

# Vulnerable women? Unmarried mothers in the Southern Netherlands during the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century

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As in other parts of Europe, illegitimacy rates in the Southern Netherlands heavily increased at the end of the eighteenth and in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Several historians have tried to explain this increase in illegitimacy by referring to the social and economic changes of the era. E. Shorter (1971) saw the industrial revolution as women's liberator and labelled the increase of extramarital sex as the *sexual revolution*. Gender historians on the contrary recognized women as the greatest victims of modernisation and pauperisation. According to L.A. Tilly, J.W. Scott and M. Cohen (1976) women were more vulnerable to become unmarried mothers because they could no longer rely on traditional social networks in their new urban environments.

Other researchers interpreted the changes in illegitimacy more as a phenomenon that was caused by gradual adjustments in both urban and rural society. According to K. Wrightson and D. Levine (1980), P. Laslett (1980) and C. Vandenbroeke (1986), it was not a sudden peak in prenuptial sex that caused the rise in illegitimacy, but a lack of marriage possibilities. In contrast to Shorter and Tilly et al., they did not focus on the vulnerability of young women before their consent to sex, but on their vulnerability in enforcing marriage afterwards. According to these researchers, long-term courtships and prenuptial sex were normal and accepted features of early modern society. As a result of the disadvantageous economic situation at the end of the eighteenth century, however, marriage was increasingly postponed or cancelled, even when pregnancy occurred.

It is not the aim of this paper to corroborate one of these hypotheses. Its intention is rather to question their common underlying presuppositions, namely the stereotypical image of the unmarried mother: a poor and isolated woman at the age of marriage. To some extent, this image has been confirmed by recent life-course analyses. G. Alter (1988), J. Van Bavel (2001) and R. Schumacher, G. Ryczkowska and O. Perroux (2007) have stated that unmarried mothers were not much younger than brides and that most of them were of poor origins. They have not, however, confirmed the isolation thesis. In fact, both Van Bavel and Schumacher et al. questioned it. Van Bavel's research for nineteenth-century Leuven showed that local girls

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had a higher chance of becoming unwed mothers than immigrants. According to Van Bavel immigrants who did not live in the parental household did not take the same risks in courtship as other girls because they lacked the familial support to enforce a marriage if necessary.

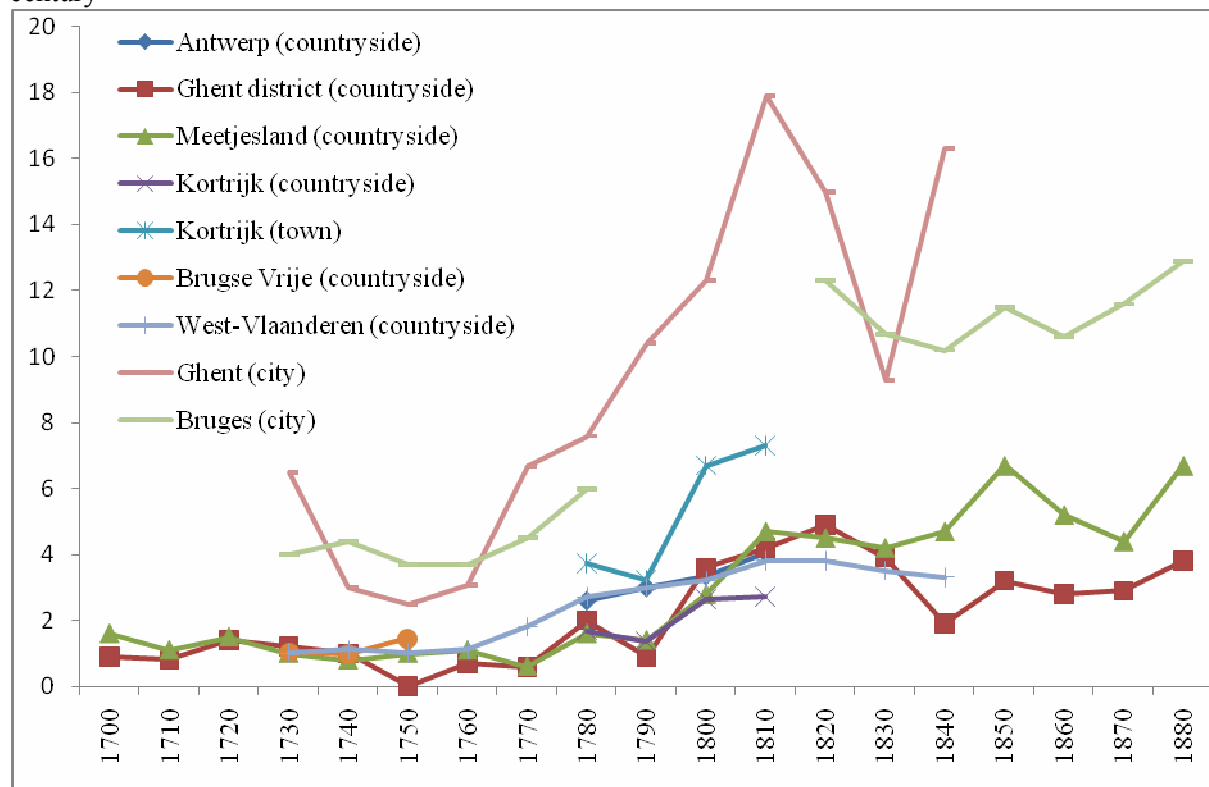
He claimed furthermore that some local women consciously got pregnant in order to influence their chances on the marriage market. This interpretation challenges the presumption that unmarried pregnancy meant no less than a disaster for the future of the mother. Few women would have agreed to have extramarital sex if the repercussions of unmarried motherhood were so negative. P.N. Stearns (1988), A. Brändström (1998) and O. Gardarsdóttir (2000) have indeed pointed out that stigmatisation and marginalisation of unmarried mothers was not as important as expected. While J. Hayhoe (2005) stated that legal changes in eighteenth-century Burgundy increasingly stigmatised illegitimacy, he found that the reverse was true in daily life. This does not mean, however, that unmarried mothers did not become more vulnerable in socio-economic terms. Therefore, the second aim of this paper is to evaluate the alleged increased *vulnerability* of unmarried women after the illegitimate childbirth. And hence the association between vulnerability and illegitimacy is studied both before and after the illegitimate childbirth.

But what is *vulnerability*? Scholars agree that it is '*a social construction depending on the social and economic context*' (Schumacher et al. 2007, 191). All societies count several vulnerable groups, like poor and single women. However, unmarried mothers and their illegitimate children are generally rated among the most vulnerable groups of all (Bourdelaïs, 2005). As Schumacher et al. have declared: '*the association between vulnerability and illegitimacy should be thought of as an interaction*' (Schumacher et al., 2007). On the one hand, the vulnerability of a particular sort of woman caused the illegitimate childbirth. On the other hand, unmarried motherhood enhanced her vulnerability even more.

This paper, thus, questions first which stereotypic vulnerabilities led to illegitimacy and second, the extent to which the illegitimate childbirth affected the social and economic future of the mother. By doing this, this paper examines the association between illegitimacy and vulnerability itself. For instance: was the vulnerability of the unmarried mothers due to the illegitimate childbirth or, as A. Reid, R. Davis, E. Garrett and A. Blaikie (2006) and A. Brändström (1998) concluded, to the socio-economic class they belonged to? Possibly it was not (or not alone) the birth of the illegitimate child that had an important influence on the lives of unmarried mothers, but also other factors such as the place of residence.

