

Conceived in Sin

Out-of-Wedlock Fertility and Bridal Pregnancies in the Antwerp District, Belgium, c. 1820-1920

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Abstract

This article explores the causes of the rise in extra-marital fertility in the Antwerp district between 1820 and 1920. The Antwerp COR*-database is used to compare the reproductive life courses and characteristics of unmarried mothers, women who experienced bridal pregnancies, as well as women who conceived exclusively within marriage. The authors conclude that illegitimacy was mainly a phenomenon among young urban working-class women, and that it was predominantly a consequence of vulnerability. The rise of illegitimacy should be viewed against Antwerp's transition from a regional textile center into a major port city, which increased migration and negatively influenced women's employment opportunities. The effects of illegitimacy were not as disastrous as the literature suggests, however, given the fact that a high percentage of the affected women eventually married.

Introduction

On December 14, 1847, at the age of twenty-one, Anna Maria van den Bemden gave birth to her first child in Antwerp. On the birth record of her daughter, Maria Theresia, 'onwettig' was written, meaning illegitimate, the young mother being unmarried. However, the father of the child, Joannes Cormon, recognized the child at birth.¹ Later on, the couple had two more illegitimate children. In 1856, they married and

¹ Het Rijksarchief in België, Burgerlijke Stand provincie Antwerpen, Akte inv.nr.2672, geboorteakten, 1847 (15 December 1847).

thereby legitimized their children. As a married woman, Anna Maria gave birth to her fourth and last child.

In the nineteenth century, marriage was the only institution within which sexual intercourse was socially, legally, and religiously accepted. Moreover, marriage provided the only context within which legitimate offspring were born, that is, children who could inherit from their fathers. Therefore, ideally, family formation started with a marriage.² Still, there were quite a lot of women who gave birth to one or more children out of wedlock. In fact, throughout Europe their numbers were on the rise from the middle of the eighteenth century onward, peaking in the nineteenth century.³ By then, nearly everywhere, more than five percent of live births were illegitimate. In some countries the percentage even rose above ten.⁴ In fact, there were large national, regional, and local differences. In Belgium as a whole, illegitimacy rates were between 7 and 9 percent, increasing to 10 percent between 1875 and 1895. Mid-nineteenth-century illegitimacy rates in Brussels were between 30 and 35 percent.⁵ In the city of Antwerp, illegitimacy rates fluctuated between 13 and 16 percent in the period 1830-1860.⁶

The question is why so many women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century engaged in extramarital sex, as well as why their numbers were on the rise. By having sex out of wedlock these women risked not only the shame of unmarried motherhood, but potentially also harmed their chances of ever getting married. Why did they take this risk?

The aim of this article is to provide new insights into the lives of unwed mothers and women who had bridal pregnancies in the Antwerp district in the period 1820-1920. A central concept in this paper is

2 P. Puschmann, 'Introduction', in: P. Puschmann (ed.), *A cultural history of marriage in the age of empires* (London 2020) 1-16, 1-2; Idem, 'Love, sex, and sexuality. Balancing economic considerations, sociocultural expectations, and personal desires', in: Puschmann (ed.), *A cultural history*, 117-138, 118.

3 J. Kok, 'Moeten en mogen trouwen. Gedwongen huwelijken en generatieconflict, 1870-1940', in: T. Engelen, O. Boonstra, and A. Janssens (eds), *Levenslopen in transformatie. Liber amicorum bij het afscheid van prof. dr. Paul M.M. Klep* (Nijmegen 2011) 94-104, 94; N. van den Boomen and P. Puschmann, 'Born out of wedlock at the river Waal. Illegitimacy in the city of Nijmegen', in: P. Puschmann and T. Riswick (eds), *Building bridges. Scholars, history and historical demography. A festschrift in honor of professor Theo Engelen* (Nijmegen 2018) 543-573, 545

4 I. Devos, S. de Langhe and M. Mechant, 'Regionale verschillen in het leven van ongehuwde moeders op het platteland in de zuidelijke Nederlanden, 1730-1846', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 8:1 (2011) 2-28, 2.

5 K. Matthijs, *De mateloze negentiende eeuw. Bevolking, huwelijk, gezin en sociale verandering* (Leuven 2001) 143.

6 J. Kruithof, 'De demografische ontwikkeling in de 19^{de} eeuw', in: C. de Clerq (ed.), *Botuwstoffen voor de geschiedenis van Antwerpen in de XIXde Eeuw* (Antwerpen 1974) 508-543, 524.

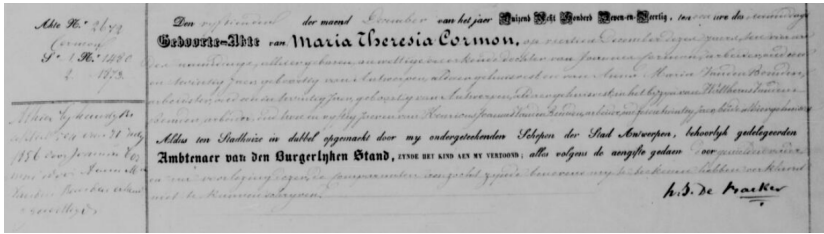


Illustration 1 Birth certificate of Maria Theresia Cormon. (source: Belgian State Archives, Civil Registry Province of Antwerp, Certificates inv.no.2672, birth certificates, 1847.)

'vulnerability.' Vulnerability has been defined in many ways, often emphasizing individuals' exposure to various types of risks, fragility, and lack of agency.⁷ Sociologist Misztal formulates an aggregative conception of vulnerability, integrating various definitions of vulnerability used in sociological research. As such, vulnerability 'captures the ways in which an individual experiences different aspects of disadvantage connected with human dependence on another, the unpredictability and the irreversibility of action.'⁸ Many historians have used the concept of 'vulnerability' in their explanation for illegitimacy. The principal cause of vulnerability is poverty, but it is also intertwined with the lack of a social network and social exclusion.⁹ It is indeed striking that, in the nineteenth century, out-of-wedlock childbearing was predominantly a phenomenon of the lower social classes, and it has often been suggested that migrant women were especially liable, as they were likely to lack kin in their city of residence. Reto Schumacher *et al.* stressed that the association between vulnerability and illegitimacy should be thought of as an interaction. On the one hand, vulnerability can be considered as a major factor motivating women to engage in premarital sexual relationships; on the other hand, out-of-wedlock childbearing may have increased women's economic insecurity, thereby engendering social stigma and vulnerability.¹⁰

The main question of this article is: did unmarried mothers and women with bridal pregnancies in the Antwerp district between 1821 and 1920 belong to a vulnerable group in society? To answer this question, four sub-questions were formulated: (1) what was the 'profile' of unwed

7 B.A. Misztal, *The challenges of vulnerability. In search of strategies for a less vulnerable social life* (London 2011) 4, 31.

8 Misztal, *The challenges*, 221.

9 R. Schumacher, G. Ryczkowska and O. Perroux, 'Illegitimate fertility in 19th-century Geneva', *The History of the family* 12 (2007) 190-191.

