Women and wage labour in rural Flanders in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries*

by Lies Vervaet

Abstract

This article addresses women's participation and remuneration in the agricultural labour market in coastal Flanders during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. An analysis of unique and unexplored late medieval farm accounts demonstrates that women's employment opportunities in this dynamic and commercial region had diminished by the middle of the sixteenth century. This article argues that demographic developments, which are usually considered to be the drivers of change in the debate about female wage labour in the centuries after the Black Death, cannot adequately explain the observed changes. The regional scope of this study enables it to demonstrate the complex and interrelated factors affecting women's prospects. These include (local) developments in population numbers, the type of rural economy (and related to this the agricultural techniques used), as well as the social and economic structure of rural society.

During the summer of 1445, Lyskin Aelbrechts worked for several weeks as a harvest labourer at a large farm north of Bruges. She reaped corn, especially wheat, using a sickle. Like the other harvest labourers, Lyskin received a piece rate according to the area she harvested. This rate was the same for all labourers, regardless of gender. Not only did Lyskin receive cash for her labour, she also received free beer during the work. At the end of the summer, Lyskin had earnt approximately 200 Flemish *d. groten* for her work. This was sufficient to buy the equivalent of approximately 650 litres of wheat on the Bruges grain market. A century later, during the summer of 1547, Callekin Cocx was hired at the same farm. The male harvest workers reaped and mowed the crops, while Callekin and her female colleagues made sheaves. For sheaving wheat, beans and other fodder crops, she received a piece rate according to the number of bound sheaves. In total she earned 96 Flemish *d. groten* by working in the fields. With this amount of money, Callekin could buy the equivalent of approximately 140 litres of wheat on the Bruges market.[1]

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[1] Archives of the Public Welfare Organization of Bruges, Archives of the St John's Hospital, Accounts St John's Hospital, 1445–6; Pacquets, C. Box Scueringhe, account Scueringhe farm, 1547–8.

The experience of these two women, most probably both single, young women, working on the same farm a century apart was completely different. While Lyskin and her female colleagues in 1445 had access to the high-paid jobs during harvest, Callekin and her fellow harvesters in 1547 performed low-paid, assisting jobs. The purpose of this paper is to explain why the experiences of these women working as harvest labourers on the same farm were so markedly different.

I

Most historians would explain the dissimilar experiences of the two women by reference to different demographic conditions and thus the supply of labour. The demographic catastrophe of the Black Death in the second half of the fourteenth century caused a severe shortage of labour. Although there has been general agreement that even before the plague the working activities of women were not restricted to housework or family care, some scholars have emphasized the particularly high participation of women in the labour market between *c.*1350 and *c.*1500. They argue that the shortage of male workers enabled women to access a whole range of employment opportunities.[2] Moreover, the post-plague labour shortage is thought to have led to greater wage equality between the sexes, including in agriculture.[3] This supposed 'golden age' was short-lived however, since the economic position of women would come under increased pressure from the sixteenth century onwards.[4] This line of reasoning has been challenged by a number of historians, among them Bennett who contended that women's work was always low-skilled, low-status and low-paid because of patriarchal prejudices towards women and Bardsley who held that women invariably received the same pay as young, old or disabled men.[5] The 'golden age' idea has been re-asserted by De Moor and van Zanden, who argue that the higher participation and remuneration of women in the labour market in the post-Black Death period resulted in their emancipation. By working as servants for several years, women could save some money. Among other things, this would have resulted in marriages based on consensus, which in turn, via different processes, stimulated economic growth.[6] This challenging hypothesis has re-stimulated the debate on the economic opportunities for women in the pre-industrial period. Even though the rise of

[2] R. Hilton, *The English peasantry in the later middle ages* (1975), pp. 95–110; C. M. Barron, 'The "golden age" of women in medieval London', in K. Bate (ed.), *Medieval women in southern England* (1989), pp. 46–50; P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, work and life cycle in a medieval economy. Women in York and Yorkshire, c.1300–1520* (1992).

[3] S. A. C. Penn, 'Female wage-earners in late fourteenth-century England', *AgHR* 35 (1987), pp. 8–11.

[4] M. Howell, *The marriage exchange: property, social place and gender in cities of the Low Countries, 1300–1550* (1998); J. L. van Zanden, 'The Malthusian Intermezzo. Women's wages and human capital formation between the late middle ages and the demographic transition of the nineteenth century', *The History of the Family*, 16 (2011), pp. 334–5.

[5] J. M. Bennett, *Ale, beer and brewsters in England. Women's work in a changing world, 1300–1600* (1999) and S. Bardsley, 'Women's work reconsidered, Gender and wage differentiation in late medieval England', *Past and Present* 165 (1999), pp. 22–7. Also M. E. Mate, *Daughters, wives and widows after the Black Death. Women in Sussex, 1350–1535* (1998), pp. 193–4.

[6] M. De Moor and J. L. van Zanden, 'Girl power: the European marriage pattern and labour markets in the North Sea region in the late medieval and early modern period', *EcHR* 63 (2009), pp. 1–33.

well-functioning labour markets was fundamental to De Moor and van Zanden's analysis, it was the sudden fall in population levels due to the Black Death and the resulting labour scarcity which was crucial.

Nevertheless, evidence from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suggests that changes in the rural economy unrelated to demographical crises had an important influence on female participation and remuneration in agriculture.[7] Specialization in pastoral farming and, in particular dairying, in some English counties in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for instance, resulted in less female unemployment and but also significantly higher wages for those women who could secure skilled work.[8] The type of the rural economy, which varied according to time and place, clearly affected the opportunities for women on the labour market. Moreover, Allen has pointed out that changes in the size of farms affected female employment in different ways to that of men. When farm size increased, employment per acre declined: for men, and even more for women. A shift to large farms consequently changed the sex balance of rural employment.[9] Finally, research into early modern proto-industrial sectors has pointed to institutional restraints such as guild pressure or community norms.[10]

One of the reasons for the emphasis on demography as an explanatory factor in the changing experiences of working rural women in the centuries after the Black Death is that the debate is heavily based on an understanding of the English situation. England was severely struck by the plague, so that, after its initial visitation and subsequent recurrences, by the 1370s the population had been halved. In other regions, such as the southern Low Countries, the evidence for population loss is less straightforward, but recent estimates indicate a reduction in the order of 30 per cent.[11] A second reason is the focus on a national or even international scale. Information on women's wages and employment patterns in medieval Europe is still very scarce. For this reason, some historians have brought together data from various places and times. Collecting disparate wage data across one country or even across several countries tends to lead to the determination of general developments as explanatory factors, while regional or even local processes are ignored. A number of influential historians of women's work such as Bennett, Schmidt and Verdon have argued that gathering empirical evidence from a regional

[7] R. M. Smith, 'Relative prices, forms of agrarian labour and female marriage patterns in England, 1350–1800', in I. Devos and L. Kennedy (eds), *Marriage and rural economy. Western Europe since 1400* (1999), pp. 19–48; J. Burnette, 'Laborers at the Oakes. Changes in the demand for female day-laborers at a farm near Sheffield during the Agricultural Revolution', *JEcH* 59 (1999), pp. 41–67; *ead*., 'The wages and employment of female day-labourers in English agriculture, 1740–1850', *EcHR* 57 (2004), pp. 664–90; N. Verdon, *Rural Women workers in nineteenth-century England. Gender, work and wages* (2002); P. Sharpe, 'The female labour market in English agriculture during the Industrial Revolution: Expansion or contradiction', *AgHR* 47 (1999), pp. 161–81.

[8] K. D. M. Snell, 'Agricultural seasonal employment, the standard of living, and women's work in the south and east, 1690–1860', *EcHR* 34 (1981), pp. 421–2.

[9] R. C. Allen, 'The growth of labor productivity in early modern English agriculture', *Explorations in Economic Hist.* 25 (1988), pp. 130–2.

[10] S. Ogilvie, *Bitter Living. Women, markets and social capital in early modern Germany* (2003); E. Van Nederveen-Meerkerk, 'Market wage or discrimination? The remuneration of male and female wool spinners in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic', *EcHR* 63 (2011), pp. 165–86.

[11] J. Roosen and D. R. Curtis, 'The "light touch" of the Black Death in the southern Netherlands: an urban trick?', *EcHR* 72 (2018), pp. 37–8.

or local perspective is necessary to understand women's experiences.[12] Humphries and Sarasua too have argued that local demand was dominant in shaping women's place in past labour markets.[13] Some social and economic historians too plead for a more regional approach, since economic development principally took place on a regional scale in the pre-industrial period.[14] While early modernist historians have considered women's experiences in one particular economic sector or one particular city or region, this perspective has seldom been applied to the late middle ages and especially to the rural world.

In this article, we consider women's wage labour from the perspective of one well-studied region, that of coastal Flanders, the part of the county of Flanders bordering the North Sea. This regional scope enables this paper to demonstrate meticulously and in detail that demography did indeed matter, but that only a complex and interrelated combination of factors can explain the different experiences of working women in the late medieval countryside. The fluctuation in population over time affected women's prospects, but so too did the nature of rural economy and, related to this, the agricultural techniques used, as well as the economic structure of rural society. These claims are based on new data on farm labourers for a region which has seldom been looked from a gendered perspective, except for the large cities.[15] The case of coastal Flanders shows that, even in a region with a highly developed market for wage labour and at a time of decreasing population, the opportunities for women were quite limited compared to those of men, except in very particular periods and for selected groups of women.