Illegitimacy rates increased throughout the Southern Netherlands, but important differences in pace and intensity can be observed. In the cities, the rise was the most noticeable. *Figure 1* indicates this for Ghent, Bruges and the provincial town of Courtrai. Much lower was the illegitimacy ratio in the countryside. This paper nevertheless focuses on the countryside. By comparing different regions, it aims to reveal the influence of regional characteristics on illegitimacy. That comparative research is necessary in order to understand social and economic phenomena, has been emphasised by several historians. R. Mitterauer (1992) introduced the idea that the structure of the soil was a determining factor for the economic organisation that developed upon it, and E. Thoen and B. Van Bavel (Thoen and Van Bavel, 1999; Thoen, 2004) established the concept of the *social-agro system*, in which the structure of the soil, the economic organisation and the social-demographic structure are connected.

Figure 1 Evolution of the illegitimacy ratio (%) in several Flemish cities and regions, 18th and 19th century<sup>2</sup>



Sources: Gyssels (1982), Vanderplaetse (1989), Van Parys (1991), Verbeurgt (1997), Van den Driessche (2002), Vercruyssen (2006), Verleysen (2006), Vanhulle (2007)

In this paper two distinct social-agro systems are studied, as well as an intermediate one. The Antwerp region and the polder region from the Franc of Bruges on the one hand are examples of areas with commercial agriculture. On the other hand, the sandy region of the Franc of Bruges and Courtrai give information on the proto-industrial areas. Finally, the Meetjesland (the region around Eeklo) combines characteristics of both commercial agriculture and proto-industry. Figure 1 shows that illegitimacy rates were higher in the Antwerp district than in the rural area around Courtrai. However, the intensity of the increase around the turn of the century was higher in the latter. The Meetjesland (Eeklo district) started off at the same level as the rural Courtrai area, but developed into the steepest curve of all rural areas under study. The analysis is mainly based on information from parish and civil registers and from a few censuses from the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, collected by

<sup>2</sup> The Antwerp region contains the localities Ekeren, Kalmthout, Kapellen, 's Gravenwezel, Schilde, Schoten, Wijnegem and Wuustwezel. The Franc of Bruges contains: Aatrijke, Ichtegem, Lichtervelde (Sandy region), Houthave, Klemsterke, Meetkerke, Stalhille en Westkapelle (Polder region). The Ghent district contains: Gentbrugge, Drongen, Mariakerke en St. Denijs Westrem. The Meetjesland contains: Bassevelde, Boekhoute, Lembeke en Watervliet. These villages are not the same as the ones analysed as the Meetjesland further in this paper (Aalter, Bellem, Eeklo, Evergem, Lotenhulle, Lovendegem, Poeke, Vinderhoute, Waarschoot, Wachtebeke, Zomergem) since the illegitimacy rates of this group are not known. The villages however belong to the same geographical area and have the same social agro-system; therefore, we can assume that the illegitimacy rate was similar. The countryside around Courtrai contains: Aalbeke, Bellegem, Kooigem and Lauwe. West-Vlaanderen finally contains all the localities in the province of West-Vlaanderen.

students for their master theses<sup>3</sup>. Unfortunately the sources of the early modern period do not contain as much information as their more recent equivalents. Therefore it is impossible to follow each mother individually. Statements can only be made for the group as a whole<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the comparison between the regions is complicated because the available source material does not date from the same chronological periods. Nevertheless, these limited sources give an important insight into the historiographical debate on the vulnerability of unmarried mothers and into the life course of these women.

## **1. PROFILE OF THE UNMARRIED MOTHER**

How different was a woman who got pregnant outside of marriage from other women? Which women were the most vulnerable to become unwed mothers? The stereotypical image of the unmarried mother is that of a young, poor and socially isolated woman. As mentioned above, several life-course analyses have confirmed that unwed mothers belonged to the lower classes and that most of them were of marriageable age. However, they questioned the thesis that unmarried mothers lived isolated from their family (Alter, 1988; Van Bavel, 2001; Schumacher et. al., 2007). Current research for rural Flanders and Brabant points in the same direction. Unmarried mothers seem to have led very similar lives to their female contemporaries. Possibly, it was their search for normalcy that made them most vulnerable.

### ***1.1. Age***

Unmarried mothers were younger than other women at first childbirth. The differences however were not large. Whereas unmarried mothers had an average age of 26,2, the mean age of marriage for women fluctuated between 26,7 in 1730-1739 and 28,9 in 1840-1849 (Vandenbroeke, 1976). The small age differences suggest that the pregnancy was the result of normal prenuptial courtship behaviour. Sexual relations during courtship were not a new phenomenon. During the Ancien Régime they were a normal and more or less accepted feature of everyday life. As a result, prenuptial pregnancies were very common (Vandenbroeke, 1976, 1979; Laslett, 1980; Stearns, 1988). Why then did illegitimacy rates rise at the end of the eighteenth century? This paper does not aim to give a definitive answer. But since prenuptiality increased along with illegitimacy, it must be clear that the boom in illegitimacy cannot simply be explained by a lack of marriage opportunities for women who in earlier times would have been pregnant brides.

Our regional and chronological comparison of the ages of unmarried mothers indicates that courtship behaviour was influenced by social and economic changes of the era. The gap in age between unmarried mothers and brides increased at the end of the Ancien Régime. Hence women became sexually active at a younger age at times when the marriage pattern became more restrictive. Possibly this was due to a certain prejudice of women. At times when it was hard to arrange a marriage, they perhaps wanted to augment their chances by getting pregnant.

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<sup>3</sup> Van den Driessche A., *Ongehuwde moeders in het Meetjesland (1750-1850)*, onuitgegeven licentieverhandeling, Universiteit Gent 2002; Vanhulle K., *Alleenstaande moeders in het Brugse Vrije, 1730-1760*, onuitgegeven licentieverhandeling, Universiteit Gent, 2007; Vercruysse S., *Ongehuwde moeders in de regio Courtrai eind achttiende eeuw*, onuitgegeven licentieverhandeling, Universiteit Gent, 2006; Verleysen B., *Ongehuwde moeders in de regio het Antwerpse eind 18e eeuw*, onuitgegeven licentieverhandeling, Universiteit Gent, 2006. For the Franc of Bruges, the information was complemented with the findings of S. De Langhe.

<sup>4</sup> Only K. Vanhulle and S. De Langhe have used life-course analysis.

Only pregnant women managed to get married before the usual age at marriage. According to Van Bavel (2001), some women in nineteenth-century Leuven made similar rational choices, for instance because they wanted to escape a large parental household.