10 Schumacher, Ryczkowska and Perroux, 'Illegitimate fertility', 192.

mothers and mothers with bridal pregnancies, and did it differ from that of women who exclusively conceived within marriage? To answer this question we will compare (i) unmarried mothers, (ii) mothers with bridal pregnancies, and (iii) mothers who were married at the time of conception regarding their age at first birth, social status, birth place, place of residence, and migration background. Special attention is given to 'migration background' as migrants are often associated with (the rise in) illegitimacy in historical research. Therefore, the following sub-question is (2): were women with a migration background more prone to premarital and extramarital fertility? Next, we evaluate whether having illegitimate children led to increased vulnerability later in life by analyzing the marriage opportunities of women who gave birth to a child out of wedlock. The accompanying sub-question is (3): did an illegitimate child negatively influence the marriage opportunities of these women, thereby indicating sustained vulnerability as a result of unmarried motherhood? In this regard, marriage opportunities and the interval between birth and marriage are examined. The fourth sub-question focusses on 'repeaters' (4): what was the profile of women who gave birth to multiple illegitimate children, and are there indications that those women belonged to a bastardy-prone sub-society, as suggested by Peter Laslett?¹¹

Out-of-wedlock fertility – A state of the art

Historians have explored various mechanisms that may have caused the rise in illegitimacy as well as social and regional variations in levels and trends of illegitimacy in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Generally, illegitimacy rates were higher in cities than in the countryside, and extramarital fertility was found mainly among the working classes.¹² It is therefore not surprising that numerous historians have explained the rise of illegitimacy in the context of modernization (i.e., industrialization, urbanization, and increased mobility). Edward Shorter asserts that the rise of illegitimacy signified an early 'sexual revolution' among working-class women.¹³ According

11 P. Laslett, 'The bastardy prone sub-society', in: P. Laslett, K. Oosterveen and R.M. Smith (eds), *Bastardy and its comparative history. Studies in the history of illegitimacy and marital nonconformism in Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, North America, Jamaica, and Japan* (London 1980) 217-246.

12 Van den Boomen and Puschmann, 'Born out of wedlock', 545.

13 E. Shorter, 'Illegitimacy, sexual revolution and social change in modern Europe', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2:2 (1971) 237-272, 237-241.

to Shorter, industrialization and the rise of wage labor had a liberating effect on laboring women. As a result of industrialization more women moved away from their families and rural communities to cities to earn individual wages. This (economic) independence was an incentive for women to break free from traditional norms concerning sexuality and social control, and resulted, in combination with increased mobility and the absence of birth control, in an increase of illegitimacy.¹⁴

Others associate the high levels of illegitimacy with heightened vulnerability due to spatial mobility, social disintegration, and economic insecurity in the context of industrialization and urbanization.¹⁵ Tilly *et al.*, for example, criticized Shorter's theory arguing that although the women did move to cities to work, they did so in order to contribute to the family income, not to seek independence. Moreover, they state that their earnings were too low to achieve economic independence.¹⁶ Low income and social isolation in the city made women vulnerable and compelled them to find a partner, hoping that marriage would provide financial security. As a result, many young working women engaged in premarital sex in anticipation of marriage, a courtship practice which had been common among rural women for centuries. However, due to economic instability, increased mobility, and anonymity in cities, men were more likely to break their marriage promise. Moreover, rural-to-urban migrant women could not count on their families to enforce marital promises, having left them behind in the countryside.¹⁷

In 'Deconstructing illegitimacy', Jan Kok states that regional variation in illegitimacy is often related to marriage obstacles and the relative acceptance of unmarried cohabitation. He argues that marriage-like relationships, such as cohabitation, could be an important reason for illegitimate births, especially in the case of 'repeaters'. Given the fact that marriage had many (legal) advantages and that cohabitation was stigmatized and sometimes criminalized, Kok reasons that cohabitation was mostly the result of obstacles preventing couples from marrying.¹⁸ Together with Dalia Leinarte, Kok has pointed out that the costs of a

14 Shorter, 'Illegitimacy', 248-259.

15 Schumacher, Ryczkowska and Perroux, 'Illegitimate fertility', 190; M. Mitterauer, *Ledige Mütter. Zur Geschichte illegitimer Geburten in Europa* (München 1983).

16 L.A. Tilly, J.W. Scott and M. Cohen, 'Women's work and European fertility patterns', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6:3 (1976) 447-476, 452, 454-463.

17 *Ibid.*, 'Women's work', 465.

18 J. Kok, 'Deconstructing illegitimacy', in: M. Hohenwarter, W.M. Iner and T. Krautzer (eds), *Mensch im Mittelpunkt. Bevölkerung-Ökonomie-Erinnerung. Festschrift für Peter Teibenbacher zum 65. Geburtstag* (Münster 2019) 71-78.

wedding may have been prohibitive for poor people, resulting in cohabitation and illegitimacy. Moreover, economic necessity potentially motivated cohabitation in the first place.¹⁹ Furthermore, Kok and Leinarte mention legal obstacles inhibiting marriage such as laws against marriages of the poor and elaborate rules that prohibited marriages among kin.²⁰ Lastly, complex official procedures could hinder foreign migrants from marrying. The French Civil Code stipulated that several documents were needed, such as documents proving parents' consent, before a marriage could take place. These requirements were often problematic for foreign migrants.²¹ Schumacher *et al.* have shown that the rise of illegitimacy in Geneva was partly the result of the difficulties immigrants faced in obtaining legal documents for marriage.²²

Although illegitimacy has been explained by some historians as a result of sexual intercourse in anticipation of a marriage that never happened or that met with obstacles, others have come up with different explanations. Nynke van den Boomen and Paul Puschmann found that a significant part of illegitimate births in nineteenth-century Nijmegen had been conceived during the annual fair, which led them to the assumption that these births resulted from occasional encounters in a setting with alcohol consumption and looser morals. Peter Laslett argues, by contrast, that a *bastardy-prone sub-society* accounted for the rise in illegitimacy. According to Laslett, unwed mothers often lived in the same neighborhood and were related to one another. Many of these mothers – 'repeaters', as he refers to them – had multiple illegitimate children. Within this subculture, alternative sexual behaviours such as prostitution and illegitimacy were exhibited, normalized, and passed on from generation to generation.²³ In general, historians debate whether the lower classes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries upheld different, looser sexual norms than the middle classes, or adopted and internalized the stricter and more 'prudish' sexual norms the middle classes aimed to spread. Various historians argue the former, although not entirely rejecting an increasing prudishness as a result of middle-class endeavors to spread their norms and values and impose them in others.²⁴ Antoon Vrints, for example, concludes on

19 Kok and Leinarte, 'Cohabitation', 498; J. Ehmer, 'Marriage', in: D.I. Kertzer and M. Barbagli (eds), *Family life in the long nineteenth century 1789-1913* (New Haven/London 2002) 282-321, 320.

20 Kok and Leinarte, 'Cohabitation', 494-498.

21 *Ibid.*, 494-498.

22 Schumacher, Ryczkowska, and Perroux, 'Unwed mothers', 194.

23 Laslett, 'The bastardy prone sub-society', 217-246.

24 E. Hoebeke, 'Sex and the city'. *Een analyse van de seksuele norm in de publieke ruimte vanuit een*

the basis of his research into (sexual) insults used among the working classes of Antwerp in the early twentieth century, that a large variety of sexual norms and values existed among the citizens of Antwerp and that the sexual norms of the working classes did not always correspond with those promoted by the middle classes.²⁵

Besides different sexual norms of the working classes, for the Belgian case scholars have found evidence in support of the vulnerability hypothesis, as well as results conflicting with the argument of social isolation put forward by Tilly *et al.* For example George Alter, who looked at nineteenth-century Verviers, also explains the rise of illegitimacy in a context of poor living and working conditions as well as migration among the working classes. Similar to Tilly *et al.*, Alter states that the persistence of rural courtship practices among migrants played a role in the rise of illegitimacy.²⁶ In addition, Alter points at the 'double standard' among the Belgian working classes. A woman should not agree to sexual intimacy too early in the relationship, as this might raise questions about her chastity and therefore her suitability as a marriage partner. If she refused it for too long, though, her partner might lose his interest.²⁷ According to Alter, sexual intercourse in anticipation of marriage could result in illegitimacy in two ways. First, he points to economic insecurity: a man might have had insufficient economic means for marriage. Second, it is conceivable that a man did not have honest intentions and, through a lack of social control, could easily disappear. However, in contrast to Tilly *et al.*, Alter argues that unmarried mothers were not socially isolated; he shows that most migrant women had moved to Verviers with their parents or siblings.²⁸ In line with Alter's results, Jan Van Bavel, who investigated bridal pregnancies and illegitimacy in Leuven, showed that there, too, not all unmarried mothers were socially isolated, and that for women living with a parent the risk of illegitimate conceptions was actually higher.²⁹

klassen- en genderperspectief gedurende de 19de eeuw tot WO I in België met Antwerpen (1909) als casestudie, masterscriptie geschiedenis (Gent 2017) 117-122; A. Vrints, 'De retoriek van de rottigheid. Belediging en seksuele eer in het buurtleven te Antwerpen, 1910-1950', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 3:4 (2008) 34, 349-377.