This research makes use of previously unexplored farm accounts, which we briefly introduce in the next part of this paper. In the third part, the activities of working women on large holdings are considered and differentiated according to the type of contract. In the fourth part, the complex interplay of the various factors which explain the changing opportunities in this region are considered in detail. In this part, we also trace the geographical and economic background of the women workers, which may have implications for their reliance on wage labour. Recent research has indeed emphasized that only in a few regions of north-western Europe did a considerable proportion of the rural population completely depend on fulltime

[12] J. M. Bennett, 'Medieval women in modern perspective', in B. G. Smith (ed.), *Women's history in global perspective* (2000), p. 144; A. Schmidt, 'Vrouwenarbeid in Nederland in de vroegmoderne tijd', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis*, 2 (2005), pp. 11–12; Verdon, *Rural women workers*, pp. 17 and 197.

[13] J. Humphries and C. Sarasua, 'Off the record: reconstructing women's labor force participation in the European past', *Feminist Economics* 18 (2012), p. 53.

[14] E. Thoen, '"Social agrosystems" as an economic concept to explain regional differences. An essay taking the former county of Flanders as an example (Middle Ages – 19th century)', in B. J. P. van Bavel and E. Thoen (eds), *Landholding and land transfer in the North Sea Area (late middle ages – 19th century)* (2004), pp. 4–66; B. J. P. van Bavel, *Manors and markets. Economy and society in the Low Countries, 500–1600* (2010), pp. 3–7.

[15] For the late medieval period and sixteenth century, most attention, for Flanders and the Low Countries as a whole, has been on cities, e.g. M. Howell, *Women, production and patriarchy in late medieval cities* (1986); S. Hutton, *Women and economic activities in late medieval Ghent* (2011); P. Stabel, 'Working alone? Single women in the urban economy of late medieval Flanders (thirteenth–early fifteenth centuries)', in J. De Groot, I. Devos and A. Schmidt (eds), *Single life and the city, 1200–1900* (2015), pp. 27–49.

[16] J. Whittle, *The development of agrarian capitalism: land and labour in Norfolk, 1440–1580* (2000), pp. 301–4; B. J. P. van Bavel, 'Rural wage labour in the sixteenth-century Low Countries: an assessment of the importance and nature of wage labour in the countryside of Holland, Guelders and Flanders', *Continuity and Change* 21 (2006), pp. 62–6.

wage labour.[16] Moreover, employment in agriculture was primarily characterized by its irregularity.[17] In this study, we wish to present a more complex explanatory framework for women's changing experiences as wage labourers in the late medieval countryside, in the way it has been achieved for several economic sectors in the early modern Low Countries or for rural England in later periods.[18]

II

For coastal Flanders, it has been assumed that wage labour became an important source of income in the late middle ages. This region was among the first rural societies of north-western Europe to change from a peasant society to one dominated by large, commercially-oriented, leasehold farms. Around 1300, small freehold peasants, cultivating no more than one to three ha of arable land, dominated rural society. They combined arable farming with proto-industrial activities such as peat digging, wool processing, salt making or fishing. Gradually these smallholders lost the ownership of their properties to urban dwellers and ecclesiastical institutions. The new landowners leased their lands on competitive conditions for short terms. By the middle of the sixteenth century, large commercial tenant farmers dominated rural society.[19] They increasingly focused on commercial livestock farming instead of intensive cereal cultivation.[20] The land and lease market tended to become a closed one, dominated by the wealthy and powerful.[21] These changes meant that increasing numbers of rural dwellers depended on the labour market to make a living.[22]

Despite the relatively well-known social and economic structure of coastal Flanders, one major research problem arises. Rural wage labour is extremely hard to document. Most of the large farms (which made use of wage labour) were leased out from as early as the fourteenth century.[23] Detailed account books kept by landlords are almost completely lacking for the late medieval period and the sixteenth century. As a result, little is known about wages for labourers performing agricultural tasks such as ploughing, threshing or carting, or for harvesters. As for

[17] J. Hatcher, 'Unreal wages: Long-run living standards and the "Golden Age" of the fifteenth century', in B. Dodds and C. D. Liddy (eds), *Commercial activity, markets and entrepreneurs in the middle ages. Essays in honour of Richard Britnell* (2011), pp. 6–7.

[18] e.g. E. Van Nederveen-Meerkerk, *De draad in eigen handen. Vrouwen en loonarbeid in de Nederlandse textielnijverheid, 1581–1810* (2007); D. Van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship: female traders in the northen Netherlands, c.1580–1815* (2007); M. Van Dekken, *Brouwen, branden en bedienen. Productie en verkoop van drank door vrouwen in de Noordelijke Nederlanden, circa 1500–1800* (2011); A. Schmidt, 'Women and guilds: corporations and female labour market participation in early modern Holland', *Gender and History*, 21 (2009), pp. 170–89; K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor: Social change and agrarian England, 1660–1900* (1985); Verdon, *Rural Women Workers*.

[19] T. Soens, *De spade in de dijk? Waterbeheer en rurale samenleving in de Vlaamse kustvlakte (1280–1580)* (2009), pp. 75–112.

[20] K. Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen, lokale elites en ongelijkheid in het Vlaamse kustgebied (14e–16e eeuw). Case-study: Dudzele ambacht* (unpubl. PhD thesis, Ghent University, 2014), pp. 97–115.

[21] L. Vervaet, *Goederenbeheer in een veranderende samenleving. Het Sint-Janshospitaal van Brugge, c.1275–c.1575* (unpubl. PhD thesis, Ghent University, 2015), pp. 288–301.

[22] E. Thoen and T. Soens, 'The family or the farm: a Sophie's choice? The late medieval crisis in the former county of Flanders', in J. Drendel (ed.) *Crisis in the later middle ages: beyond the Postan-Duby paradigm* (2015), p. 141.

[23] A. Verhulst, *Précis d'histoire rurale de la Belgique* (1990), p. 78 and p. 110.

other regions, most studies have concentrated on reconstructing the wages of building workers or manual labourers (including those digging or maintaining drainage works) employed by major organizations.[24] Soens has recently presented a wage series for unskilled labourers for the period 1280–1580.[25] Nevertheless, wage labourers performing agricultural tasks – and especially the women in this group – have remained one of the most intangible groups of pre-industrial society.[26] Fortunately, some highly informative farm accounts of institutional landowners, who kept at least part of their lands under direct cultivation, have recently been discovered. The farm accounts of the Saint John's hospital of Bruges, the Hospital of Our Lady of the Potterie of Bruges[27], the Abbey of Ter Doest in Lissewege[28] and the Abbey of Terhagen near Axel[29] allow us to gather new evidence on rural wage labour. The friars and sisters of St John's hospital managed a large farm of about 200 ha called Scueringhe, situated in the rich clay polders north of Bruges, in the village of Zuienkerke.[30] Scamelweeken in Vlissegem, close by Zuienkerke, farmed by the friars and sisters of the Potterie, was especially large by the region's standards. In 1511, it extended to 133 ha.[31] The size of Scueringhe and Scamelweeken made the hospitals of the Potterie and St John's two of the most important rural employers in the region. In 1445 for instance, no less than 165 individuals received a wage by working at least temporarily at Scueringhe farm. On the other hand, because farms in general gradually became larger during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, these large holdings became more representative of the whole over time. The area of the farm in Lissewege, also situated north of Bruges, belonging to the Abbey of Ter Doest is less certain. In 1572–3 approximately 50 ha was used as arable land. Terhagen Abbey managed between 25 and 35 ha in the second half of the sixteenth century close to the city of Axel. The farm accounts of these four organizations[32], although widely varying in detail, inform us about the participation and remuneration of women in the agricultural labour market. More generally, the accounts present new and unique wage series for agricultural work. Sources of this kind have hitherto not been exploited by scholars employing a gendered perspective in the Low Countries.

[24] For instance, E. Scholliers, 'Lonen in steden en dorpen van Oost-Vlaanderen (15e–17e eeuw)', in C. Verlinden and J. Craeybeckx (eds), *Dokumenten voor de geschiedenis van prijzen en lonen in Vlaanderen en Brabant* (4 vols, 1965), II, pp. 514–77; K. Deblonde-Cottenier, G. De Mey and W. Prevenier, 'Prijzen en lonen in de domeinen der Gentse abdijen', in C. Verlinden and J. Craeybeckx (eds), *Dokumenten voor de geschiedenis van prijzen en lonen in Vlaanderen en Brabant* (4 vols, 1972), IV, pp. 230–326.

[25] T. Soens, 'Floods and money: funding drainage and flood control in coastal Flanders from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries', *Continuity and Change* 26 (2011), pp. 333–65; Appendix.

[26] Whittle, *Development*, p. 226; P. Van Cruyningen, 'Vrouwenarbeid in de Zeeuwse landbouw in de achttiende eeuw', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis*, 2 (2005), pp. 43–4.

[27] G. Maréchal, *Sociale en politieke gebondenheid van het Brugse hospitaalwezen in de middeleeuwen* (1978).

[28] R. De Ganck and N. Huyghebaert, 'Abbaye de Ter Doest à Lissewege', in *Monasticon Belge, III, Province de Flandre Occidentale* (4 vols, 1966), II, pp. 319–54.

[29] M. Nuyttens, 'Abbaye de Ter Hagen à Axel, Merelbeke et Gand', in *Monasticon Belge, VII, Province de Flandre Orientale* (5 vols, 1980), III, pp. 461–71.

[30] Vervaet, *Goederenbeheer*, pp. 150–3.

[31] J. Mertens, *De laatmiddeleeuwse landbouweconomie in enkele gemeenten van het Brugse Vrije* (1970), p. 66.

III

As in later periods, two different types of female labourers were hired on the large commercial farms of late medieval Flanders: permanent, live-in servants and casual labourers.[33] Here we consider each in turn.