Table 1. Mean age of unmarried mothers at childbirth

Region	Period	Mean	Median	n
Courtrai (town)	1780-1799	26,5	26	69
	1800-1815	25,9	25	397
Antwerp (countryside)	1780-1799	25,2	24	55
	1800-1815	25,7	24	222
Franc of Bruges (polder region)	1730-1760	28,9	27	36
Meetjesland (countryside)	1780-1796	26,8	25	134
	1830-1846	26,3	25	637
Franc of Bruges (sandy region)	1730-1760	26,9	25	40
Courtrai (countryside)	1780-1799	27,4	27	29
	1800-1815	25,9	25	66

Sources: Van Den Driessche (2002), Vercruyssen (2006), Verleysen (2006), Vanhulle (2007)

However plausible, an explanation such as this is highly hypothetical, since no information on the motives of the unmarried women is available. Moreover, considering the case of the Southern Netherlands the opposite motivation is plausible as well. Without aiming for a pregnancy, women might have assented more easily to the sexual wishes of their boyfriends because they feared they would otherwise be set aside for a more willing girl (Alter, 1988). Definitive celibacy, especially for women, grew along with economic hardship and single women had poor prospects. Therefore it is not unreasonable to think that girls were eager to avoid ending up as spinsters. This is why women of marriageable age were most vulnerable: they were determined to get married and therefore they were willing to take high risks.

Our regional analysis confirms the reciprocal connection between the ages of unmarried women and the restrictive age of marriage. As can be seen in table 1, the age of unmarried women declined most in the poorer proto-industrial areas, which were the regions with the most restrictive marriage pattern and the highest percentages of definitive celibacy. In the rural region around Courtrai, the age of unmarried mothers declined from 27.4 in the last decennia of the eighteenth century to 25.9 in the first decennia of the nineteenth century. A similar observation, but of a lower order, can be made for the Meetjesland, the region with mixed economic characteristics. Antwerp, the region of commercial agriculture, was not characterized by an increase of the age of unmarried mothers. On the contrary, the ages of unmarried mothers slightly increased, whereas the age at marriage did not rise as much as elsewhere. Yet the overall ages of unmarried mothers were lower in Antwerp than elsewhere. This is no contradiction, however, since the age of marriage was lower as well (Stallaerts, 1980). The Bruges region finally seems to be an odd exception. The mean age of unmarried mothers in this region was much higher than elsewhere. The mean however is highly affected by outliers. The ages of unmarried women in the polder region around Bruges were not so much higher than in the sandy region, but they were more diverse.

The impoverishment that struck the Southern Netherlands at the end of the eighteenth century thus played a role in the increase of illegitimacy. The potential number of unmarried mothers

increased because they wanted to safeguard their marriage chances. This happened both in the Antwerp region and in proto-industrial Flanders. Although illegitimacy rates in Antwerp were traditionally higher, the sudden increase was more obvious in the poorer Flemish districts where the courtship period was extended.

### ***1.2. Social-economic class***

Although some historians have rightly remarked that the higher classes could more easily escape the registration of an illegitimate birth (Kok and Koster, 1987), in general there is little discussion about the fact that the majority of unmarried mothers belonged to the lowest classes of society (Tilly et. al, 1976; Van Bavel, 2001; Evans, 2005; ...). This type of vulnerability is easy to detect on the basis of the professional occupation of unmarried women mentioned in the sources (table 2). Practically all professions refer to unskilled and low-waged activities. The activities of unmarried women, however, depended on the region and the period. Naturally, the occupations of the poor (as well as of the higher classes) depended on the social agro-system. In the proto-industrial and mixed regions, the large majority were spinsters. In the agricultural districts, they were mostly domestic servants and day labourers. In the towns there was more diversity: there one could find spinsters, lace makers, seamstresses, washerwomen and domestic servants among the unmarried women.

Nevertheless, these were also the occupations of the majority of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women. The professions reflect more the economic characteristics of each region than they inform us about the actual state of the women's financial situation. Poverty was widespread, but of course there were differences in degrees of shortage, and it is difficult to evaluate whether the unmarried women belonged to the most deprived. What is unmistakably true is that marriage was crucial for them. Women's work was lower paid, and it was not easy for a single unskilled woman to make ends meet. Presumably, the lower one's bargaining power in the marriage market or the poorer one was, the more risk one was willing to take to conclude a marriage.

Moreover, other factors indicate that unmarried mothers were among the poorest. In the Franc of Bruges the parish registers stated which women were dependent on public relief. In the polder region this was 6,1 % of all unmarried mothers, while in the poorer sandy region this was 25%. Of course, these are minimum values. They only reveal who received support at the moment of childbirth. It is conceivable that many more women received support at one point in their life. The information of the 1748 census points at least in that direction. 42,9% of the women or their families received support. Again, this is only a random indication.

Illegitimacy rose, simply enough, because the group of vulnerable women expanded. It is clear that vulnerability for unmarried motherhood is foremost a consequence of being deprived. In their search for a better life, they knew marriage was crucial. It remains unclear, however, if these women were the most distinct and perhaps marginal part of society, or whether they were just the unlucky ones of a large group of women living in the same conditions and willing to take risks. Therefore, it is crucial to find out how they related to the rest of society. Were they part of a household and of the village community they lived in or were they outcasts and did they live isolated from society?

Table 2. Social-economic class of unmarried women at the moment of childbirth (%)

	Courtrai town (1785-1815)	Antwerp (1780-1815)	Meetjesland (1830-1846)	Courtrai countryside (1785-1815)
<b>I. Agriculture</b>	<b>0,5</b>	<b>5,1</b>	<b>2,4</b>	<b>3,0</b>
<b>II. Casual labour</b>	<b>10,0</b>	<b>52,0</b>	<b>11,3</b>	<b>4,0</b>
Domestic servant	6,0	32,1	4,6	1,0
Day labourer	4,0	12,3	2,5	3,0
Labourer (general)		7,6	2,1	
Labourer (factory)				
Others			2,1	
<b>III. Crafts</b>	<b>65,8</b>	<b>3,4</b>	<b>73,9</b>	<b>44,1</b>
a. Textile	51,0	1,2	68,6	42,7
Spinster	19,8	0,7	67,0	42,0
Weaver	0,3		1,4	0,7
Lace maker	29,9		0,2	
Others	1,0			
b. Nutrition			0,6	
c. Clothing	11,8	1,4	4,7	0,7
Sewstress	11,8	1,4	4,7	0,7
Others				
d. Others	3,0	0,4		0,7
Washerwoman	3,0	0,4		0,7
<b>IV. Trade-Transport</b>	<b>2,0</b>	<b>0,4</b>	<b>1,2</b>	<b>0,7</b>
Innkeeper		0,4	0,2	
Shopkeeper			0,8	
Others	2,0		0,2	
<b>V. Administration- Free professions</b>	<b>0,0</b>	<b>0,0</b>	<b>0,0</b>	<b>0,0</b>
<b>VI. Non-productive</b>	<b>1,0</b>	<b>0,8</b>	<b>0,8</b>	<b>2,0</b>
Person of private means	1,0	0,4	0,8	2,0
Beggar		0,4		
Poor relief				
<b>VII. Not mentioned in the source</b>	<b>21,0</b>	<b>39,4</b>	<b>10,6</b>	<b>46,0</b>
<b>n (100%)</b>	<b>528</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>634</b>	<b>79</b>

Sources: Van Den Driessche (2002), Verduyck (2006), Verleysen (2006), Vanhulle (2007)

### 1.3. Socially isolated?

The isolation question is not easy to answer however. The sources of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century only give partial information on this matter. Only two facts are possible to research: the origins of the unmarried mother and the household composition. Moreover, this information can only be suggestive since it does not give a definite answer regarding the living circumstances of the unmarried women at the time of childbirth.