25 Vrints, 'De retoriek', 351-352, 371-372.

26 G. Alter, *Family and the female life course. The women of Verviers, Belgium* (Madison 1991) 113, 137.

27 *Ibid.*, 120-121.

28 *Ibid.*, 131, 139.

29 J. Van Bavel, 'Family control, bridal pregnancy, and illegitimacy. An event history analysis in Leuven, Belgium, 1846-1856', *Social Science History* 25:3 (2001) 449-479, 461, 463.

Recently, evolutionary explanations have been added to the discussion. Katharina Pink *et al.* demonstrated for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Krummhörn, Germany, that women who had experienced the death of one or more of their siblings in early life (0-5 years) were at an increased risk of conceiving out of wedlock. While this tendency points also to vulnerability, they explain it from a biological perspective. Women who experience harsh life circumstances are more likely to pursue a speedy life history strategy: these women do not wait until they have formed a stable relationship, as early death might otherwise prevent them from reproducing. Such biological assertions show that there are multiple pathways through which vulnerability can lead to risky sexual behaviour and illegitimacy.³⁰

Antwerp in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

During the nineteenth century, the city of Antwerp transformed from a small regional textile center into one of the largest European seaports, with a large service sector, making it the fastest-growing city in Belgium.³¹ In 1846 it numbered just under 90,000 inhabitants, rising to more than 300,000 by 1910.³² Immigration, which soared from the late 1840s onwards, played an important role in this growth.³³ Most migrants in Antwerp came from its hinterlands, although considerable numbers came from abroad, especially from neighboring countries. The number of migrants from further away increased during the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁴ Antwerp as a port and service center attracted labor migrants.³⁵ Antwerp's economy was dominated by port activities, offering job opportunities mainly to men. Thus, the city therefore attracted more male than female migrants, although

30 K. Pink, K. Willführ, E. Volland and P. Puschmann, 'Effects of individual mortality experiences on out of wedlock fertility in 18th and 19th century Krummhörn', *Human Nature* 31 (2020) 141-154.

31 P. Puschmann, *Social inclusion and exclusion of urban in-migrants in northwestern European port cities. Antwerp, Rotterdam & Stockholm, ca. 1850-1930* (Leuven 2015) 84-85.

32 Puschmann, *Social inclusion*, 87.

33 H. Greefs and A. Winter, 'Alone and far from home. Gender and migration trajectories of single foreign newcomers to Antwerp, 1850-1880', *Journal of Urban History* 42:1 (2016) 61-80, 64.

34 Greefs and Winter, 'Alone', 66-67.

35 H. Smedt, P. Stabel & I. Van Damme, 'Zilt succes. Functieverschuivingen van een stedelijke economie', in: I. Bertels, B. De Munck and H. Van Goethem (eds.), *Antwerpen. Biografie van een stad* (Antwerpen 2010) 109-144, 123; Greefs and Winter, 'Alone', 64.

the share of female migrants increased in the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁶ The influx of migrants and overall mobility were also stimulated by the rapid development of the railway system in Belgium and its neighboring countries.³⁷ Furthermore, rural push factors played a role. Rural livelihoods were threatened by increasing population pressure and declining rural employment opportunities, partly due to agricultural innovations.³⁸ Between 1750 and 1850 the rural population of Flanders almost doubled, resulting in decreasing average farm sizes.³⁹ Consequently the rural population had become increasingly reliant on the rural linen industry. However, as a result of the increasing mechanization of textile production and strong competition from England, especially the Flemish rural linen industry, which had employed around 300,000 people in 1840, had been virtually obliterated by 1850. The already dire situation was exacerbated by the rural crisis of the mid-1840s as a result of a series of harvest failures, which impacted not only Flanders but almost all of Europe.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, as various scholars have demonstrated, it was not necessarily those who suffered most from the economic changes and rural crisis who migrated. Instead, they argue that the dynamics of selectivity, traditions, and access to migration information and networks were seem-



Illustration 2 Picture of an Antwerp prostitute, +/- 1920-1925 (source: Isadfiche: BE SA 562689, Inventarisnummer: FOTO#50724, FelixArchief, Antwerpen.)

36 Greefs and Winter, 'Alone', 66.

37 Ibid., 68.

38 Ibid., 62-64, 74-75.

39 N. Deschacht and A. Winter, 'Rural crisis and rural exodus? Local migration dynamics during the crisis of the 1840s in Flanders (Belgium)', *Explorations in Economic History* 56 (2015) 32-52, 34; Winter and Greefs, 'Alone', 62.

40 Deschacht and Winter, 'Rural crisis?', 32-35.

ingly more decisive in stimulating migration than structural socio-economic differences.⁴¹

Antwerp's transition from a textile center to a port-city had negative consequences for the working classes. The transition resulted in lower real incomes, poorer living conditions, and economic insecurity.⁴² In 1850 approximately 40 percent of the Antwerp population lived in poverty.⁴³ Employment opportunities for the local population declined with the disappearance of textile industries. Newcomers took up employment in port-related sectors. The transition to a port economy was especially disastrous for women, who had previously often found employment in the textile industries. The share of women conducting paid work declined from 58.5 percent in 1796 to 41 percent in 1830. Moreover, more women were forced to work as waitresses, domestic servants, or prostitutes, due to declining employment opportunities for females.⁴⁴

Data and methodology

This paper is based on data from the Antwerp COR*-database, a representative letter sample of the total population that lived in what is known today as the Antwerp district between 1846 and 1920. The area comprises of the city of Antwerp, its suburbs (13 municipalities), and 48 rural municipalities, allowing comparisons of different geographical settings (e.g., rural versus urban).⁴⁵ It contains longitudinal micro-level information on 33,583 individuals.⁴⁶ All persons in the database have a last name starting with the letters 'Cor' or a partner (or another householder) with such a last name. The letter combination 'Cor' was selected by the database makers because individuals with surnames that started with these letters were equally distributed over the total nineteenth-century Flemish population. Moreover, COR*-persons are representative of various socio-demographic characteristics of the

41 Ibid., 48.

42 C. Lis, *Social change and the laboring poor: Antwerp 1770-1860* (New Haven 1986), 38; B. Blondé, M. Van Dijk and A. Vrints, 'Een probleemstad? Spanningsvelden tussen burgerlijke waarden en sociale realiteiten' in: Inge Bertels, Bert De Munck and Herman Van Goethem (eds), *Antwerpen. Biografie van een stad* (Antwerpen 2010) 277-307, 294.

