

Family roles, access to resources, access to work: unmarried women (15th–19th centuries)

Historiography on women's work in the early modern period has focused heavily on widows, as they usually had greater freedom in managing their own money and property. Guilds granted widows the right to continue running their workshops, with varying degrees of restriction, but some research has also shown that many remained in charge of the workshop even when their children, having come of age, should have taken their place.

More recently, research has turned to the activities of wives, whether as unpaid workers in the artisan workshop run by their husband, or as providers of dowry capital essential to starting a business, or as collaborators capable of learning a trade which they would later practise as widows. Furthermore, research has also examined wives who practised a trade different from their husbands', obtaining, particularly in contexts where community of property between spouses was in force, the title of 'public merchants'.

The figure of the unmarried woman has remained in the shadows, as her rights are not always clear or explicitly stated in the regulations. Domestic service is perhaps the only occupation of unmarried women that has been thoroughly investigated, partly because it is not always easy to determine whether the single women appearing in the sources are widows or unmarried. The fact remains that early modern urban censuses record the presence of unmarried women, distinct from widows, in various craft and commercial activities. What form of legal majority existed for women? Where Roman law applied, were they subject to *patria potestas* for life? What social control was exercised over them regarding potential access to work? In what kind of family did they live? And to what extent might this have influenced their career choices and, conversely, how might work have provided them with the means to – or compelled them to – live outside the confines of their biological family? These are some of the questions that may be considered.

We welcome proposals for papers investigating the occupational roles and access to resources of unmarried women, both young and older, in urban settings.

Among the various topics that may be addressed:

- rights and economic autonomy
- education at home or away from home
- careers and managerial roles
- access to family resources
- family types and cohabitation among unmarried working women
- 'institutional' unmarried working women: *beguines*, *pizzocchere*, *bizzocche*
- guild regulations

Submission guidelines

Proposals (title, abstract of approximately 300 words, and a short biographical note) should be sent by April, 6th, 2026 to:

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Authors will be notified of the outcome of the selection by April, 10th, 2026.