The parish registers only inform us of the birthplace of the women, not of the circumstances of their migration. Therefore it is impossible to distinguish between women who migrated alone and those who did so along with their parents. A similar remark applies to the information on the households since the censuses can precede the childbirth by many years. Moreover, censuses were very rare in the early modern period. For this study, it was only possible to analyse the census of 1748 of the Franc of Bruges. Therefore the amount of data on this particular question is very limited.

According to the classical interpretations of unmarried motherhood (Shorter, Tilly et. al), migrants had a higher chance of becoming unwed mothers because they lived apart from their family and lacked the control of or support from traditional social networks. *'Having lost one family, many sought to create another'*, as Tilly et al. wrote (Tilly et al., 1976, 463). Several more recent studies have confirmed some aspects of the isolation idea. R. G. Fuchs and L. Page Moch, who researched the origin of unmarried mothers in nineteenth-century Paris, recognized similar vulnerabilities as Tilly et al. did: *'The employment opportunities of this capital city placed female migrants in positions that denied them both protection from sexual relations and the earning power to underwrite a marital relationship.'* (Fuchs and Page Moch, 1990, 1030).

Alter demonstrated as well that immigrants had a higher chance of becoming unwed mothers. Nevertheless, he did not want to interpret this as a confirmation of the isolation thesis because he had not been able to distinguish between the immigrants who came alone and those who moved along with their family (Alter, 1988). Van Bavel nevertheless made the distinction and refuted the isolation thesis, at least for the Leuven case. He found that women who immigrated alone had the least chance of getting pregnant outside of marriage. *'If anything, extramarital pregnancy was a sign of social integration rather than of isolation'*, he wrote (Van Bavel, 2001, 464). Nevertheless, single women who did become pregnant had difficulties in enforcing a marriage. *'Although the risk of extramarital pregnancy cannot be attributed to separation from the family and native community, it may have increased the risk of illegitimate childbirth.'* (Van Bavel, 2001, 465) According to Van Bavel, women living apart from their family did not take as many risks in their courtship behaviour because they knew they lacked the social relations to enforce a marriage if necessary.

In the present study, there is a clear distinction between the town and agricultural areas on the one hand and the proto-industrial regions on the other hand (table 3). The first counted many more immigrants among the unmarried mothers than the latter. Especially the richest area of the study, the polder region of the Franc of Bruges, marks the contrast. More than half of the unmarried mothers there were not born in the village they gave birth in. The question remains whether this is relevant for the vulnerability study of unmarried mothers. Possibly the difference only reflects the higher labour migration that characterized these regions. In 1815, 28% of the unmarried women in the sandy region were immigrants, compared to 44% in the



polder region (De Langhe). If there were more female immigrants, it makes sense that they also formed a larger percentage of the unmarried women. Nevertheless, illegitimacy rates were higher in the town of Courtrai and in Antwerp than in the countryside of Courtrai, and it is not impossible that this was caused by the higher number of immigrants.

Table 3. Portion of immigrants amongst the unmarried mothers (%)

<b>Region</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>%</b>	<b><i>n</i> (100%)</b>
Courtrai (town)	1785-1815	35,8	664
Antwerp (countryside)	1800-1815	32,9	164
Franc of Bruges (polder region)	1730-1760	53,8	26
Franc of Bruges (Sandy region)	1730-1760	20,0	30
Courtrai (countryside)	1785-1815	17,2	145

Sources: *Vercruysse* (2006), *Verleysen* (2006), *Vanhulle* (2007)

In general, however, the proportion of immigrants among the unmarried mothers is rather low. As stated above, not all the immigrants moved alone. Many had migrated as a child with their parents. Moreover, most of them had only travelled a limited distance, which indicates that they did not start a completely new life. In Antwerp for instance, only 9,1% of the unmarried women was born in a village further than 10 kilometres from the birthplace of the illegitimate child.

Table 4. Household situation of the unmarried mothers before childbirth (%),  
Census of the Franc of Bruges, 1748

<b>Household situation</b>	<b>%</b>
<i>Living with one or both parents</i>	61,9
Both	19,0
Only the mother	38,1
Only the father	4,8
<i>Living with other kin</i>	9,5
<i>Being married</i>	4,8
<i>Being widowed</i>	9,5
<i>Living alone</i>	4,8
<i>Other</i>	9,5
Living with unrelated persons	4,8
Being a domestic servant	4,8
<i><b>n</b> (100%)</i>	21

Source: *Vanhulle* (2007)

With respect to the isolation thesis it is more important to study the household situation. The 1748 census of the Franc of Bruges informs us about the household situation. Van Bavel's (2001) research for Leuven showed that girls who lived with their father and whose mother had died, had a higher chance of becoming unwed mothers. According to Van Bavel this was caused by the wish of the girls to found a family of their own. The more siblings the girl had, the more she left her father's home. Unfortunately for those daughters it were the single

fathers who were least eager to give up their daughters. Especially if they had younger children, they needed the adult daughter to manage the domestic duties.

Other historians, however, among whom Alter (1980) for Verviers and A. Lottin (1970) for Lille, have stated the opposite. According to them it was mainly the absence of a father that made daughters vulnerable for illegitimate motherhood. The data for the Franc of Bruges confirm their results. 19% of the unmarried mothers lived with both parents. While 38,1% of the future illegitimate mothers lived with their widowed mothers, only 4,8% lived with their widowed fathers. The percentage of women living with other kin (9,5%) or with another family (4,8) was remarkable as well. Most likely, these women were orphans. Given that the amount of data is small, these findings can only be an indication, but they do reveal a factor of vulnerability. The absence of a father figure made poor women very vulnerable to becoming unwed mothers. Presumably, this vulnerability is more related to a lack of support in arranging a marriage than to a higher chance of getting pregnant.

## **2. THE REPERCUSSIONS OF THE ILLEGITIMATE BIRTH FOR THE LIFE COURSE OF THE MOTHER**

What were, for the unmarried mother, the consequences of having a baby out of wedlock? Was she socially marginalised and stigmatised? Did her chances of getting married decrease as a consequence of having an illegitimate child? In other words, did unmarried motherhood mortgage the life course of these women and did it make them more vulnerable? As O. Gardarsdóttir pointed out, unmarried mothers were *'by no mean a homogeneous group'* (2000; 436). So, to what extent did having a child out of wedlock play a decisive role in the future of the unmarried woman? And which other variables could have had an impact on her life course? More specifically, did the geographical area they were living in play a crucial role?

### **2.1 *'Pests of the society'?*<sup>5</sup> The overall influence of having a bastard.**

While the 'New Poor Law' in England, enacted in 1834, described the unmarried mothers as *'pests of society, burdens, villains, strumpets, and cunning manipulators of men and charities'* (Forman Cody, 2000; 132), before 1820 unmarried mothers and their bastards were not seen as 'problematic' by the poor relief or other governmental institutions. Moreover, in nineteenth-century Finland, Gardarsdóttir (2000) could not find any clear stigma on unmarried mothers. As a result he concluded that unmarried women were not isolated from the society they lived in. Nevertheless, he determined that unmarried mothers living with their parents or with the father of their child (whom they might marry after a while) lived in more prosperous conditions than did unmarried females who had no social network to rely on. On the other hand, Postles's research on early modern England based on court records shows a totally different picture. He stated that unmarried mothers not only moved out from their birth parish to overcome the stigmatisation, but also were (judicially) forced to move and therefore lived in isolation (Postles 2007). While Postles interpreted the whole life course of the unmarried mother as very vulnerable, researchers such as Gardarsdóttir in Finland (2000), Van Bavel in Leuven (2001), Reid et al. in Scotland (2006), Schumacher et al. in Geneva (2007) and Brändström in Sweden (1998) showed a more positive position and focused on the unmarried mothers as a heterogeneous group. A part of this group of single mothers could have experienced a strong negative impact, while another equally important part could have experienced little negativity with regard to illegitimate childbirths.