43 Blondé, Van Dijk and Vrints, 'Een probleemstad?', 295, 300.

44 Lis, *Social change*, 31-32.

45 K. Matthijs and S. Moreels, 'The Antwerp COR*-database. A unique Flemish source for historical-demographic research', *The History of the Family* 15:1 (2010) 109-115, 110.

46 Puschmann, *Social inclusion*, 68.

Flemish population at the time. Last but not least, COR*-names also include a wide range of foreign immigrants. The database is based on data from population registers and vital registration records: birth, marriage, and death certificates (the latter sources, contrary to the population registers, go back to the early nineteenth century).⁴⁷

For this paper, data was used on mothers giving birth to their first child in the period 1821-1906. All women in the database were linked to their children in the database, which allowed 'reconstructing' the reproductive life course of these mothers. After deletion of cases with incomplete data on the target variables (civil status at birth, and, in the case of married women, a marriage date), this led to a dataset of 1,110 unique mothers. Next, a distinction was made between three types of mothers: (1) mothers who conceived exclusively within marriage, (2) mothers who experienced a bridal pregnancy, and (3) mothers who gave birth to at least one illegitimate child. To prevent a married woman who gave birth prematurely falling into the 'bridal pregnancy' category, a threshold of eight months after marriage was maintained. If the woman had given birth within these eight months after the wedding, she was labelled as a 'mother with a bridal pregnancy'. Hence, to be able to determine whether a married mother belonged to the bridal pregnancy category the wedding date was needed. Mothers with exclusively legitimate children but without a marriage date or lacking birth dates of their children were excluded from the analysis. Also removed were women whose life course was incomplete due to left-censoring, as they had potentially borne children outside of the observation area and/or period, making it impossible to categorize them accurately.

The three groups of mothers were compared regarding their age at first birth, social status, birthplace, place of residence, and migration background. Accordingly, the following variables were selected: date of birth of the mother, occupation of the mother, HISCO code for occupation of the mother, dates and places of birth of the children, and whether the children were legitimate or illegitimate. Next, the following variables were constructed: the birth order of each child, the migration status of the mother (by comparing birthplace to residence), the HISCAM score for the occupation of the mother, the age of the mother at giving birth, the age of the mother at marriage, and the time interval in months between the birth of the first illegitimate child and the date of marriage of the mother. The age at first birth is calculated as

47 Matthijs and Moreels, 'The Antwerp COR*-database', 109-115.

the difference in years between the date of the first recorded birth of a woman in the database and the date of birth of the woman. The age at first marriage is calculated in the same way using the date of the first marriage recorded in the database.

The social status of the mothers is determined by recoding the occupations of the mothers (coded in HISCO) into HISCAM. HISCAM stands for 'Historical CAMSIS' and is based on HISCO. HISCAM is an occupational stratification scale from 1 to 100. High occupations, such as doctor, receive a high score; lower occupations, such as domestic servant, get a low score.⁴⁸ For this paper a special HISCAM scale for women was used, that is, HISCAM VERSION 1.3.1 (NOVEMBER 2013), U3: Female only, 1800-1938.⁴⁹ Since some women had only one registered and others multiple occupations, we decided to use the occupation with the lowest HISCAM score for all women, as vulnerability at some point in the life course is expected to have been a cause of extramarital fertility. Since vulnerability may have been temporary, average or highest HISCAM-scores were considered as less appropriate for this analysis than the lowest HISCAM scores, because by focusing on average or highest HISCAM-scores we are more likely to miss vulnerable periods in the life course of women. The women's migration status was determined through a combination of her birth place and her residence at the birth of her first child (or the municipality of declaration of the first child). Three migration status categories were distinguished: (1) women who did not migrate, (2) women who migrated within the Belgian borders, and (3) foreign female migrants. Based on the same data, a distinction was also made by direction of migration (rural-rural, rural-urban, urban-rural, and urban-urban). In this regard, places that by the mid-nineteenth century consisted of at least 10,000 inhabitants were considered as urban, while places with fewer inhabitants were considered as rural.

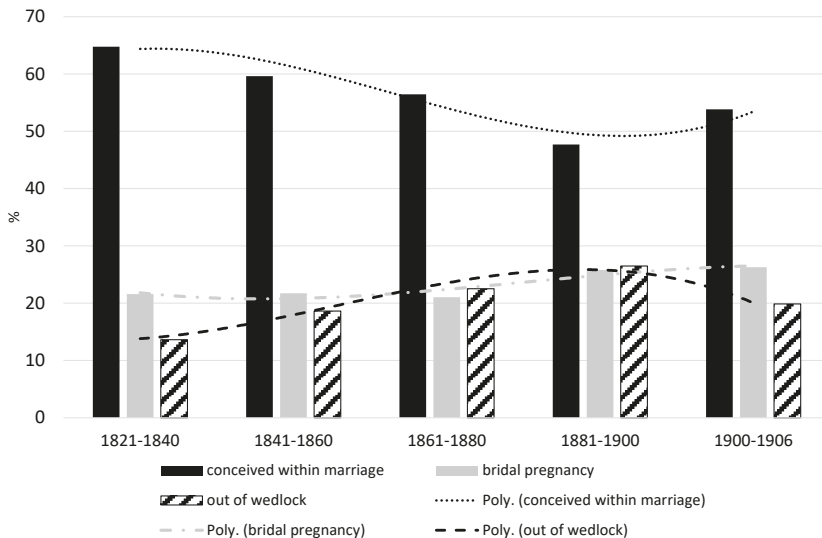
Using basic descriptive analyses, the distribution of all three types of mothers is visualized over time. Next, the three types of mothers are compared regarding their age when giving birth for the first time, social status, birthplace and place of residence, and migration background. Finally, within the 'out-of-wedlock' category basic descriptive analyses are presented concerning 'repeatership' and marriage opportunities.

48 P.S. Lambert, R.L. Zijdeman, M.H.P. van Leeuwen, I. Maas and K. Prandy, 'The construction of HISCAM. A stratification scale based on social interactions for historical comparative research', *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History* 46:2 (2013) 77-89; M. van Leeuwen, I. Maas and A. Miles, *HISCO: historical international standard classification of occupations* (Leuven 2002).

49 <https://www.camsis.stir.ac.uk/hiscam/>

Illegitimacy and bridal pregnancies in the Antwerp district

Graph 1 shows the distribution of (1) mothers who conceived exclusively within marriage, (2) mothers who experienced bridal pregnancies, and (3) mothers who gave birth out of wedlock, as well as its development over time between 1821 and 1906. Between 1821 and 1840, some 65 percent of all mothers conceived exclusively within marriage, around 22 percent experienced a bridal pregnancy, and slightly less than 14 percent gave birth to at least one illegitimate child. In the following decades, however, when Antwerp transformed from a regional textile center into a port city, the shares of bridal pregnancies and illegitimacy would rise and reach, respectively, 26 and 27 percent during the final two decades of the nineteenth century. By then, more than half of all mothers had conceived out of wedlock. Then, in the first years of the twentieth century, illegitimacy numbers declined again. The increase of illegitimacy and bridal pregnancy ratios in the nineteenth century and their decline at the beginning of the twentieth century correspond with the overall trend of illegitimacy and bridal



Graph 1 The distribution of mothers in three categories: (1) those who conceived exclusively within marriage, (2) those who experienced a bridal pregnancy, and (3) those who gave birth out of wedlock, by year of the firstborn child in the data, including polynomial trend lines, 1821-1906. Source: Antwerp COR*-database, release 2010; N=1.110

pregnancies in Belgium.⁵⁰ Moreover, research has shown that the fall in illegitimate fertility was paralleled by a decline in marital fertility in Belgium as well as the rest of Europe, indicating that the decline of illegitimate fertility was part of the so-called demographic transition.⁵¹

Characteristics of unwed mothers and mothers with bridal pregnancies

Age at first birth and age at first marriage

The average age at first birth of the different types of mothers as displayed in graph 2 provides an indication of whether illegitimacy and bridal pregnancies were the result of sexual intercourse in anticipation of marriage or not. If the age at first birth in illegitimate births and bridal pregnancies differed strongly from the age at births conceived within marriage, we interpret this as a deviation from social standards.⁵² In the period 1821-1906, the average age at first birth of married mothers was 27.2. Mothers with bridal pregnancies were on average 24 years old at first birth and unmarried mothers on average 22.9. Through the entire research period, unmarried mothers were on average substantially younger at first birth than were married mothers (results not shown, available upon request).