(i) Servants

The accounts show that from the mid-fourteenth century onwards, servants were hired in two terms per year, for the winter or for the summer.[34] They either worked in the household or undertook tasks related to dairying. Scueringhe farm, for instance, employed a maid responsible for the provisions, a general maid and one or two dairymaids. In all likelihood, these servants were asked to do a great variety of tasks.[35]

The employment opportunities for women as live-in servants on the large farms were rather limited compared to those of men, and they hardly changed during the period under consideration. The gender balance was skewed: men were always in the majority. At Ter Doest farm, at least eight males worked during the winter of 1572–3, but only two women. At Scueringhe farm, the number of female servants fluctuated between three, four or five per term, while that of male servants fluctuated between 25 and 40 per term. The men also outnumbered the women at Scamelweeken farm at the end of the fifteenth century. In the summer of 1497, the managers of this farm hired three women but at least eight men as servants. These indications are in line with the findings based on a tax register for the nearby village of Watervliet in 1544, where the large farms hired a disproportionately male workforce.[36] This was also the case in early modern England where it has been established that large farms employed a lower proportion of female servants than small to medium-sized farms.[37]

Along with these relatively limited opportunities for employment as servants, the remuneration of the women who were employed in this role remained lower than that of

[32] Archives of the Public Welfare Organisation of Bruges, Archives of the St John's Hospital, Accounts of St John's Hospital, 1412–13, 1413–14, 1419–20, 1420–21, 1421–22, 1442–23, 1443–44, 1445–46, 1446–47, 1453–54, 1454–55, 1455–56, 1490–91; Pacquets St John's Hospital, C. Box Scueringhe, account, Scueringhe farm, 1543–44, 1545–46, 1546–47, 1547–48. The account of Scueringhe farm of 1346–47 is described and partly edited by J. Himpens, 1956. Unfortunately, the original document has since been lost. Our Lady of the Potterie, Archives of Our Lady of the Potterie in Bruges, Accounts, 1377–78, 1378–79, 1379–80, 1380–81, 1382–83, 1385–86, 1387–88, 1388–89, 1390–91, 1393–94, 1395–96, 1398–99, 1400–01, 1402–03, 1493–04 and 1494–05; Comptes Divers, register 158, account 1495–06, 1496–07 and 1497–08; State Archives Bruges, Verzameling Oud Kerkarchief, nr. 146, Accounts of Ter Doest, 1572–73, 1575–76 and 1576–77; State Archives Ghent, Archives of the Abbey of Terhagen Ghent, nr. 38, Accounts 1557, 1558, 1559, 1563, 1564, 1567, 1570 and 1574.

[33] P. Vandewalle, *De geschiedenis van de landbouw in de Kasselrij Veurne, 1550–1645* (1986), pp. 182–7; T. Lambrecht, 'Agrarian Change, labour organization and welfare entitlements in the North-Sea Area, *c.* 1650–1800', in King and Winter (eds), *Migration, settlement and belonging in Europe,* p. 209.

[34] L. Vervaet, 'The employment of servants in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century coastal Flanders: a case study of Scueringhe farm near Bruges', in J. Whittle (ed.), *Servants in rural Europe* (2017), pp. 23–5.

[35] J. Whittle, 'Housewives and servants in rural England, 1440–1650: evidence of women's work from probate documents', *Trans. Royal Historical Soc.*, sixth ser., 15 (2005), pp. 73–4.

[36] T. Lambrecht, 'The institution of service in rural Flanders in the sixteenth century: a regional perspective', in Whittle (ed.), *Servants in rural Europe*, pp. 40–1.

[37] Whittle, 'Housewives', pp. 54–6.

their male colleagues. All servants received the usual board and lodging, and a bonus in cash[38] but the cash wages of female servants amounted to 50 to 70 per cent of the wages of men at Scueringhe and Scamelweeken farm during the first half of the fifteenth century and in the middle of the sixteenth. This proportion is similar to that found in late medieval rural England.[39] Although experience, skill and age mattered a great deal, the cash wages of experienced female servants remained fairly stable at Scueringhe. Expressed in litres of wheat, for a year's service a dairymaid would earn approximately 717 litres in 1420, 942 litres in 1450 and 730 litres in 1547, board and lodging not included.

Women also enjoyed fewer career opportunities than men as measured by potential earnings. The range of wages was much greater for men than women. In 1453, the foreman of Scueringhe farm, the highest paid servant, earned 264 Flemish *d. groten* during the winter season, nearly five times as much as a younger, inexperienced male servant, who only received 56 *groten*. The highest paid female servant received on average only twice as much as the lowest paid maid. Maykin Van den Berghe for instance received only 72*d.* groten for her service during the winter at Scueringhe farm in 1453, while Cornelie, the highest paid female servant that year, received 120*d.* groten. Moreover, moving to a larger farm did not result in increased earnings for female servants in the middle of the sixteenth century, in the way it did for their male counterparts. In the village of Watervliet, maximum wages for male servants rose with farm size, while those of female servants were unrelated to farm size.[40]

Despite these limitations, female servants appeared to be a mobile workforce. Most women only worked one or two terms at a holding. At Scamelweeken farm, from 1 May until 1 October 1496, Grote Janne, Cleen Janne and Betkin were hired. The next term, only Betkin stayed and Grote Barbele and Cleene Barbele were employed in the place of Grote Janne and Cleen Janne. These findings correspond with the traditional view of early modern servanthood as being characterized by a high degree of mobility.[41] Besides, the Scueringhe maids only exceptionally worked as casual labourers after – or before – their service: there was hardly any overlap between the two types of employment. In accordance with the traditional view, the female servants were mostly young and unmarried. In Middle Dutch, the spelling of the names in administrative sources gives an indirect indication of age. Diminutive names with the suffix – '*in*', for instance *Betkin* for the name Elizabeth or *Maykin* for the name Mary – could indicate a younger person.[42] At least half of all female servants employed at Scueringhe farm and all the female servants working at Ter Doest farm bore a diminutive name. It is noteworthy that the farm administrators do not once refer to the husbands of their female servants. Presumably

[38] Even though wages were always expressed in monetary terms, it is possible that in reality remuneration in kind was given, which frequently occurred in Flanders and other regions in the early modern period, T. Lambrecht, *Een grote hoeve in een klein dorp. Relaties van arbeid en pacht op het Vlaamse platteland tijdens de 18e eeuw* (2002), pp. 150–63; P. van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam. Boeren in West-Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, 1650–1850* (2000), p. 180.

[39] A. Kussmaul, *Servants in husbandry in early modern England* (1981), pp. 143–4; Bardsley, 'Women's work', p. 29.

[40] Lambrecht, 'Institution', pp. 44–6.

[41] A. Kussmaul, 'The ambiguous mobility of farm servants', *EcHR* 34 (1981), pp. 222–5.

[42] G. Dupont, 'Van Copkin over Coppin naar Jacob. De relatie tussen de voornaamsvorm en de leeftijd van de naamdrager in het Middelnederlands op basis van administratieve bronnen voor het graafschap Vlaanderen, eind 14de – midden 16de eeuw', *Naamkunde*, 33 (2001), pp. 119–21.

these servants were single women. The customs of the Bruges rural district support this presumption, because marriage was one of the accepted reasons to end service.[43] Servant Pieter Van Rye, foreman of Ter Doest in 1573, received a present worth 48 Flemish *d. groten* when he left the farm because of his marriage. As observed for other regions, service functioned as a transitional occupation between childhood and adulthood. Through service, young people could save some money or goods to establish their own household, independent of their parents.[44]

(ii) Casual labourers

The work of the permanent labourers was in varying degrees supplemented by that of casual workers. Farm accounts, such as those of Scueringhe and of Scamelweeken, differentiated between regular day labourers and harvesters.[45] Male labourers were hired at any time of the year, especially for threshing, but also for manuring, transportation, digging or some other unspecified tasks. They normally received a daily wage but sometimes (and increasingly for threshing) piece rates. Obviously, the harvesters were hired only during summer. Their pay was almost always based on the work they completed. At Scueringhe farm, they were already receiving piece rates in 1346 which is quite early by comparison with other regions of the Low Countries.[46] The wages of casual labourers were, at all times, always paid in cash. They may also have received drink but the sources are never explicit on this point.

The managers of Scueringhe and Scamelweeken farms hired women exclusively for harvest work, and never as casual labour during other seasons. Their employment was always for short periods, a maximum of six weeks during the months of July and August. Nevertheless, in 1346–47 and in the 1440s women's labour was extremely important during the weeks of harvest: in the summer of 1445, 43 of the 79 individual harvesters were women at Scueringhe. Women not only bound or gathered the sheaves, but also reaped with the sickle. In 1445 and 1446, as many as 60 per cent of all hired reapers were women. As demonstrated for the late medieval English countryside and for fourteenth-century northern France, women at this moment were an essential part of the harvest labour force.[47] The women in Zuienkerke received the same piece rates for reaping as their male counterparts, even before the arrival of the Black Death. In the first half of the fifteenth century, this amounted to 35–45 Flemish *d. groten* per ha, as

[43] L. Gilliodts-Van Severen, *Coutume du Franc de Bruges* (3 vols, 1879), I, p. 246.

[44] Kussmaul, *Servants*, p. 31.

[45] The accounts differ greatly in detail. In the detailed accounts from the 1440s, the harvest period is divided into the number of harvest weeks, usually five or six. For each week the wage rates for each task are given, for instance using the sickle (in Dutch 'snidene') at 22*d. groten* per week or using the scythe ('pickene') 7*d*. per week. Wages differed from week to week. All harvest labourers are mentioned in a random order, but divided by task. For each labourer the processed acreage is given and the total wage earned for that week.