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<sup>5</sup> Forman Cody, 2000, 132

To research the impact of the birth of an illegitimate child on the life course of the unmarried mother, we will focus on two main areas: the household composition of the unmarried mothers and their marriage chances.

### 2.1.1 Socially isolated?

Could unmarried women in the early modern Southern Netherlands rely on family and/or on a social network, or were they isolated and left to their own devices? Moreover, how did this differ as a result of the geographical area they were living in?

As can be seen in table 5, unmarried mothers could in a considerable number of cases rely on their parents or on other close kin. As expected, this phenomenon was most widespread in the countryside. In the city of Bruges, living with other close kin was a popular form of living for unmarried mothers. While during the second half of the eighteenth and in the first half of the nineteenth century the rates of illegitimacy rose considerably, the possibilities for unmarried mothers to live with close kin rose too. Moreover, in comparison with other unmarried women older than 30 years, the unmarried mothers above this age had more chance to live with their parents. These numbers show that unmarried mothers were not isolated or rejected from the society they lived in. In nineteenth-century Finland, also 15% of the unmarried mothers could live with their parents (Gardarsdóttir 2000). Similarly, Alter (1988) found that in Verviers most of the unmarried mothers stayed as long as possible with (one or both) parents. Reid et al. (2006) also found strong evidence that unwed mothers and their bastards frequently lived in the parental household. However, when economic circumstances worsened, fewer unmarried mothers lived in the household of their parents. Yet most illegitimate children still could rely on the support of their grandparents and lived with them while their mothers moved in order to find work.

Table 5: Household composition of the unmarried mothers after childbirth, at the time of census (%).

Household composition	Courtrai (1814)		Franc of Bruges (1748)		Franc of Bruges (older than 30 years old) (1815)			Meetjesland (1796/1846)	
	City	Country	Sandy	Polder	Sandy	Polder	City	1796	1846
Living alone	10,5	15,2	66,7	50	21	27	23	34,1	4,3
Living with parents	15,7	50,0	33,3		39	28	17	38,6	54,8
Living with other kin	10,5	10,9			14	3	15	11,4	10,8
Living with unrelated persons	42,1	2,2		50	26	36	43	15,9	30,1
Living with employer	21,0	21,7							

Sources: Van den Driessche (2001), Vercruysse (2006), Vanhulle (2007) and Burghgrave, G/ Dewulf-Heus, Romain L., *Volkstellingen 1814/1815, 1976-1989* (own research)

Although it was expected that unmarried mothers had more chance to (be forced to) move after the birth of their bastard (Vandenbroeke, 1986), the migration rates show a relatively low chance for unmarried mothers to emigrate. Especially migration towards the city was rare. For the Antwerp countryside, at the end of the eighteenth century only 5.6% of the unmarried mothers moved from the countryside to the city of Antwerp. In the nineteenth

century this rate rose to 10.5%. On the other hand, 53.2% of the unmarried mothers moved from one parish to another in the Antwerp countryside. This could confirm the idea that the unmarried mother was being forced to leave the ‘birthparish’ after having an illegitimate child. The Antwerp countryside, however, was characterised by commercially oriented agriculture, which left little room for unmarried women to find work in their own parish. Other regions with the same economic characteristics such as the polder area of the Franc of Bruges show similar migration data for unmarried women in general, which indicates that these migration rates were not exceptional. (see table 7) In proto-industrial areas, on the contrary, migration rates were low.

Table 6: Household composition (%) unmarried women older than 30 in the Franc of Bruges, 1815

Household composition	Sandy	Polder	City
Living alone	20	25	26
Living with her parents	30	22	14
Living with other kin	20	13	15
Living with unrelated persons	20	19	29
Living with employer	11	19	16

Sources: Burghgrave, G/ Dewulf-Heus, Romain L., *Volkstellingen 1814/1815, 1976-1989* (own research)

Table 7: Mobility rates of unmarried women older than 30 in the Franc of Bruges, 1815 (%)

Area	Mobility rates (%)
Sandy (n=397)	28
Polders (n=574)	44
City (n=183)	14

Sources: Burghgrave, G/ Dewulf-Heus, Romain L., *Volkstellingen 1814/1815*<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, moving did not always imply total isolation. Earlier research on unmarried mothers (Alter, 1988) and other unmarried women (Gordon, 2005; Fuchs and Page Moch, 1990) showed that single women in the city often received social support from their parents, other kin and friends. Moreover, Bourdelais (2005) pointed out that, besides the networks of family and friends, socio-economic mechanisms –such as poor relief– existed which helped the most vulnerable of the society to construct their lives more properly. Reid et al. (2006) also concluded for rural Scotland that ‘(...) *it is unlikely that unmarried mothers and their offspring were stigmatised or disadvantaged in terms of social support networks*’ (op cit.; 108). In general, unmarried mothers were neither stigmatised, nor isolated from the society they lived in. Many received support from their parents or other close kin. And moving does not seem to have been the result of a stigma. It rather seems to be the result of the specific socio-economic circumstances of the area they lived in.

Brändström (1998) stated that there could not have been a marginalisation of unmarried women, otherwise not so many unwed mothers would have gotten married in nineteenth-century Sweden. Can the same be concluded for the single mothers in the Southern Netherlands?

### 2.1.2 Decreased marriage opportunities?

While unmarried mothers could rely on family support after giving birth to an illegitimate child, marriage opportunities could have decreased as a result of this event. To evaluate this

<sup>6</sup> Current doctoral research of Sofie De Langhe: The subsistence strategies of unmarried and never married women in the Franc of Bruges, 1730-1850 (supervisor Prof. dr. Isabelle Devos).

properly, it is important to distinguish the unmarried mothers who married shortly after the child's delivery and those who would only marry a few years later or never married at all.

In many cases, the first group was part of the economically vulnerable classes who did not have the means to marry at the time the pregnancy was discovered. These mothers are examples of the *courtship hypothesis* (Wrightson and Levine, 1980). Therefore, it is likely that these women would have had the opportunity to marry the father of their child at the time when economic possibilities increased (Gardarsdóttir 2000 and Brändström 1998). It is important to state, however, that the unmarried mothers who married shortly after the child's birth did not necessarily marry their child's father. These women could have been the victim of a marriage promise (Vandenbroeke 1986) or could have tried to get married by getting pregnant (Van Bavel, 2001). Notwithstanding these comments, it is probable that, in most of the cases, the unmarried mothers who married shortly after delivery, married the father of their child. Thus, it can be concluded that this prenuptial pregnancy and delivery simply occurred as a *life-course event preceding the marriage* (Gardarsdóttir 2000; 451).