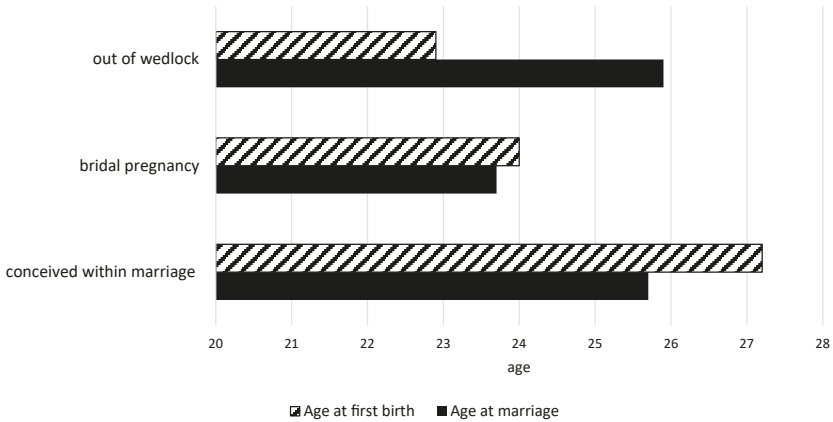
Likewise, the age at marriage can serve as another indication of whether bridal pregnancies and out-of-wedlock births were the result of sexual intercourse in anticipation of marriage or not.⁵³ Between 1821 and 1920, mothers who conceived exclusively within marriage on average married at the age of 25.7 (graph 2). If marriage and illegitimacy were both consequences of courtship, one would expect that women having a bridal pregnancy or illegitimate birth would experience this at the age when most women married. However, this seems not to have been the case in the Antwerp district. The average age at first birth of unmarried mothers was considerably lower than the average age at marriage in general. The strikingly low average age at first birth of unmarried mothers suggests that most of them had

50 C. Vandenbroeke, 'Het seksueel gedrag der jongeren in Vlaanderen sinds de late 16^e eeuw', *Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis* 62 (1979) 193-230, 209; E. Shorter, J. Knodel and E. Van De Walle, 'The decline of non-marital fertility in Europe, 1880-1940', *Population Studies* 25:3 (1971) 375-393, 375-378.

51 Shorter, Knodel and Van De Walle, 'The decline of non-marital fertility', 375-378.

52 Van den Boomen and Puschmann, 'Born out of wedlock', 556.

53 Ibid.



Graph 2 Average age at first birth (1821-1906) and at first marriage (1821-1920).
 Source: Antwerp COR*-database; release 2010, N=1,110



Illustration 3 A wedding in Antwerp, 1875.
 Source: FOTO-OF#9895, FelixArchief, Antwerpen

not yet reached an age when marriage was economically feasible and socially accepted. Moreover, graph 2 shows that mothers of illegitimate children who did marry eventually, were on average around the same age as married mothers or slightly older. This suggests that mothers of illegitimate children only ‘repaired the mistake’ at a later age. Mothers

who experienced a bridal pregnancy were to a lesser extent younger at first birth. Moreover, the average age at marriage of women who experienced a bridal pregnancy was considerably lower than that of women who conceived exclusively within marriage. Furthermore, the evolution of the average age at marriage of pregnant brides and non-pregnant brides followed roughly the same trend throughout the research period (not displayed). The younger age of mothers with bridal pregnancies at first birth and marriage suggests that they deviated less from social norms and mostly became pregnant from sexual intercourse in anticipation of marriage. The pregnancy only brought the wedding forward. By contrast, the women who gave birth to an illegitimate child started having sexual intercourse much earlier, which was a clear deviation from the social norm.

Social status

Illegitimacy was found mainly among the working classes.⁵⁴ To assess whether this feature also applied in the Antwerp district, the HISCAM score based on the lowest registered occupation of the women was analyzed. For 25.3 percent of the 1,110 mothers there was no occupation available. Graph 3 shows the distribution of the three types of mothers within three HISCAM categories. Graph 3 shows that the unmarried mothers belonged predominantly to lower social classes (HISCAM 40-51), which corresponds with the findings in other regions.⁵⁵ A possible explanation for this predominantly low social status of unmarried mothers is economic vulnerability. Due to low incomes and insecure employment, women from the lower social classes had poor bargaining power during courtship.⁵⁶ Tilly *et al.* argued that insecure employment and low income compelled young women to find mates and engage in sexual intercourse earlier as a way of expressing their wish to marry.⁵⁷ Several historians have furthermore pointed out that lower classes had slightly different sexual norms, and that they had less to lose financially and concerning their reputation. Parental control was therefore less

54 Van Bavel, 'Family control', 463; Schumacher, Ryczkowska, and Perroux, 'Unwed mothers', 195-196; Devos, De Langhe and Mechant, 'Regionale verschillen in het leven van ongehuwde moeders op het platteland in de zuidelijke Nederlanden, 1730-1846', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 8:1 (2011) 2-28, 12.

55 Van Bavel, 'Family control', 463; Schumacher, Ryczkowska and Perroux, 'Unwed mothers', 195-196; Devos, De Langhe and Mechant, 'Regionale verschillen', 12.

56 Alter, *Family and the female life course*, 120.

57 Tilly, Scott and Cohen, 'Women's work', 464-465, 473, 476.

strict.⁵⁸ Others, such as Margo De Koster, have argued that working class parents did value their reputation and that of their daughters, as a good reputation and a healthy relationship with one's family and community was important to ensure a social safety net for less fortunate times.⁵⁹ Moreover, Bart De Wilde has argued that the idea of the working classes having looser sexual norms is exaggerated and that extramarital fertility was also surrounded with fear among the working classes, especially with regard to illegitimate pregnancies.⁶⁰ It is possible that 'double standards' among the working classes, as argued by Alter, caused women in urban social classes to take more risk concerning premarital sexuality out of fear of staying single.⁶¹

Since most unmarried mothers were from lower classes, the observed rise of illegitimacy during the second half of the nineteenth century (graph 1) might correspond with the proletarianization of the Antwerp hinterlands and the transition of Antwerp from a textile center to a port city, which increased impoverishment and economic insecurity and reduced employment opportunities for women.⁶² More women started working as domestic servants, waitresses, and prostitutes, which are considered high-risk occupations. However, several historians have contested the fact that prostitutes and domestic servants ran a higher risk of illegitimate childbearing. Illegitimacy is often not strongly correlated to prostitution, since prostitutes mostly used contraceptives.⁶³ Moreover, Reto Schumacher *et al.* stated that the relationship between domestic servants and illegitimacy should not be generalized; for Geneva they showed that servants did not run a higher risk of illegitimate childbearing.⁶⁴ Another explanation is that, due to proletarianization and increased economic insecurity, couples increasingly lacked the money to get married, causing more men to break their promise of marriage or couples to postpone marriage or

58 Laslett, 'The bastardy prone sub-society', 226; Schumacher, Ryczkowska and Perroux, 'Unwed mothers', 199-200.

59 Margo De Koster, 'Ongepast gedrag van jonge vrouwen en (generatie)conflicten. Ouderlijke klachten over onhandelbare dochters bij de kinderrechter van Antwerpen in 1912-1913 en 1924-1925', *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis* 8 (2001) 101-131, there 112.