[46] E. Scholliers and F. Daelemans, *De conjunctuur van een domein: Herzele 1444–1752* (1981), p. 42; P. Priester, *Geschiedenis van de Zeeuwse landbouw, circa 1600–1910* (1998), pp. 166–8, 183–5.

[47] M. Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes: women's work and men's work at harvest time', *History Workshop J.* 7 (1979), pp. 102–3; D. Youngs, 'Servants and labourers on a late medieval demesne: the case of Newton, Cheshire, 1480–1520', *AgHR* 47 (1999), p. 157; B. Delmaire, 'La femme aux champs (nord de la France, XIVe siècle)', in L. Jegoe *et al.* (eds), *Splendor Reginae: passions, genre et famille. Mélanges en l'honneur de Régine Le Jan* (2015), pp. 140–3; J. Whittle, 'The food economy or lords, tenants and workers in a medieval village: Hunstanton, Norfolk, 1328–48', in M. Kowaleski *et al.* (eds), *Peasants and lords in the medieval English economy* (2015), p. 45.

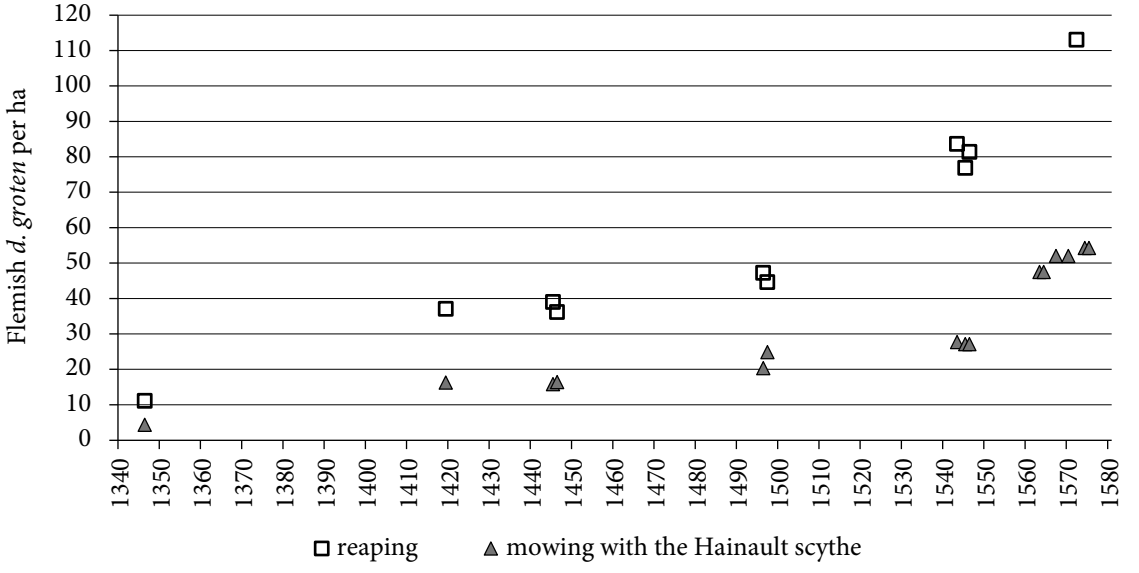

FIGURE 1. Nominal harvest wages in coastal Flanders: nominal piece rates for reaping and for harvesting with the Hainault scythe, in Flemish *d. groten* per ha.

Sources: see note 32.

Figure 1 shows. Although there is much variance, the Scueringhe women reaped approximately the same acreages as the men, which is remarkable in view of the fact that estimates for England in the 1830s and 1840s indicate that on average a man reaped three quarters of an acre in the same time as a women reaped half an acre.[48] Such differences presumably resulted from differences in physical capacity, essential in performing hard manual labour, between the average men and the average women.[49] A possible explanation for the parity at Scueringhe is that the women there were helped by younger siblings or children, whose names were not registered in the accounts.[50] However, as we will demonstrate later, the women doing the harvesting were probably young and mobile and it is unlikely that even younger relatives travelled with them. All in all, it is most likely that harvest labourers were paid at the end of each week when a note was taken of the payments to individuals, but that the composition of the group of harvest workers changed daily. The similar output of male and female workers primarily resulted from differences in the number of days – or even in the number of hours – of harvest work at this particular farm.

[48] J. Burnette, 'An investigation of the female-male wage gap during the Industrial Revolution in Britain', *EcHR* 50 (1997), p. 275.

[49] Ibid., pp. 275–6; J. Hatcher, 'Debate. Women's work reconsidered: gender and wage differentiation in late medieval England', *Past and Present* 173 (2001), pp. 193–4.

[50] Hiring children was not an unusual strategy to reduce labour costs. Poos noticed that on a large fifteenth-century Essex farm, the agricultural tasks were performed by servant boys of 11 and 12-year-old, L. Poos, *A rural society after the Black Death: Essex, 1350–1525* (1991), pp. 213–9. The Flemish farm accounts only offer evidence of young boys hired as scarecrows and as cowherds.

For the women processing large acreages, we assumed that they worked at least six full days per week, although working on a Sunday was not impossible.[51] On the other hand, there were always some days during harvest-time when it was impossible to reap because of rain. This makes six days work a week a reasonable number.[52] So to estimate the daily earnings of the harvest workers, we divided the harvested acreage per week by six and multiplied this by the stipulated piece rate. Reapers at Scueringhe farm processed a maximum of 0.20 to 0.30 ha per day, which accords with the estimate of 0.20 ha a day suggested by Slicher van Bath.[53] In the nineteenth century, farmers of bordering Zealand in the northern Low Countries expected labourers, hired for reaping and also for binding, to process approximately 0.10 to 0.15 ha a day.[54] The reapers of Scueringhe farm earned a maximum of 8–11 Flemish *d. groten* a day in the 1440s. Women like Lyskin Aelbrechts could earn 10.2 Flemish *d. groten* a day, her colleague Mandine 11*d.* This is an exceptional daily wage in comparison to contemporary wages: threshers at Scueringhe farm received 4–5 Flemish *d. groten* a day as Figure 2 shows; labourers employed by the waterboard of Blankenberge earned 5–6 Flemish *d. groten* a day[55]; in Bruges in the 1440s, a master-mason received 12 *groten* during summer.[56] On top of their wages, the harvesters received free beer during the work.[57] Usually, harvest piece rates in commercial agriculture were exceptionally high.[58] At Scamelweeken farm in 1496, the ploughmen received 4 Flemish *d. groten* a day, while his colleague working on the same farm during harvest received 6 or even 7 *groten*. The high harvest wages also resulted from the long workdays: harvest labourers most probably toiled from sunrise to sunset.[59] It also possibly reflected the health risk of working in the coastal region, where we know that, in the eighteenth century at least, the mosquitoes continued to carry malaria.[60]

By working several weeks at Scueringhe farm during the summers of the 1440s, women could make a significant sum of money as the cases of Lyskin Aelbrechts and Callekin Cocx show. In five or six weeks of harvest, this could be almost enough to lease a 3-ha parcel north of Bruges in 1445.[61] Moreover, the amount they earned in a couple of weeks approaches the cash amount a female servant received for a whole year of service at Scueringhe farm. This

[51] F. Scheelings, 'Het werkgedrag en de arbeidsmoraal van de plattelandsbevolking op de vooravond van de Industriële Revolutie', in *Arbeid in veelvoud* (1988), pp. 101–2; T. Lambrecht, 'Les fêtes religieuses et le travail dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux, XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles', in C. Maitte and D. Terrier (eds), *Pour une histoire du travail* (2014), pp. 47–9.

[52] See also Roberts, 'Sickles', p. 24 who supposed that a working week was six days.

[53] B. H. Slicher van Bath, *De agrarische geschiedenis van West-Europa (500–1850)* (1987), p. 203.

[54] Priester, *Geschiedenis*, p. 96.

[55] Soens, 'Floods', Appendix.

[56] J. P. Sosson, *Les travaux publics de la ville de Bruges XIXe–XVe siècles. Les materiaux. Les hommes* (1977), p. 301.

[57] The custom of offering beer to harvest workers is also noticed for the early modern farms in Zeeland, Priester, *Geschiedenis*, p. 96.

[58] In early modern Zeeland Flanders, dominated by an intensive commercial cereal culture, wages for reapers approached or even exceeded the fifteenth-century Scueringhe wages (own calculations based on van Cruyninghen, *Behoudend*, p. 74).

[59] E. Scholliers, 'Werktijden en arbeidsomstandigheden in de pre-industriële periode', in E. Scholliers and P. Scholliers (eds), *Werktijd en werktijdverkorting* (1983), pp. 12–13.

[60] I. Devos, 'Malaria in Vlaanderen tijdens de 18de en de 19de eeuw', in J. Parmentier and S. Spanoghe (eds), *Orbis in orbem. Liber amicorum John Everaert* (2001), pp. 213–14.

[61] Vervaet, *Goederenbeheer*, pp. 72–8.

TABLE 1. Employment patterns of female servants at Scueringhe farm

	First half of fifteenth century	*Middle of the sixteenth century*
Number of hired female servants	2–5	2–4
Percentage of women workers	10–13	18–25
Wages (range)	600–900 litres of wheat	600–800 litres of wheat
Women's wages as proportion of men's wages (range)	60–70	70

Sources: see note 32.