Once again, the region the unmarried mothers lived in seems to have had an important impact on the marriage opportunities of these women. Earlier research has shown that in areas where the social and economic distinction among the inhabitants was strong, the opportunities for the unmarried women to get married were reduced (Segalen, 1980). Moreover, Vandenbroeke (1979) stated for the Southern Netherlands that in agricultural areas where the farms were commercially oriented, birth fathers felt more intimidated as the result of the hostile atmosphere vis-à-vis the unmarried mothers. As a consequence they broke their marriage promises.

Table 8: Unmarried mothers who married (minimal percentages)<sup>7</sup>

Area	Period	%	n (100 %)
Courtrai (City)	1785-1815	65,2	76
Antwerp	1780-1799	27,4	135
	1800-1815	37,9	240
Meetjesland	1780-1796	33,7	273
	1830-1846	48,2	664
Courtrai (Countryside)	1785-1815	60	47
Franc of Bruges	1730-1760	57,1	91

Sources: Van den Driessche (2001), Vercruysse (2006), Verleysen (2006) and Vanhulle (2007)

The rates of the marriage opportunities in the Southern Netherlands show a dual image. On the one hand, unmarried mothers in the commercial agricultural regions married less frequently than unmarried mothers in the proto-industrial regions. First of all, they moved more frequently out of the 'birthparish', and secondly, the unmarried mothers in the agricultural areas who did stay married relatively less frequently in comparison to those in proto-industrial regions. In the area of Bruges, this difference was obvious. In the sandy region in the middle of the eighteenth century 86% of all unmarried mothers who stayed in the 'birthplace' married, while in the polder region this was only the case for 64% of them. On the other hand, in the regions with commercial agricultural output more unmarried mothers married in the first year after the birth of their bastard.

Table 9: Time span (in years) between birth of the bastard and marriage of the mother (%)

<sup>7</sup> The maximum number of mothers who married was 86% in the sandy region of the Franc of Bruges, 64% in the polder region and 62,5% in the Meetjesland.

Area	Period	1 year	2 year	3 year	4 year	5 year	6-10 year	11-15 year	≥16 year	n
Courtrai (City)	1785-1815	21,7	10	11,7	8,3	6,7	20	6,7	15,1	76
Antwerp	1780-1799	42,0	4,0	18,0	10,0	4,0	10,0	6,0	6,0	50
	1800-1815	44,2	12,8	10,5	8,1	4,7	11,6	5,8	2,3	86
Franc of Bruges polder	1730-1760	36	24	4		4	28	4		25
Meetjesland	1780-1796	22,0	16,0	10,0	4,0	4,0	32,0	10,0	2,0	50
	1830-1846	23,1	13,6	8,8	8,8	7,7	25,6	8,4	4,0	273
Franc of Bruges sandy	1730-1760	41,6	8,3	20,8		12,5	16,6			24
Courtrai (countryside)	1785-1815	16,0	4,0	6,0	14,0	14,0	22,0	16,0	8	46

Sources: Van den Driessche (2001), Vercruyssen (2006), Verleysen (2006) and Vanhulle (2007)

Thus, unmarried mothers in the regions where inequality was higher among the inhabitants either moved out of the ‘birthparish’ or married as soon as possible after the birth of their bastard. Is it plausible to conclude that this behaviour was a result of the disapproving social climate? Or was it rather a consequence of the economic situation of the region? The disadvantageous economic circumstances for the (unmarried) women could have forced the unmarried mothers either to marry as soon as possible or to move to find work in another parish/area. If the migration rates of the unmarried mothers are compared to those of other unmarried women, it is clear that the behaviour of the former forms the same pattern as that of the latter. (see above) Moreover, unmarried mothers who moved from rural Antwerp to the city were young, usually moved without their child and started working as a domestic servant, just as other unmarried women did (Vandenbroeke, 1976). The fact that the mothers married shortly after the birth shows also that getting pregnant was more a ‘marriage strategy’<sup>8</sup> than it was in regions with cottage industry. It is therefore reasonable to assume that unmarried mothers in areas where inequality was higher were forced to move or to marry soon after the birth of the illegitimate child not because of social disapproval, but as a result of the disadvantageous economic circumstances.

In general, in the areas with smallholders and cottage industry unmarried mothers married only a few years after the illegitimate birth. This can be explained by the economic opportunities available for unmarried women in these areas. In the sandy region of the Franc of Bruges, more unmarried mothers could live with their parents than in the polder region. The cottage industry provided the unmarried women, and likewise the unmarried mothers, with opportunities to work in the family economy while staying in their parental household. Moreover, it also provided the possibility for unmarried women to live on one’s own.

While the frequency of marriage followed the ‘standard path’ of the marriage behaviour of other women in the specific region they lived in, the mean age at marriage of single mothers was a little higher than was the mean age of all women in these periods.

The mean age at marriage of women in the Southern Netherlands in the middle of the eighteenth century was 26.3 years, at the end of this century it was 27.5 years, and by the middle of the nineteenth century the mean age had risen to 29.7 years. The mean age at marriage for men also rose during this period, from 29 years old in the middle of the nineteenth century to 31 years old in the first half of the nineteenth century. At the end of the

<sup>8</sup> Either as a result of courtship, of a *promesse de mariage* or of an active marriage strategy on the part of the unmarried females.

eighteenth century, however, the mean age at marriage for men had dropped to 28 years old (Devos, 1999; Vandenbroeke 1976 and 1995).

Table 10: Mean age at marriage of unmarried mothers and their future husbands (years)

Area	Period	Age at marriage woman		Age at marriage husband	
		Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Courtrai city	1785-1815	33		35,8	
Antwerp	1780-1799	29	27	29	28
	1800-1815	29	27	32	29
Franc of Bruges polder	1730-1760	30,1	29	35	32,5
Meetjesland	1780-1796	27,1	27	34,7	31,5
	1830-1846	29,3	29	32,8	31
Franc of Bruges Sandy	1730-1760	27,2	27	31,4	31,5
Courtrai countryside	1785-1815	31,5		36,3	

Sources: Van den Driessche (2001), Vercruysse (2006), Verleysen (2006) and Vanhulle (2007)

In summary, the chances for the unmarried mothers to get married were not that different from those of other women in the early modern period.<sup>9</sup> The majority of the unmarried mothers could marry, and, except for the countryside of Courtrai, 50% or more of the women who could be followed did so in the first three years after the birth of their bastard. Brändström also found evidence for nineteenth-century Sweden of a high number of unwed mothers who married later (Brändström, 1998).<sup>10</sup> The marriage chances of unmarried mothers, however, did vary. The agricultural area they lived in was a first important variable that had an influence on their marriage chances; but other variables came into play as well. Our next aim is to examine other variables that could have had an influence on the marriage chances of unmarried mothers.

## 2.2 Variables with an impact on the marriage chances of unmarried mothers

### 2.2.1 Courtship

The gap between the birth of the bastard and the marriage of the mother can be used as an indicator of the type of relationship between the marriage partners. The smaller the gap, the more chance the mother married the father of her child. In that case, we assume the marriage is the outcome of a courtship. Presumably, this type of marriage had a different impact on the vulnerability of the mother. In other words, what was the influence of marrying the birth father on the life course of the unwed mother?