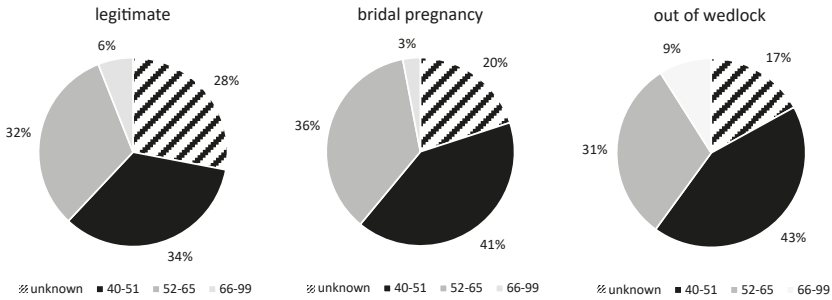
60 B. De Wilde, 'Seks op en naast de werkvloer. De seksualiteitsbeleving van arbeiders en de houding van de vakbewegingen', in: D. De Weerd (ed.) *Begeerte heeft ons aangeraakt. Socialisten, sekse en seksualiteit* (Gent 1999) 143-78, 153.

61 Alter, *Family and the female life course*, 116-118.

62 Lis, *Social change*, 28; Blondé, Van Dijck and Vrints, 'Een probleemstad?' 294-295, 300; Greefs and Winter, 'Alone', 55, 64.

63 Kok, 'Deconstructing illegitimacy', 160.

64 Schumacher, Ryczkowska and Perroux, 'Unwed mothers', 200.



Graph 3 Social status of the different types of mothers: (1) legitimate birth (2) bridal pregnancy (3) out-of-wedlock birth.

Source: Antwerp COR*-database, release 2010; N=1.110

refrain from it.⁶⁵ Altogether, these results suggest that economically and socially vulnerable women were at a higher risk of illegitimacy.

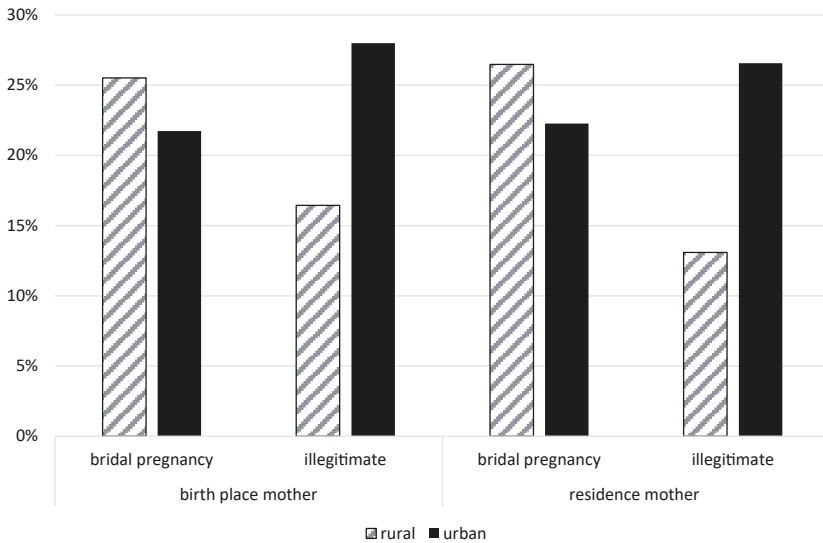
The distribution of social status is not that different within the bridal pregnancy category. However, what stands out is that the share of mothers belonging to the higher social classes was larger among the unmarried mothers compared to those who experienced a bridal pregnancy. Most likely in the higher (middle) classes sexual intercourse was less acceptable courtship behaviour compared to the lower classes. Various historians have demonstrated, also for Antwerp, that the (upper) middle classes upheld more prudish sexual norms than the working classes.⁶⁶ Consequently, pregnancies resulting from extramarital sexual intercourse among the higher social classes had a higher chance of resulting in rejection on the marriage market or no help from parents to bring their daughters to marriage. Moreover, in the higher classes biological offspring were important as there was a lot for children to inherit, and men wanted to make sure that only biological children would inherit from them. Perhaps if the chastity of higher-class women was doubted, marriage was more likely waived altogether. This shows that vulnerability was not purely economical, but that strict sexual norms and values of one's surroundings limited women's agency and made them vulnerable.

Rural-urban differences

The results concerning birthplace and place of residence show that illegitimacy in the Antwerp district was primarily an urban phenomenon (graph 4). For 99.5 percent of the mothers the place of birth is known.

65 Tilly, Scott and Cohen, 'Women's work', 461-468; Alter, *Family and the female life course*, 120, 139; Kok, *Langs verboden wegen*, 16-17.

66 Vrints, 'De retoriek', 351; Hoebeke, 'Sex and the City', 12, 17, 117-122.



Graph 4 Rural-urban differences in terms of the total share of illegitimate births and bridal pregnancies. Source: Antwerp COR*-database, release 2010; N = 1,104 (6 cases have been excluded due to an unknown birthplace of the mother)

Graph 4 shows that the share of unmarried mothers born in urban areas was considerably higher than the share of unmarried mothers born in the countryside. These women grew up in an urban context, an environment in which illegitimacy was more common. Furthermore, as argued by Alter, it was an environment that upheld a double standard.⁶⁷ Moreover, the urban working class possibly had different, looser sexual norms.⁶⁸ Possibly, these women therefore grew up experiencing less stigma surrounding premarital and extramarital pregnancies, which likely increased the possibility that they would partake in such behaviour themselves. By contrast, the share of bridal pregnancies was somewhat higher in rural areas compared to urban areas.

The right side of graph 4 shows the percentages of unmarried mothers and bridal pregnancies by rural and urban residence, at the first pregnancy. In 84 percent of the cases, the mother's place of residence was stated on the child's birth certificate. For the 16 percent lacking an explicit residence, we inferred that the woman resided in

67 Alter, *Family and the female life course*, 120-121.

68 J. Carlier, 'Fragmenten van een verborgen geschiedenis van de seksualiteit. Mentaliteitshistorische analyse van het discours in Antwerpse strafdossiers uit het Interbellum', in: *Verlagen van het Centrum voor Genderstudies* (Gent 2007) XVI, 54; Vrints, 'De retoriek van de rottigheid', 351-352, 371-372; Schumacher, Ryczkowska, and Perroux, 'Unwed mothers', 199-200.

the municipality where the birth certificate was drawn up. Again, the share of unmarried mothers living in cities was higher compared to those living in the countryside. Of the mothers who lived in an urban area at their first birth (in the data), 26.5 percent gave birth to an illegitimate child, versus only 13.1 percent of the mothers living in a rural area. The division between rural and urban residence for women with bridal pregnancies was similar to what we observed for the place of birth: the share of bridal pregnancies was higher among the women who lived in the countryside than among the women living in urban areas. This difference makes it seem plausible that, in the countryside, women who became pregnant were more often able to force the baby's father to marry them. All in all, these results suggest that unmarried motherhood was predominantly an urban phenomenon. Therefore, the rise of illegitimacy in the nineteenth-century Antwerp district can be explained largely from an urban context. The anonymity of the city made it easier for men to impregnate women without marrying them.