TABLE 2. Employment patterns of female casual labourers in coastal Flanders

	First half of the fifteenth century	*Middle of the sixteenth century*
Performed task	reaping	binding and 'assisting'
Kind of remuneration	piece rates	piece rates and daily wages
Number of working women at Scueringhe farm per year	*circa* 40	*circa* 5–10
Proportion of women workers for harvest work Scueringhe farm	*circa* 50%	*circa* 15%
Estimated daily wage	*circa* 6–10 Flemish *d. groten*	*circa* 2 Flemish *d. groten*

Sources: see note 32.

confirms the wide gap between daily wages implicit in annual service contracts and those earned casually during the late middle ages, as has recently been demonstrated for England by Humphries and Weisdorf.[62] Notwithstanding the security of employment and the value of board and lodging enjoyed by servants, it appears that casual work offered the most attractive opportunities in fifteenth-century coastal Flanders.

However, a century later, the situation for women was completely different. Substantially fewer women found employment on the large farms. At the farm at Scueringhe, only 10 to 15 per cent of all harvest labourers during the summers of 1543, 1545, 1546 and 1547 were women. Moreover, their work was limited to making sheaves. At the Ter Doest farm, the harvest work of women in the 1570s was simply described as 'assisting' ('gheholpen inden ougst' in Dutch). Obviously, the relegation of women to subsidiary jobs had consequences for their remuneration. For sheaving at Scueringhe in the 1540s, they earned 1 or 1.5 Flemish *d. groten* per 1000 sheaves.[63] Griete Cheyns, for instance, received only 2 Flemish *d. groten* a day for assisting during the harvest at Ter Doest farm in 1572, while her male counterparts received at least 4 or even 6 Flemish *d. groten* for

[62] J. Humphries and J. Weisdorf, 'The wages of women in England, 1260–1850', *JEcH* 75 (2015), pp. 418–9.

[63] Because the information in the accounts, or other contemporary evidence, does not allow a calculation of the number of sheaves made in one day, it was impossible to arrive at an estimate of daily wages for gathering or sheaving.

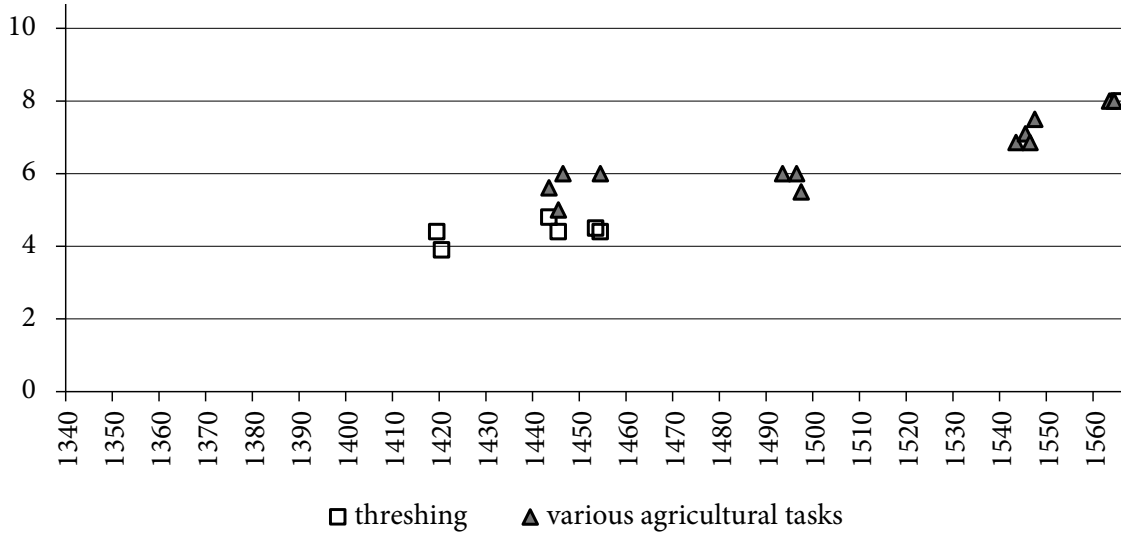

FIGURE 2. Nominal daily wages for casual labour in coastal Flanders: recorded daily wages for threshing and various agricultural tasks, performed by men, in Flemish *d. groten*.

Sources: see note 32.

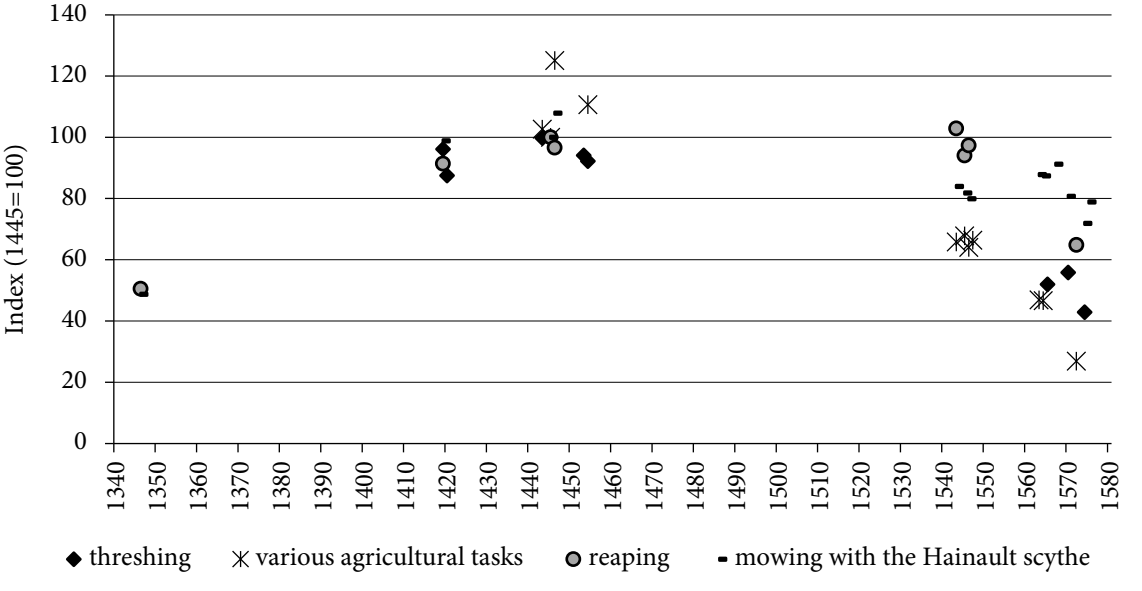

FIGURE 3. Index of the real wages, expressed in litres of wheat, for threshing (daily wages), various agricultural tasks (daily wages), reaping (piece rates per ha) and mowing with the Hainault scythe (piece rates per ha), with 1445=100.

Notes: Bruges wheat prices (11-year moving average) taken from Verhulst, *Prijzen*. Because of the booming cereal prices from the 1550s onwards, the downward trend of real wages has to be nuanced.
Sources: see note 32.

casual work. On the same farm in the summer of 1575, the male mower received 16 Flemish *d. groten*, while several 'assisting' women only earned 6 *groten* each. It is clear that by the middle of the sixteenth century women had lost access to the highest-paid jobs in agriculture. Reapers received approximately 80 Flemish *d. groten* per ha in the 1540s at Scueringhe farm. With this payment, labourers could buy the same amount of cereal at the Bruges market as their colleagues a century before, as Figure 3 demonstrates. However, the opportunity to earn on this scale was now reserved to men. A very limited number of women might also earn money by performing domestic jobs at the farm on a casual basis. At Ter Doest farm in the 1570s, several women received a daily wage for cleaning and doing the laundry.

The question obviously arises of what happened between the middle of the fifteenth century and the middle of the sixteenth century. In contrast to permanent employment as servants, casual labour for women was subject to substantial changes. How can we explain these changing work patterns of women? It is tempting to consider the period around 1440 as a golden age, caused by a labour shortage and similar to that supposed for the English countryside in the century-and-a-half after the Black Death. Following this line of reasoning, the radically changed situation by the middle of the sixteenth century could be explained by demographic recovery. In the next section of the paper, we argue that the characteristics of the labour supply was indeed a factor, but that it combined with changes in the type of rural economy and changes in the social structure of society.

IV

Before addressing the interplay of different explanatory factors, it is important to bear in mind that women in the late medieval Flemish countryside experienced few normative and institutional restrictions in the labour market, at least in comparison to those in the booming urban centres of the Low Countries or early modern Germany.[64] Unfree labour and servile dues had been insignificant from the high middle ages onwards.[65] Guilds played a minor role in the Flemish countryside. In the Low Countries, labour legislation only arose in the second half of the sixteenth century.[66] Previously, only general stipulations in regional customary law regulated wage labour. In these bodies of law, no differentiation according to gender was made. In some cases, it was even explicitly stated that the same rules applied to farmhands as to maids.[67]

(i) Demography

There is no doubt that coastal Flanders experienced a serious labour shortage in 1430s and 1440s. The rich Scueringhe data dates from a particularly turbulent political period. In 1436–38, the city of Bruges revolted against the Duke of Burgundy. This event was accompanied by

[64] Stabel, 'Working alone'; E. Kloek, 'Vrouwenarbeid aan banden gelegd? De arbeidsdeling naar sekse volgens de keurboeken van de oude draperie van Leiden, ca. 1380–1580', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 13 (1987), pp. 373–402; Ogilvie, *Bitter Living.*

[65] Verhulst, *Précis,* pp. 73–5.

[66] C. Verlinden and J. Craeybeckx, *Prijzen- en lonenpolitiek in de Nederlanden in 1561 en 1588–1589: onuitgegeven adviezen, ontwerpen en ordonnanties* (1962), p. 6.

[67] For the rural district around Bruges, Gilliodts-Van Severen, *Coutume*, I, pp. 245–8; Lambrecht, 'Institution', pp. 50–4.

famine and an outbreak of the plague[68] and had an impact on the countryside around Bruges.[69] Moreover, during the 1430s, English soldiers frequently plundered the Flemish coastline from the sea.[70] Besides these political troubles, the coastal region suffered ecological problems. Between *c.*1370 and *c.*1425, the area was subjected to several storm surges.[71] Consequently, the region experienced a succession of demographic crises, which could explain the large numbers of women hired during harvests of the 1440s.

