Archives of Bruges is working on a database which will include all vital facts from the parish registers of baptism, marriage and funeral and from the civil registers of birth, marriage and death for all parishes in the Franc of Bruges and in the entire actual province of Western Flanders. For the moment, however, only the information of some parishes is already digitalised. As a result of this digitalisation it is possible for some individuals who moved out their own parish to follow them, but only at certain points in their lives, namely at the time of marriage or death.

Through this approach I hope to find an answer on the question which factors influenced the life course of never married women which are not related to the factors of being unmarried, social class, region or period.

However, limits remain to exist. For example, it is impossible to know every occupation and living situations of the never married woman. This is only known at the time of a census. At that time, the never married woman still could have been a child or was already very old, so the living condition of

this specific moment in time cannot be taken as representative for her entire life course. Nevertheless, this information can anyhow shows important trends in the life courses of never married women.

Another limit we are faced with is the fact that women most probably have changed occupations or living forms during their life course. It is impossible to know all these different phases in the life of a never married woman. This can be experienced as a strong limitation in order to built up a strong research and especially if this research is built on the method of the life course analysis.

Despite of this limitation however, it is my belief that a life course analysis is possible. Even more, it is the only possibility.

#### ***4.2.2 Example of the parish of Lichtervelde***

To make the previous more concrete, the case of the parish of Lichtervelde can function as a good example.

I consulted 22 different archive records. These contained a request to run a school, four different records connected with the poor relief, probate inventories, probate inventories of insolvent estates, lists of gifts to churches, lists of people who paid land taxes, lists of people who paid personal property and rental taxes, lists of people who were insane, lists of people who needed extra grain, grain censuses, lists of pubs, post mortem investigations, records of summons, records of judicial complaints, records of confiscation, record of poor relief to poor spinners and weavers, census of 1845.

In most of the records I found the name of probably never married women. Nevertheless, some records did not mention a name of an unmarried woman. The record of the insane persons for example did not contain a single woman. The same was the case for the post mortem investigations, the list of pubs, the records of summons, the records of judicial complaints and the records of confiscation

Others as the grain census or the probate inventories, on the contrary, provided me with a whole range of names of probably never married women.

All these women were looked up in the parish register of death and put in the database if they were indeed never married and were older than 50 at the time of their death. As already stated before, 20 never married women could be selected. Thereafter, additional information was put in the database: the date of birth, the place of birth, different places of residence, occupation, household composition at the time of a census, information of the parents, the information of the (quality) source the woman was found in.

Beside the possibility to perform a life course analysis, the quality sources also can provide a possibility to construct other quantitative analysis. It is for example important to outweigh the number of never married women that appeared in the quality sources to these of the number of never married women in the whole society and to these of widows and married women. Did the proportion of never married women that appeared in a specific source shows the same rate as the proportion of never married women in the society? In the source 'List of people who needed extra grain' of the parish of Lichtervelde, I found several grain censuses. This source can be delighted to make this comparison. At the 7th of May 1740, the local government counted the reserves of different kinds of grain that each household contained. Only the head of the household is mentioned, so only the unmarried women who headed a household are known. From the 405 households, 161 households did not have any provision. From the 17 household headed by unmarried women, only one, the one of Joanna Chijs, had a little grain in stock, namely, 3 units of rye en 3 units of wheat. So this makes clear that the proportion of unmarried women who headed households and had grains in provision against all households who had grain in provision felt below the proportion of unmarried women who headed households in the total population, namely, 0,4% against 4,2%. For widows the proportion was 9,8% against 11,1%.

## **Conclusion: Expected Results**

To counterbalance both the scarcity of quantitative sources and the problem that only very rich or very poor never married women are researched for the early modern period, the method of the life course approach that combine quantitative and qualitative sources appeared as a valuable alternative. Despite a whole range of limitations and with less information as could have been collected for individuals in the (second half of the) 19<sup>th</sup> century, this 'early modern period' life course approach will nevertheless help to understand how never married women were able to organise their lives in different socio-economic settings at a transitional time period.

The expectation is that the life course of the women who remained unmarried in the early modern period did not differ much from these of other women. At the same time however, some factors could have had influenced either the fact that they remained unmarried either the choices they made during their life course.

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