Migration

Migrants have often been associated with (the rise in) illegitimacy. The question thus arises whether migrant women in the Antwerp district were indeed at an increased risk of conceiving out of wedlock. Interestingly, the share of single female migrants in the city of Antwerp did increase at a time when illegitimacy peaked. Anne Winter claimed that female migrants in the city of Antwerp were at a higher risk of bearing an illegitimate child.⁶⁹ Winter and Greefs point out that a majority of the single female migrants in Antwerp were either domestic servants or prostitutes, both considered as high-risk occupations.⁷⁰ Were migrant women indeed at an increased risk of having an illegitimate child?

The migration status of 99.5 percent of the mothers was traceable in the database. Unfortunately, the number of (uncensored) foreign immigrants in the sample's birth certificates is relatively small (N=40). The results should therefore be interpreted with caution. The number of domestic migrants is considerably larger (N=469). Table 1 shows the distribution of the three categories of mothers by migration status and type. Surprisingly, the share of legitimately born children was lower among non-migrant women compared to both domestic and international migrants, while the share of bridal pregnancies was higher among non-migrants. From the latter we may assume that native-born

69 A. Winter, *Migrants and urban change. Newcomers to Antwerp, 1760-1860* (London 2009) 132.

70 Winter and Greefs, 'Alone', 70.

women succeeded somewhat more easily in marrying the man who had impregnated them outside of marriage, especially compared to international migrant women, whose share of bridal pregnancies was relatively low, although their share of illegitimate children was very high indeed: about one in three international migrant women gave birth to a child out of wedlock. Perhaps this was a consequence of the weaker integration of international migrants in local social networks in comparison to domestic migrants, as Van Bavel argued for Leuven.⁷¹ These factors played a smaller role with regional migrants, because they often already had a social network in the area.⁷² Lastly, various scholars have pointed out obstacles to marriage, such as lacking the necessary documents (an issue especially for foreign migrants), which simply prevented couples who were in stable relationships, and possibly even cohabiting, from marrying.⁷³

Table 1 Mothers by birth type and by migration status.

	Legitimate	Illegitimate	bridal pregnancy	Total
<i>no migration (N=595)</i>	49.1%	26.1%	24.9%	100%
<i>domestic migration (N=469)</i>	60.3%	17.1%	22.6%	100%
<i>international migration (N=40)</i>	52.5%	32.5%	15.0%	100%
<i>rural-rural (N=128)</i>	72.7%	3.9%	23.4%	100%
<i>rural-urban (N=230)</i>	54.8%	20.4%	24.8%	100%
<i>urban-rural (N=36)</i>	61.1%	11.1%	27.8%	100%
<i>urban-urban (N=115)</i>	54.8%	32.2%	13.0%	100%

Source: Antwerp COR*-database, release 2010; N=1,104 (6 cases have been excluded due to an unknown birthplace of the mother).

The lower part of table 1 provides further insights into the different types of migration. Unmarried mothers with a migration background had the largest share within the urban-to-urban category. This suggests that illegitimacy was primarily an urban phenomenon. Furthermore, a relatively large portion of unmarried mothers with a migration

71 Van Bavel, 'Family control', 465; P. Puschmann, P. Grönberg, R. Schumacher and K. Matthijs, 'Access to marriage and reproduction among migrants in Antwerp and Stockholm. A longitudinal approach to processes of social inclusion and exclusion, 1846-1926', *The History of the Family* 19:1 (2014) 29-52.

72 B. De Munck, H. Greefs and A. Winter, 'Poorten en papieren. Diversiteit en integratie in historisch perspectief', in: Inge Bertels, Bert De Munck and Herman Van Goethem (eds), *Antwerpen. Biografie van een stad* (Antwerpen 2010) 211-343, 227.

73 Kok and Leinarte, 'Cohabitation', 494-498.

background migrated from the countryside to the city. In a similar vein, mothers with bridal pregnancies often migrated from the countryside to the city or vice versa. These results suggest that Tilly, Scott and Cohen's explanation that women from the countryside continued rural courtship practices in urban environments applies here, too. Due to cities' anonymity and lack of social control, promises of marriage were broken more easily.⁷⁴ However, another possibility is that (a portion of) these women decided to move to the city after getting pregnant in the countryside. By moving from the rural home community to the large and anonymous city, they may have managed to avoid the shame of giving birth to a child out of wedlock in the vicinity of family, friends, and neighbors. Further research is necessary to understand whether rural-urban and urban-urban migration among this group of women was a cause or a consequence of premarital sexuality. Lastly, mothers with bridal pregnancies migrated from one rural area to another relatively often. Possibly these mothers also experienced shame and therefore left their village, but instead of moving to the city they moved to another village, because they and/or their partner had a rural livelihood, for example as an agricultural laborer.

Sustained vulnerability?

Illegitimacy was generally frowned upon and may therefore have had negative consequences for both mother and child.⁷⁵ In order to evaluate whether illegitimacy indeed led to sustained vulnerability over the life course, we will evaluate the marriage prospects of women with an illegitimate child, as well as the interval between the first birth and the first marriage, as the latter can serve as a proxy of whether the marriage partner was the father of the child: the longer the interval, the more likely it is that the marriage partner was not the father.⁷⁶

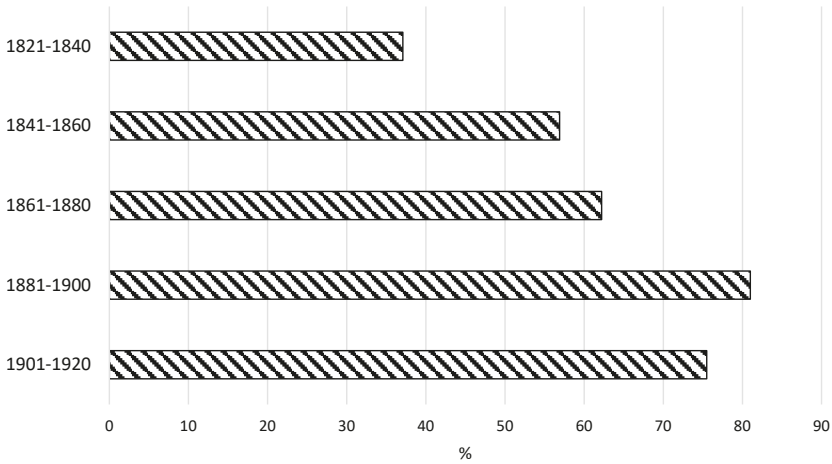
Marriage opportunities

A mother was classified as 'married' if a wedding date was available in the database. There were in total 233 unique mothers of illegitimate children who eventually married. An important limitation is that mothers who married later in life, after moving outside the Antwerp district and

⁷⁴ Tilly, Scott and Cohen, 'Women's work', 464-467.

⁷⁵ Devos, De Langhe and Mechant, 'Regionale verschillen', 21.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.



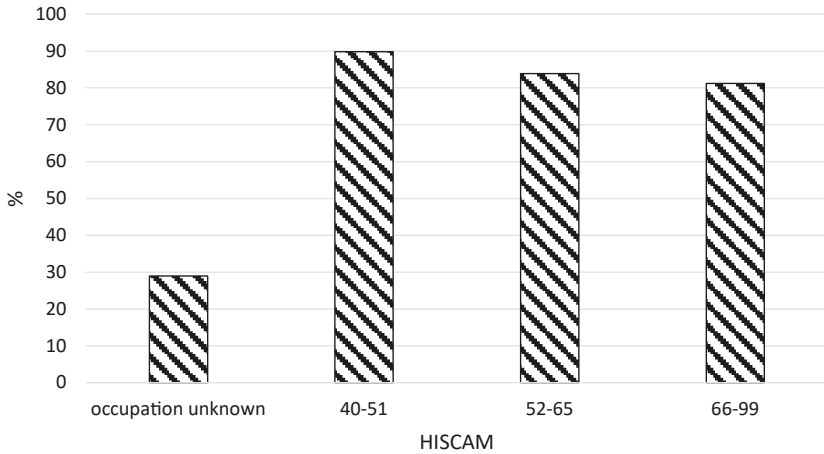
Graph 5 Percentage of mothers with an illegitimate child who married, 1821-1920.