The prevailing labour shortage in the second quarter of the fifteenth century is demonstrated by the high value of daily wages for casual work. The amount of wheat which could be bought by the daily wage for ploughing, harrowing and manuring was never higher than in the 1440s and 1450s. Generally, the decades around 1440 are considered to be advantageous for wage labourers in Flanders.[72] By the middle of the sixteenth century, the amount one day of labour could buy was only half as much as a century before, as Figure 3 demonstrates. As in Flanders generally, real wages markedly decreased in the sixteenth century.[73]

The most obvious explanation for the observed change in the employment characteristics of women by the middle of the sixteenth century would be a recovery in population numbers. However, the coastal area witnessed a fundamental population decrease between the first half of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century. In general, population levels decreased by a quarter between *c.*1450 and *c.*1530.[74] In Zuienkerke, the decline was even more pronounced: in 1425, the village counted approximately 1133 inhabitants, but by 1527 the number had shrunk to approximately 450 inhabitants.[75] And yet this marked population decrease did not lead, as one might expect, to an expanded participation of women in farm labour, but rather to the opposite. For this reason, processes other than demographic developments need to be considered.

(ii) Changes in the rural economy

In the fourteenth and first half of the fifteenth century, large holdings in coastal Flanders focused on cereal culture, in particular the growing of wheat. At the Scueringhe farm, approximately 65 to 75 per cent of the land was reserved for arable in the first half of the fifteenth century. At this holding, 120 to 150 ha of crops had to be harvested in a couple of weeks. Given that one reaper processed approximately 0.20 to 0.30 ha per day, it is clear that the managers of St John's had to find a large number of temporary harvest workers. In such a situation, systematic discrimination against women, by offering them lower rates, would have been neither rational nor efficient. A similar situation pertained in late medieval England, where

[68] W. Blockmans, 'The social and economic effects of plague in the Low Countries, 1349–1500', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis* 58 (1980), pp. 856–7; W. Vangassen, *De pestepidemieën na 1350, voornamelijk deze van 1400 en 1438 in Vlaanderen en Henegouwen* (unpubl. MA dissertation, Gent University, 1952), pp. 67–78.

[69] Vervaet, *Goederenbeheer*, pp. 211–2.

[70] M. K. E. Gottschalk, *Historische geografie van Westelijk Zeeuws-Vlaanderen* (2 vols, 1958), II, pp. 46–50.

[71] Ibid., I, pp. 162–210; II, pp. 2–32.

[72] Sosson, *Travaux*, pp. 300–4; E. Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen gedurende de late Middeleeuwen en het begin van de Moderne Tijden* (1988), pp. 963–72; W. Blockmans, *Metropolen aan de Noordzee: de geschiedenis van Nederland, 1100–1560* (2010), p. 563.

[73] Thoen and Soens, 'Family', p. 200

[74] Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*, pp. 67–72.

[75] Ibid., p. 70.

Hatcher has observed that wage discrimination according to gender was implausible.[76] Whittle has similarly noticed that women working in the harvest in pre-Black Death Hunstanton, a village in Norfolk, were paid the same as men.[77] On the large farms of northern France, focusing on commercial cereal culture, the differences between the sexes in day-rates for harvest labour was also minimal.[78]

The use of piece rates on the Flemish farms, the same for both sexes, meant that labourers were stimulated to work speedily. Moreover, it also meant that harvest work required less control by the employers. Conversely, the output per worker needed to be accurately determined. The friars of Scamelweeken farm spent heavily on supervising the harvest each year.

In a predominantly cereal culture, the sickle was the ideal instrument for harvesting. It cuts the stalks evenly, without gathering too many weeds, and the loss of corn was limited. Consequently, in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century coastal Flanders, labourers used the sickle above all else. At Scueringhe farm in the 1440s, only a small part of the arable acreage was mown, most probably the area covered with fodder crops. The same kind of correlation between the type of crop and the technique used has been found for early modern England.[79]

From the second half of the fifteenth century onwards, cattle-raising became more important. Land was increasingly exploited as fertile grassland rather than arable for cereals.[80] A specialization in some branches of pastoral agriculture could offer opportunities for women, for instance as live-in dairymaids.[81] Like other farmers in the sixteenth century, the friars of St John's came to focus on the fattening of oxen for urban markets.[82] This required less labour than dairy farming and in particular offered little or no work for women. The development of this specialism explains the stability in the number of female servants and their wages in the Flemish coastal area.

The shift to pastoral farming resulted in a reduced area needing harvest. At Scueringhe farm in the 1540s, only 40 per cent of the land was used for arable farming of which a large part was now reserved for fodder crops. Consequently, the friars needed far fewer labourers during the harvest. In the 1540s, they hired approximately 35 individuals for harvest jobs, where in the 1440s the number might have been as many as 120. Besides, the sixteenth-century harvesters of the coastal area primarily used the Hainault scythe, called *pick* in Middle Dutch.[83] At Scueringhe farm in the 1540s, at least 80 per cent of the cultivated area was harvested with this tool. At Ter Doest farm in the 1570s, 78 per cent of the cultivated land was harvested this way. The sickle was still used for a small acreage of wheat. At Ter Haghen

[76] Hatcher, 'Debate', p. 195.

[77] J. Whittle, 'The food economy of lords, tenants and workers in a medieval village: Hunstanton, Norfolk, 1328–1348', in M. Kowalewski, J. Langdon and P. Schofield, *Peasants and lords in the medieval English economy. Essays in honour of Bruce M. S. Campbell* (2015), pp. 44–5.

[78] Delmaire, 'La femme', p. 146: women earned on average 90% of the wages of men during the harvest of 1341, while disparities of 70% were considered as usual for late medieval England.

[79] When JPs fixed the wages of harvest piece-workers after 1563, they assumed that wheat and rye would always be reaped, but that barley, oats, peas and beans would more commonly be mown. Roberts, 'Sickles', p. 15.

[80] Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*, pp. 99–103.

[81] Snell, 'Employment', pp. 421–2.

[82] Vervaet, *Goederenbeheer*, pp. 110–7.

[83] E. Thoen, 'The birth of the Flemish Husbandry: agricultural technology in medieval Flanders', in G. Astill and J. Langdon (eds), *Medieval farming and technology. The impact of agricultural change in north-west Europe* (1997), p. 81.

farm between 1557 and 1574, all crops were harvested with the Hainault scythe. With it, workers could easily cut the stalks close to their roots. This generated more straw, necessary for cattle farming. The scythe also enabled workers to cut weighty, flattened or jumbled corn. Harvesting with the Hainault scythe was one-and-a-half times quicker than reaping.[84] The piece rate for *pickers* was substantially lower than that for reapers. At Scueringhe farm in the 1540s, *pickers* received 28 Flemish *d. groten* per ha, while their small number of colleagues still using the sickle received 80 *groten*, as Figure 1 shows. This figure also demonstrates that the disparity in remuneration between the sickle and the scythe was never as large as in the sixteenth century, implying that harvesting with the scythe was unquestionably advantageous to the employer.

However, the Hainault scythe was strictly reserved for men. The most cited reason for this exclusivity is that harvesting crops with the Hainault scythe – or generally with a common scythe – demanded unusual physical strength, stature and skill.[85] Another argument is the usual attire of women at the time. The rhythmically used hook could get caught up in their long skirts. Even if the skirts were raised and bound together, the bulk of the fabric would hamper their movement.[86] It is also likely that the idea that working with the scythe was inappropriate for women also prevailed. Agricultural tasks were all gendered in medieval Europe.[87] The impact of customs and social expectations is hard to determine in this particular case, among others because of the lack of contemporary comments.

The shift from arable farming to pastoral farming and, related to it, the changing preference of employers for the Hainault scythe reduced the opportunities for women. In the sixteenth century, the reduced workforce was primarily composed of men using the scythe. The work of women was restricted to binding and gathering sheaves. These 'assisting' jobs were far less financially rewarding. The impact of the type of rural economy and the tools used can be shown by a comparison to early modern Zeeland Flanders, part of the Dutch Republic. This region specialized in commercial grain cultivation. Moreover, the region was regularly confronted with an acute labour shortage, due to border conflicts and warfare with the Southern Low Countries. According to Van Cruyningen, the sickle was retained as the preferred harvest implement because all type of workers, including women and children, could easily use it.[88]

[84] P. Lindemans, *Geschiedenis van de landbouw in België* (2 vols, 1952), II, p. 61; Roberts, 'Sickles', p. 5.

[85] Roberts, 'Sickles', p. 8. This argument, appealing to divergence in strength, has been criticized by M. Muller on the grounds that the extent of difference between the physiques of men and women is at least in part culturally determined, M. Muller, 'Peasant women, agency and status in late thirteenth and early fourteenth century England, some reconsiderations', in C. Beattie and M. F. Stevens (eds), *Married women and the law in pre-modern northwest Europe, c. 1200–1700* (2013), p. 101, based on Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972), pp. 27–8.

[86] This argument has been put forward by Dr. Isis Sturtewagen, a medieval archeologist specializing in late medieval clothing. Her argument is, among other things, based on the miniatures of Simon Bening, a Flemish miniaturist working in Bruges around 1500 and producer of the Golf Book (British Library, Add. MS 24098). I am grateful to her for her suggestion.

[87] J. Whittle, 'Rural economies', in J. M. Bennett and R. Karras (eds), *The Oxford handbook of women and gender in Medieval Europe* (2013), pp. 316–20.

[88] Van Cruyningen, *Behoudend*, pp. 167–8.