Focussing on unmarried mothers makes clear that two ‘kinds’ of unmarried mothers can be detected: namely, the mothers who were able to marry soon after the birth of their bastard and the mothers who became pregnant either after a courtship period, a marriage promise or ‘voluntary’ sexual behaviour but who could not marry the birth father of their child. It is, however, very difficult to determine who married the father and who did not. In the pre-

<sup>9</sup> At the end of the eighteenth century 21% of women never married. (Devos 1999). In the province East-Flanders 20.9% of the women between 40 and 49 were unmarried at the end of the eighteenth century while in the middle of the nineteenth century this rate rose to 25.4%. (Vandenbroeke 1976) In the age group 30-35 28% of the female inhabitants were unmarried during the eighteenth century, and in the middle of the nineteenth this rose to 46-54%. (Vandenbroeke 1976) In the Meetjesland 38% of the unmarried mothers who did not emigrate never married.

<sup>10</sup> Between 69 and 86% of the unmarried mothers got married.

modern demographic sources, information on the birth father is very scarce. Numbers are known for the Antwerp countryside, but this is a rare finding. In this region, 26.4% of the birth fathers was mentioned in the sources for the period 1780-1799 and 28.8% for the period 1800-1815. Moreover, only 37.8% of the unmarried mothers married the birth father in the period 1780-1799 and 34.1% in the following period. Nevertheless, marrying in the first half year after the birth was very common, which increases the assumptions that both the marital partners were the birth parents of the child born out of wedlock<sup>11</sup>.

Table 11: Frequency of intervals between birth of the bastard and marriage of the mother in months in the first year after birth (%)

Area	Period	< 1 month	2-6 months	7-12 months	n (100%)
Antwerp	1780-1799	38,1	47,6	14,3	21
	1800-1815	23,7	52,6	23,7	38
Franc of Bruges polder	1730-1760	44,4	33,3	22,2	9
Franc of Bruges Sandy	1730-1760	70,0	30,0		10

Sources: Verleysen (2006), Vanhulle (2007)

It is therefore important to question whether mothers who married their sexual partners/fiancés still can be defined as ‘vulnerable’? It is clear that these unmarried mothers in some cases could rely on the social and economic support of their partners (see also evidence from Brändström 1998). This made them, strictly speaking, less vulnerable. But if ‘the problem to get married before the delivery of the child of the premarital pregnancy’ is taken into account, then these unmarried mothers also can be defined as ‘vulnerable’. Firstly, the impossibility of marrying before the delivery indicates either economic or social impediments to getting married. Secondly, pregnancy before marriage would have, nevertheless, increased the insecurity of these women about getting married. Possibly this made them more vulnerable after the delivery. Thus, although unmarried mothers often married soon, the insecurity raised as a consequence of this premarital birth increased the vulnerability of the unmarried mothers.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.2.2 Influence of the time gap between the birth of the child and the marriage of the unmarried mother

The longer the unmarried mother remained single, the more her marriage chances decreased. The experiences of the unmarried mothers in the Southern Netherlands, however, contradict this assumption. In areas where the unmarried mother could only marry a few years after the birth, she married more frequently than did single mothers in areas where they could marry shortly after the birth. Moreover, in these areas where the unmarried mother had to wait

<sup>11</sup> It is, however, impossible to conclude that every mother who married shortly after the birth of her child married the child’s father and to conclude that every mother who only married a few years after the birth did not marry the birth father of her child. Francisca Moyaert for example married Jacob Jan Vanneste (age 72) on 12 February 1823 at the age of 46 after having four children out of wedlock. At the time of the census of 1815 this source shows already that these two future marital partners already lived together at least 8 years before finally marrying. Moreover when her illegitimate daughter Sophia Moyaert (born 15 years before the marriage of her mother) married in 1835, she was legitimated as Sophia Vanneste. (State Archives Bruges, Municipal records of Marriage, Torhout, microfilm, 1386089, 12/02/1823; Bruyneel G., Haegebaert K., Cogh P., *Volkstelling 1814*. 31: Torhout, Lichtervelde, 1996; State Archives Bruges, Municipal records of Marriage, Torhout, microfilm 1386091, 23/10/1835)

<sup>12</sup> This did not necessarily imply, however, that giving birth to an illegitimate child made the social position of the mother problematic.



longer to get married they married more frequently men of the same age group (less as 5 years of age difference).

Table 12: Age difference between the unmarried mother and her future husband (%)

Area	Period	Gap < 5 Year	Husband > 5 years older	Husband > 5 years younger	N
Antwerp	1780-1815	30,9	44,7	24,5	94
Franc of Bruges polder	1730-1760	37,6	50	6,3	15
Meetjesland	1780-1796	42,6	50,0	7,4	54
	1830-1846	47,4	44,4	8,1	135
Franc of Bruges sandy	1730-1760	55,4	46,8		14

Sources: Van den Driessche (2001), Verleysen (2006), Vanhulle (2007)

While age differences between the unmarried mothers and their husbands were small the proto-industrial regions, the difference was smaller in the commercial oriented regions. This was, however, due to the fact that in these areas the unmarried mothers had to marry either very young or very old husbands (see table 10).

Table 13: Number of marriages of unmarried mothers to widowers (%)

Area	Number of marriages to widower
Courtrai city 1785-1815	23,70%
Antwerp 1800-1815	16,5%
Franc of Bruges polder 1730-60	28,6%
Courtrai countryside 1785-1815	11%
Franc of Bruges sandy 1730-60	22,2%

Sources: Van den Driessche (2001), Verleysen (2006), Vanhulle (2007)

Moreover, unmarried mothers living in the agricultural areas where economic circumstances were more disadvantageous also married more widowers. In these regions it was also more common for other women to marry a widower. Zwaenepoel (2005) explains this as a consequence of the male oriented area where unmarried women felt the economic need to marry and therefore married older and often already widowed husbands.<sup>13</sup> Thus the influence of the agriculture area in which the unmarried mothers were living seems to have been very strong.

### 2.2.3. Death of the bastard

Could mothers whose child died shortly after birth have experienced increasing marriage opportunities as Depauw (1980) argued for nineteenth-century Nantes? In the Southern Netherlands, this does not seem to have been the case. In the Antwerp countryside, there was no such relationship. On the contrary, mothers who still had a living bastard married more frequently than mothers who did not.<sup>14</sup> In the Meetjesland the same experience can also be

<sup>13</sup> Which did not always mean a (economically) disadvantageous situation for these single mothers. Widowers could already have built up economic savings, which could have been favourable for the unmarried mother.

<sup>14</sup> In the Antwerp countryside 28.5% of the mothers whose child was still alive married, while only 19.6% of the mothers whose child died married.

detected. Mothers whose child was still alive married more frequently.<sup>15</sup> In connection with this analysis two reservations have to be made. Firstly, it was impossible to follow the life courses of the mothers who did not stay in the 'birthparish', so it is impossible to know what the experiences of these migrating unmarried mothers were. Secondly, the parental/social pressure on the unmarried mothers and their partners to marry could have been much stronger when the illegitimate child was still alive. It is, in other words, not that surprising that unmarried mothers with bastards who were still alive married more frequently in the 'birthparish' and that unmarried mothers without an illegitimate child married more frequently in other parishes.

So, there is no evidence of a positive relationship between the death of the bastard and the increasing chances for the unwed mother to get married.

#### *2.2.4. Parental influences*

Was the parental influence important for the marriage chances of the unmarried mothers and for their life course? Lottin (1978) and Alter (1988) both confirm this assumption. According to them, the absence of the father decreased the chances for the unwed mother to get married. Van Bavel (2001) also pointed to the importance of the presence of parents to increase the marriage chances of unmarried mothers.<sup>16</sup> But for nineteenth-century Leuven, he found that – although his data were very limited – widowed fathers reduced their daughters' marriage chances, because they preferred their unwed mother-daughters to stay in the household to perform the household tasks.