(iii) Structural social transformation of the region

By focusing on livestock farming, farmers were responding to ecological problems, in particular the deteriorating soil hydrology, as well as an increasing demand for meat from the urban centres[89], but foremost to structural problems in the labour market. In the fourteenth century and first half of the fifteenth, numerous smallholdings in the coastal area disappeared.[90] As a result, the large farms were no longer able to draw on a plentiful supply of local smallholders to work several days a week on the farm, especially during the harvest season, for an additional income or in exchange for the loan of a horse and a plough to work their own small acreages. In fact, it is only for the first half of the fourteenth century we have indications of such intense labour relations between the smallholders of Zuienkerke and Scueringhe farm.[91] The labour abundance in this period is reflected in the extremely low remuneration for harvest labour in comparison to its later evolution, as Figure 3 shows. From the end of the fourteenth century onwards, farm managers had to look elsewhere for the necessary labour force.

The labourers at Scueringhe farm, men as well as women, were certainly not of local origin in the 1440s, as can be demonstrated by searching for their names or the names of relatives in three different types of sources available for the region. All landowners are accurately described in the water board rate books because every landowner, in practice the freeholders and customary holders, contributed to the maintenance of dikes and roads according to the land area they owned.[92] The names of the Scueringhe workers, or possible relatives, do not appear among the landowners, even the smallest, of the village and surrounding villages. It is true that even in the fifteenth century, most land in the area north of Bruges was leased out, so it is possible that the workers or their relatives cultivated small plots of land in Zuienkerke and surrounding villages. Yet similar names are not to be found among the leaseholders of St John's of Bruges, the landlord who owned at least one-fifth of all the land in the neighbourhood of Scueringhe farm.[93] Moreover, among the 277 different taxpayers of the shire of Zuienkerke in 1425, which – in addition to male heads of households – included widows (with or without children), cohabitating sisters and single women, no obvious relatives of the farm hands are mentioned.[94] It is also significant that in the Scueringhe accounts of the 1440s, the workers were only seldom identified as 'the son

[89] E. Thoen and T. Soens, 'Elevage, prés et paturage dans le comté de Flandre au Moyen Age et au début des Temps Modernes. Les liens avec l'économie rurale régionale', in *Prés, prairies et paturages dans l'Europe médiévale et moderne* (2006), pp. 92–3; T. Soens and E. Thoen, 'Vegetarians or Carnivores? Standards of living and diet in late medieval Flanders', in Simonetta Cavaciocchi, 'Le interazioni fra economia e ambiente biologico nell'Europa preindustriale, secc. XIII–XVIII : atti della 'Quarantunesima Settimana di studi', 26–30 aprile 2009' ('Economic and biological interactions in pre-industrial Europe, from the 13th to the 18th century') (2010), pp. 526–7.

[90] Soens, *De spade in de dijk?*, pp. 73–87. From several parameters, among others the characteristics of the lease market, it is clear that bankrupt peasant families did not stay in the Flemish coastal region.

[91] J. Himpens, *Het Sint-Janshospitaal te Brugge (1188–1350)* (unpubl. MA dissertation, Catholic University of Leuven, 1956), p. 122.

[92] Archives of the Public Welfare Organisation of Bruges, Archives of the St John's Hospital, A. Water Boards, nr. 7: Water Board Register of the Blankenbergse Watering, 1456.

[93] Vervaet, *Goederenbeheer*, pp. 50–7.

[94] State Archives of Bruges, Bundels van het Vrije, nr. 271: Zettingslijst Zuienkerke 1425.

of or the daughter of …' which further argues for a non-local origin: the friars and sisters of St John's, dominating the area north of Bruges, would have known at least some of the inhabitants by name.

Where did the workers came from? Several fifteenth-century casual workers at Scueringhe and Scamelweeken farm bore a surname referring to the same eastern and north-eastern counties of the Low Counties, in particular Brabant, Holland, Zeeland and Guelderland. Although using surnames to determine the origin of workers is a risky business, references such as Jan Beel from Zeeland or the anonymous Zeeusche wyf, the Oosterlync or the Brabandere indicate the same geographical labour mobility. In addition, several names refer to villages in the sandy, inland part of Flanders. Occasionally, the farm administrator registered the origin of the workers, such as 'de mans van Oudenaerde', 'Cornelis and Hannekin, beede van Oudenaerde', and 'Lauwericx Wittinc van Eeklo'. This suggests at least temporary migration in the rural sector in late medieval Flanders, several decades before more confident evidence exists.[95] In the eighteenth century, numerous inhabitants of inland Flanders travelled to the polders to work for several weeks in the cereal harvest.[96] As with the early modern situation, the mobility of the fifteenth-century harvesters has to be considered temporary rather than permanent labour migration. This is also suggested by the customary law of the Bruges rural district, which dictated that judgments on conflicts over the wage of harvest workers had to be executed immediately.[97]

With high wages, the friars of St John's and the Potterie hoped to attract extra labourers originating from regions with a surplus of labour, such as inland Flanders.[98] Labourers were able to take advantage of the exceptional wages, especially during the harvest season. They constantly travelled around, looking for higher wages. And higher wages were as good as always available, since summer wages on Scueringhe farm varied even from week to week, in the 1440s from 34 to 50 Flemish *d. groten* per ha.[99] Wages indeed varied according to the sort of the cereal, but also according to the condition (thinly or thickly sown, flattened or standing) and the urgency of the work. This urgency, moreover, enabled the workers to negotiate rates with the farm managers. Scholars have pointed to the strong bargaining position of harvest labourers.[100] The crew of harvesters at Scueringhe farm changed weekly, sometimes even daily, in the 1440s. Harvest labourers weren't only geographically mobile, but lacked any attachment to where they worked. In this decade, on average, only 12 per cent of the harvesters at Scueringhe farm in any one summer returned there the following

[95] Verlinden and Craeybeckx, *Prijzen- en lonenpolitiek*, p. 101.

[96] Van Cruyninghen, *Behoudend*, pp. 171–8; Lambrecht, 'Agrarian Change', pp. 214–5. Labour mobility during the harvest season has also been documented for the northern Low Countries from the sixteenth century onwards, B. J. P. van Bavel, *Goederenverwerving en goederenbeheer van de Abdij van Mariënweerd (1129–1592)* (1993), p. 440; J. Lucassen, *Naar de kusten van de Noordzee. Trekarbeid in Europees perspectief, 1600–1900* (1984), pp. 117–9.

[97] Gilliodts-Van Severen, *Coutume,* I, p. 248.

[98] E. Thoen, 'A "commercial survival economy" in evolution. The Flemish countryside and the transition to capitalism (Middle Ages–19th century)', in P. Hoppenbrouwers and J. L. van Zanden (eds), *Peasants into farmers: the transformation of rural economy and society in the Low Countries (Middle Ages–19th century) in the light of the Brenner debate* (2001), pp. 111–19.

[99] On the farms of l'hôpital Saint Saveur of Lille, northern France, the harvest wages even differed per day in the 1340s, Delmaire, *La femme*, pp. 145–6.

[100] Youngs, 'Servants', p. 155.

summer. Clearly, the friars of the hospital farms maintained an anonymous and impersonal relationship with their employees.

It would seem that at this moment, female harvesters were as free to move from job to job as their male counterparts. This was possible because, in all probability, they were young and unmarried. At least a third of the Scueringhe female harvesters bore a diminutive name. The supposition that they were young is also supported by a small number of them (7 per cent) being referred to as 'daughter of'. At the same time, the normal lack of reference to parents or relatives (as for the male harvest workers in the first half of the fifteenth century) confirms their non-local origin. The clerk keeping the accounts never referred to the women's husband. The significance of this absence can be appreciated by considering the contemporary rent and lease registers of St John's, in which women were predominantly identified in relation to their husband (even if deceased), despite the fact that, according to regional customary law, they were legally capable of renting and cultivating land in their own name. For these reasons it can be assumed that the working women were unmarried, notwithstanding the fact that reference to a husband living in a village at a distance and unknown to the farm managers was most probably irrelevant to them.[101]

The geographical and temporal mobility of the working women has consequences for the value of their remuneration, because their earnings were spent in other regions. Let's suppose that the Scueringhe women of the 1440s originated from inland Flanders or from Brabant. Taking into account deductions from their summer earnings for travel and lodgings, these women would still have been able to lease a plot of land encompassing 2.5 ha in the area south of Gent, and similarly 2.5 ha in Brabant close to Brussels.[102] Knowing that farm size seldom exceeded a few ha in inland Flanders[103], the summer earnings of the women clearly offered the prospect of starting their own farm and household.

The harvest labourers, originating from outside coastal Flanders, had to be paid on the completion of their work, doubtless in cash, and before a single part of the crop could be sold. This is also suggested by the activities of farm managers on the credit market. In 1495, the friars of the Potterie borrowed a large sum of money from the Bruges political elite which was clearly intended to pay for the harvest costs at Scamelweeken farm. The sum was repaid without interest later in the year.

As a consequence of the changing social structure of the coastal region, with migrant workers replacing local workers, the large commercial farms were confronted with growing labour costs.[104] Although sharp fluctuations occurred annually, these costs approached

[101] Several scholars have argued that women without the adage 'wife of' must not automatically be regarded as unmarried, e.g. Muller, 'Peasant women', pp. 104–06 and J. Bennett, *Ale*, pp. 166–70; These historians emphasize that the marital status of women was simply irrelevant for the author of the documents.

[102] L. Verstappen, *Pachtprijzen als meters van economische politiek en conjunctuur. Een vergelijkende studie tussen het platteland rond Brugge, Gent en Leiden (1450–1570)* (unpubl. MA dissertation, Gent University, 2001), Appendix; Thoen, *Landbouwekonomie*, pp. 531–7; F. Daelemans and F. Scheelings, 'Pachtprijzen in Brabant, 14de–18de eeuw', in F. Daelemans (ed.), *Pachtprijzen en economische conjunctuur (14de–20ste eeuw)* (1983), Appendix 2.

[103] Thoen, 'A "commercial survival economy"', pp. 113–16.

[104] The profitability of such farms was largely determined by the size of the labour costs, B. J. P. van Bavel, *Transitie en continuïteit: de bezitsverhoudingen*

TABLE 3. Number of winter servants per ha of arable land at Scueringhe farm, 1346–1547

Period	*Number of winter servants per ha arable land*
1346	0.27
1403–1421	0.25
1442–1455	0.23
1543–1547	0.18

Sources: see note 32.

TABLE 4. Labour costs and revenues at Scueringhe farm, 1445–6 and 1543–7

Period	*Annual labour costs in grams of silver (average for the period)*	*Annual farm revenues in grams of silver (average of the period)*
1445–6	30,933	45,504
1543–7	15,760	39,675

Sources: see note 32.

60 per cent of the annual budget at Scamelweeken farm in the 1380s and 1390s. In the 1440s, a period marked by demographic crisis as discussed above, those of Scueringhe farm even approached the income of the farm, as Table 4 shows. Conversely, on the flourishing early modern cereal farms of Zealand Flanders, labour costs constituted approximately 30 to 40 per cent of the annual budget.[105] The shift towards less labour-intensive but more capital-intensive livestock farming should be considered as a response to structural changes on the labour market. Population indeed mattered in this story, however only in an indirect manner. Besides focusing on the fattening of cattle, farmers above all sought to rationalize wage labour by introducing piece rates for threshers, introducing the Hainault scythe instead of the sickle and balancing the number of servants versus casual labourers according to the wages they expected to pay them.[106] Table 3 shows the decreasing labour input at Scueringhe farm between the middle of the fourteenth century and the middle of the sixteenth century. For farms such as Scueringhe or Scamelweeken, not lacking in the necessary capital, these measures undoubtedly had positive results. While annual revenues only slightly decreased, their labour costs had substantially decreased by the middle of the sixteenth century, as Table 4 shows for Scueringhe farm.

Such figures, however, pertain to institutional farms. For freehold and tenant farmers, the later with rent to pay each year, the struggle to keep down labour costs was even more fierce. Undoubtedly they lacked the capital to switch to livestock meaning that many of them could not continue in farming. Consequently, in otherwise prosperous and politically stable periods

Note 104 *continued*
en de plattelandseconomie in het westelijke gedeelte van het Gelderse rivierengebied, ca. 1300–ca. 1570 (1999), pp. 614–17.

[105] Van Cruyningen, *Behoudend*, p. 235.

[106] Vervaet, 'Employment', pp. 34–5.

such as the 1530s and 1540s, the group of (nearly) landless people who depended on wage labour increased.[107] The work patterns of the threshers of Scueringhe farm demonstrate the growing importance of wage labour for rural dwellers. In 1454, 29 different people threshed the corn. Threshers worked at least two days and at maximum of 26 days on the farm; on average, they threshed for 15 days. A century later the cereal harvest, reduced because of the shift to pastoral agriculture, was processed by only nine different threshers. On average, each of these worked approximately 83 days on the farm, which is five times more than their predecessors.[108] The social and economic transformation of the region explains why enough male (harvest) labourers were available in 1540s, notwithstanding the substantial demographic decline which had taken place. That the labour supply now sufficed is suggested by the evolution of real wages for casual workers. With their daily wage, casual workers were able to buy only half as much cereal at the Bruges market as their colleagues one century earlier, as Figure 3 shows. Farmers could recruit more locally in the 1540s. Approximately 10 per cent of all the workers bore the same surname as the leaseholders of St Johns in Zuienkerke and surrounding villages. Moreover, some workers were referred to as 'several people from the village, Jacob from the village' and similar formulations. Despite this more locally based recruitment, the relationship between employer and employee remained rather anonymous and impersonal, as demonstrated above, and also by the appearance of descriptions such as 'Passchier and his companions'. This pattern of recruiting gangs with a foreman, who negotiated the wages of the entire gang, was typical for large early modern farms.[109]

In the 1540s, a period of adequate male labour supply, women were undoubtedly excluded from the best-paid harvest work. Farmers clearly preferred men as harvest workers, not only with the labour-intensive Hainault scythe but also for reaping small acreages with the sickle. Tasks such as harvesting and threshing had to be performed as quickly as possible in this very competitive and commercial environment. Therefore, employers sought physical strength and speed. Women were frequently employed to undertake the 'assisting' jobs on Scueringhe farm in the middle of the sixteenth century, but they found work through their husband or male relatives and not independently as in the 1440s. Jannekin processed the fodder crops for the horses on Scueringhe farm in the 1543, while her husband Geert Pasman worked as a casual labourer at least 106 days on the same farm; the wife of Adriaen Van Bergheyke made sheaves in the fields during the summer of 1547, while her husband worked the preceding years at the farm as a casual worker and harvest worker; Dyne Bertille assisted during the hay harvest, while her brother Luc was hired to dig peat at the farm in 1543. Notably, women were now sometimes referred to anonymously as 'wives from the village' or the like. Women, it seemed, not only performed low-paid roles but were also not worth mentioning by their proper name.

The question of what the female casual labourers did for the rest of the year and the economic activities the female servants performed after their period of service is hard to

[107] Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*, p. 152.

[108] Since threshers worked by piece rate in the sixteenth century, I can only roughly estimate the total number of working days, based on the general output of threshing provided by Slicher van Bath, *Geschiedenis*, p. 203.

[109] Allen, 'Growth', p. 137; C. M. Newman, 'Work and wages at Durham Priory and its estates, 1494–1519', *Continuity and Change* 16 (2001), p. 370; Lucassen, *Naar de Kusten*, pp. 117–9.

answer. Looking for their names in contemporary sources is like searching for a needle in a haystack. Generally, it appears that in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Flemish coastal region women did not have other major opportunities to make a living. Local rural industries where women could find employment, such as brick making or peat digging, were in decline from the fifteenth century onwards.[110] The limit of two looms per village and the prohibition on the sale of wool in the rural district around Bruges, imposed after pressure from urban weavers, made it impossible for a domestic textile industry to develop in the coastal area.[111] The opportunities for women to secure small acreages of land to run as smallholdings were also reduced from the fifteenth century.[112]

V

Until now, the debate about female wage labour in the centuries after the Black Death has chiefly taken place on a national scale, emphasizing demographic developments as the driver of change. Several historians have, however, convincingly argued for the importance of regional and even local case studies, because these allow us to place women's experiences in their proper context. This article presents previously unexploited evidence for wage labour by women in agriculture in one of most dynamic parts of northern Europe, coastal Flanders. Analysing the work patterns of women on large commercial farms in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries confirms the importance of differentiating according to the type of employment, as has recently been pointed out by Humphries and Weisdorf. The large farms consistently employed a few female live-in workers with long-term contracts, in spite of the shift to cattle farming and of demographic decline. Moreover, female servants always earned far less than their male colleagues. In commercial agriculture, service did not provide the advantageous opportunities for women identified by some scholars for the urban economies of north-western Europe. As casual workers, women only found employment on large farms during the brief harvest period. Remarkably, they did not experience wage discrimination, not even in the era before the Black Death. The stipulated piece rates for harvest work pertained to both men and women. However, specific harvest tasks were strictly divided between the sexes. In the era dominated by cereal cultivation in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, women reaped corn with the sickle. Especially in periods with extreme labour scarcity such as the 1440s, numerous women, a large proportion of whom originated from other regions, worked in the fields during harvest. Due to the shift to livestock in the sixteenth century, fewer workers were needed. Besides, farm managers preferred the labour-saving Hainault scythe which, as an instrument reserved for male use, pushed women into the low-paid 'assisting' jobs such as binding. As in early modern textile industries[113], the late medieval rural labour market consisted of different segments, with each segment not only experiencing its own development but also having its

[110] Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*.

[111] L. Vervaet, 'The economic opportunities of rural women in late medieval Flanders', in M. Muller (ed.), *The Routledge History handbook of medieval rural life, c.1100–1550* (forthcoming, 2020).

[112] *Ead*., 'Women and leasehold in rural Flanders, c. 1290 to c. 1570', *Rural Hist*., 30 (2019), pp. 6–7.

[113] E. Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Market wage or discrimination? The remuneration of male and female wool spinners in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic', *EcHR* 63 (2010), pp. 165–86.

own gender aspects. In the sixteenth century, employers found sufficient male labour because of the increase in nearly landless labourers in the region. The evidence of coastal Flanders confirms the idea that women were recruited into the labour force when needed but overlooked when supplies of male labour were adequate.[114] The significance and structural consequences of these temporary opportunities for only a specific group of women for rural society as a whole should not be overestimated.

This regional, empirical study demonstrates that the presence of a free and well-developed market for wage labour combined with declining population numbers is not a sufficient explanation of changes in the participation and remuneration of female workers in late medieval rural society. An adequate explanation integrates demographic evolution, both long-term and short-term, the type of rural economy, and related to this the hand tools used, and the social structure of rural society. Nevertheless, far more research is necessary to understand the divergent impact on men and women of one of the most fundamental evolutions in rural society, in particular the development towards agrarian capitalism.

[114] Mate, *Daughters*, p. 56; A. M. de Pleijt and J. L. van Zanden, 'Two worlds of female labour: Gender wage inequality in Western Europe, 1300–1800', Lund University, Department of Economic History, Seminar Paper 195 (2017).