Among the unmarried mothers in the countryside of Courtrai the relationship between living with parents and marrying is slightly positive. Only the household position at time of the birth of the bastard is known, so conclusions are circumspect. Of the mothers living with their parents 51% married, while only 45% of the unmarried mothers who did not live with their parents married. So, there is a relationship between parental support and marriage chances, although it does not seem to have had an enormous impact on the life course of the mothers.

To examine whether the influence of the widowed father was also negative vis-à-vis the marriage chances of the unmarried mothers, the household situation of unmarried mothers above the age of 30 in the Franc of Bruges was compared with other unmarried women above that age. Although only very few unmarried mothers older than 30 lived in the household of their widowed father (3.8% in the sandy and 6.3% in the polder region), in the sandy region relatively more unmarried mothers in comparison with other unmarried women lived with their widowed father than with their widowed mother. (19.2% against 13.8%) In the polder region, however, there was no difference. This can slightly indicate the thesis of Van Bavel. Nevertheless, the influence of the presence of parents does not seem to have been unilaterally positive vis-à-vis the marriage chances of the unwed mother-daughters.

#### *2.2.5. Influence of the age of the unmarried mother*

To what extent was the impact of still being an unmarried mother after 30 a factor? How did this influence her marriage chances? At the beginning of the nineteenth century for the Franc of Bruges it seems that mothers who married after the age of 30 had to be satisfied with socially less attractive marriage partners. They had to marry an extremely older or extremely younger husband. 60% married a *younger* husband. Of these women who were older than their husbands 66.7% was 10 to 20 years older. Social homogeneity, however, remained

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<sup>15</sup> In the beginning of the nineteenth century 49.5% of all mothers who still had a bastard alive married. Only 35.7% of the unmarried mothers whose child was dead, married.

<sup>16</sup> See 1.3 above: his assumption that unmarried women took more risks in their sexual behaviour when parents were present.

unaffected. They married husbands who belonged to the same social class as they did. In short, the older the unmarried mother, the more her chance of getting married was affected.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Is there a clear association between illegitimacy and vulnerability? The data for the rural Southern Netherlands in the long eighteenth century suggest an ambiguous answer on both sides. On the one hand, it is easy to detect vulnerabilities. Some women had a higher chance of becoming unwed mothers than others. And illegitimate childbirth entailed negative repercussions. On the other hand, questions arise about the degree of differences with the rest of the population and the influence of regional variation.

The study of the profile of the unmarried mother confirms certain stereotypical features. Unwed mothers belonged clearly to the lower classes of society and they were of marriageable age. The professions of unwed mothers imply that these women originated from a class of women for which marriage was economically crucial, but hard to obtain. Their ages suggest that the time for 'arranging a marriage' had arrived. In order to raise their marriage chances, they were probably willing to take higher risks in courtship, which can be seen as a sign of vulnerability. Moreover, the increase of economic hardship at the end of the eighteenth century and the accompanying tightening of the restrictive marriage pattern worsened this vulnerability. Illegitimacy rates rose primarily because the number of poor, and thus the number of vulnerable women, increased.

It is clear that illegitimacy was indeed a consequence of social-economic vulnerability. Nonetheless, defining the vulnerable group remains problematic. The large majority of the eighteenth-century population fulfilled the main condition for being labelled vulnerable, namely they were poor. It was a common feature of society to take risks in courtship, especially when the economic situation heightened the competition on the marriage market. Possibly, the unmarried mothers were no different from the other poor. Perhaps they were just the unlucky ones who got pregnant without arranging a marriage before the date of childbirth. It is just as likely, however, that they were the most vulnerable – either economically or socially – part of a large vulnerable group in society. On the basis of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources it is however not possible to determine this. We know that the unmarried mothers belonged to the lower classes, but we cannot distinguish between several groups within these lower classes.

When questioning whether the unmarried mothers were well integrated into society or were outcasts, we encounter similar problems. There are no sources available to inform us about psychological and sociological questions of this type. An answer must therefore be derived from other types of information. But neither the migration data nor the information about the composition of the households seems to confirm the hypothesis that future unmarried mothers lived more isolated from society than other women. Although in the commercially oriented agricultural regions the proportion of immigrants among unwed mothers was higher than in other areas, presumably this was the consequence of higher labour migration in these regions. No exact data on the place of residence at time of childbirth are given. Presumably however, the unwed mothers mainly lived with their parents or with other close kin. Both the 1748 census of the Franc of Bruges and the place of residence after childbirth point in that direction.

There is however one vulnerability which distinguishes the unwed mothers from other girls of the same class: they had often lost their fathers. The absence of a father might be a major factor in the impoverishment of the family. Furthermore, it is possible that fatherless girls profited from more unchaperoned courtships. But it is more likely that the father mainly made the difference in arranging a 'recovering marriage'. However, to be able to give a definitive

answer, it is necessary to compare the presence of a father for both unmarried mothers and prenuptial brides.

In general, the study of the repercussions of illegitimate childbirth confirms the idea that unmarried mothers were not that different from the rest of society. The household composition of unmarried mothers confirms that these women were not outcasts of society. At least, they were not expelled from their family. On the contrary, they lived more often with their parents or other close kin than unmarried women without an illegitimate child. Therefore, it is plausible that illegitimacy was indeed a consequence of marriage strategies. If the repercussions were not so negative, it was worthwhile to take risks in courtship.

It is clear, however, that it had some negative impact since unmarried mothers married at a later age than their female contemporaries. More detailed observation reveals a more complicated picture in which the region in which the unmarried mother lived played a crucial role. This paper clearly demonstrates that the regional variable affected the life course and marriage chances of unwed mothers considerably. In agricultural areas with big commercially oriented farms, unmarried mothers more frequently moved out to the 'birthparish'. Of those women who emigrated, it is unclear whether they married or not. The ones who stayed, however, married less frequently than unmarried mothers in proto-industrial regions. Moreover, they married more often with partners who were many years older or younger. At the same time, they married sooner after the illegitimate childbirth than the unmarried mothers in the proto-industrial regions. The high migration levels, however, were a normal feature of the economic characteristics of the commercially oriented regions, as were the bigger age differences of the marriage partners. The higher number of 'quick marriages' finally reflects the absence of work opportunities for independent women in these areas. Hence the lives of unmarried mothers were similar to the ones of other unmarried women in the same area.

In summary, it is clear that unmarried women belonged to the lowest and therefore most vulnerable classes of society. Presumably, these women were born vulnerable and died vulnerable. But they were not so different from their contemporaries. And therefore the interactive association between illegitimacy and vulnerability in the Southern Netherlands cannot be proven, at least not given the current state of research. The only clear conclusion that can be drawn is that the geographical area they lived in had a more decisive influence on the life course of women than illegitimacy had. Many questions, however, remain unanswered. Were unmarried mothers different from other poor? Did the presence of the father indeed increase the chances of getting married and did widowed fathers play a reverse role? How did the life course of the unmarried mothers who migrated unfold? Although eighteenth-century sources cannot answer all questions on the life course of ordinary women, further and more profound research is clearly necessary.

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