Source: Antwerp COR*-database, release 2010

thus out of the area of data collection for the COR*-database, are not mentioned in the database. Furthermore, no information was collected for the period after 1920, and therefore marriages that took place after 1920 are not included. However, the number of mothers who married after 1920 was probably small, since the last birth in the database occurred in 1906. Due to these minor limitations the figures presented are minimum percentages; in reality they may have been even higher.

Graph 5 shows that the percentage of the mothers of illegitimate children who eventually married was high (67.1%). Moreover, an increase during the nineteenth century is observed, followed by a slight decrease at the beginning of the twentieth century. The high percentages of mothers of illegitimate children who eventually married suggests that the presumed 'disastrous' effects of having an illegitimate child were somewhat overestimated. Evidently these women were not completely disregarded as marriage partners. In addition, these rising percentages suggest that illegitimacy became more acceptable in the course of the nineteenth century. A possible explanation is the transition of Antwerp from a textile center to a port city. Port labor predominantly attracted male migrants, especially during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Most likely this male dominance gave less socially desirable women, such as unmarried mothers, a better position in the marriage market.⁷⁷ From the late nineteenth century

⁷⁷ A. Winter, *Migrants and urban change*, 132.



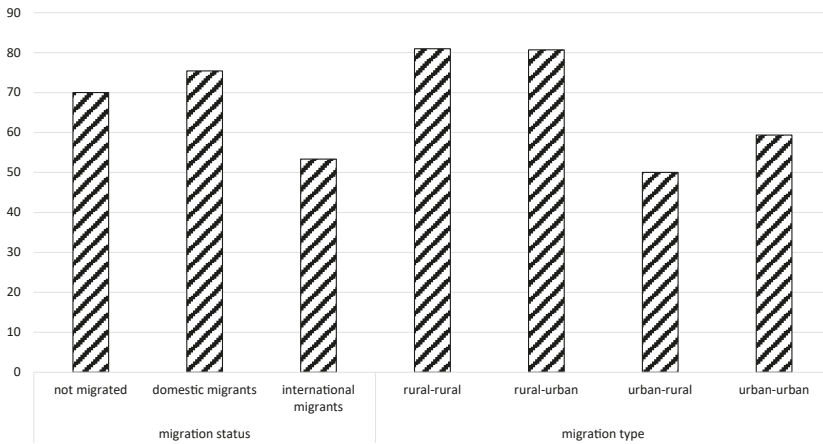
Graph 6 Percentage of mothers with an illegitimate child who married, by social status, 1821-1920. Source: Antwerp COR*-database, release 2010

onward, male dominance among migrants declined. Perhaps this decline contributed to the observed decline in marriage rates among mothers with an illegitimate child seen between 1901 and 1920. Another possible explanation for the declining marriage percentages among mothers with illegitimate children was World War I, which led to a (general) postponement of marriages in Belgium.⁷⁸

Graph 6 shows the percentages of mothers with illegitimate children who married, by social status. The results show a clear pattern: mothers from lower classes had better chances of getting married than mothers from higher classes. Most likely, illegitimacy was perceived as more unacceptable in the higher classes than in the lower classes, resulting in a more negative impact on marriage opportunities. What is striking, however, is the low marriage percentage of mothers whose occupation was unknown. Perhaps this group encompasses the mothers with the most precarious (financial) situation: jobless or in unregistered professions, such as prostitution.

Graph 7 displays the percentage of women with an illegitimate child who married, by migration status and type. As mentioned previously, international immigrants generally had lower marriage chances due to the lack of a social network, their unpopularity among natives as a

⁷⁸ S. Hin, P. Puschmann and K. Matthijs, 'From surviving the war trenches to storming the gender barricades? Marriage patterns in Belgium in the early twentieth century and the impact of war on gender relations', in: S. Brée and S. Hin (eds), *The impact of World War I on marriages, divorces, and gender relations in Europe* (New York 2019) 93-118, 99.



Graph 7 Percentage of mothers with an illegitimate child who married by migration status and migration type, 1821-1920. Source: Antwerp COR*-database, release 2010

result of cultural differences, and problems concerning necessary legal documents.⁷⁹ It is therefore not surprising that the marriage percentage of mothers with illegitimate children with an international migration background is considerably lower than those of their native peers. The percentages of domestic migrants are more similar to those without any migration background and even slightly higher. The most obvious explanation is that domestic migrants differed less from the native Antwerp population in terms of cultural traits (i.e., language, customs, and norms and values) than international migrants.⁸⁰ Moreover, as most internal migrants in Antwerp came from its hinterlands, they possibly often had some social connections in Antwerp when they arrived, which potentially enhanced their position in the marriage market.

The right side of graph 7 shows that for women who migrated from one rural area to another, and for women who migrated from the countryside to the city, marriage percentages were particularly high. This suggests that social control did not play a major role in marriage opportunities. However, it may also be an indication that women who migrated were not necessarily socially isolated. Striking are the low marriage rates among urban-to-rural female migrants. It seems that women with an illegitimate child who moved from the city to the countryside were disregarded as potential marriage partner by rural dwellers.

79 Puschmann, Grönberg, Schumacher and Matthijs, 'Access to marriage', 35-36, 42, 46; Schumacher Ryczkowska and Perroux, 'Unwed mothers', 194.

80 Greefs and Winter, 'Alone', 64; De Munck, Greefs and Winter, 'Poorten en papieren', 227.

The interval between birth and marriage

The interval between the birth of an illegitimate child and marriage of its mother can provide further insights into the influence of having an illegitimate child on women's marriage prospects. The larger the interval, the greater the chance that the mother did not marry the child's father and was urged to find another partner.⁸¹ Table 2 shows that 16.1 percent of all mothers of an illegitimate child married within one year after having given birth. Of the mothers of an illegitimate child who eventually married, 24.1 percent married within one year after giving birth. It is very likely that these mothers married the father of their child. Arguably, these children were more prenuptial than illegitimate. Perhaps financial circumstances prevented these couples from marrying before childbirth.⁸² The largest share of women with an illegitimate child who married did so between two and five years after the baby was born; 22.4 percent of those women who eventually married did so five or more years after the birth of the child. The likelihood that these women were marrying the biological father of their first child was lowest. Most likely they were mainly women who had had to find another marriage partner.

Table 2 Interval between birth of the illegitimate child and marriage of the mother, 1821-1920

	% of all mothers of an illegitimate child	% of all mothers of illegitimate child who married
0-1 year	16.1	24.1
1-2 years	13.0	19.4
2-5 year	22.8	34.1
> 5 years	15.0	22.4
Sum	66.9	100.0

Source: Antwerp COR*-database, release 2010.

In sum, the results concerning marriage opportunities of illegitimate mothers indicate that bearing an illegitimate child did not have disastrous consequences for marriage opportunities. At least illegitimate mothers were not strongly shunned on the marriage market. For further research it would be interesting to look at the men

81 Devos, De Langhe and Mechant, 'Regionale verschillen', 23.

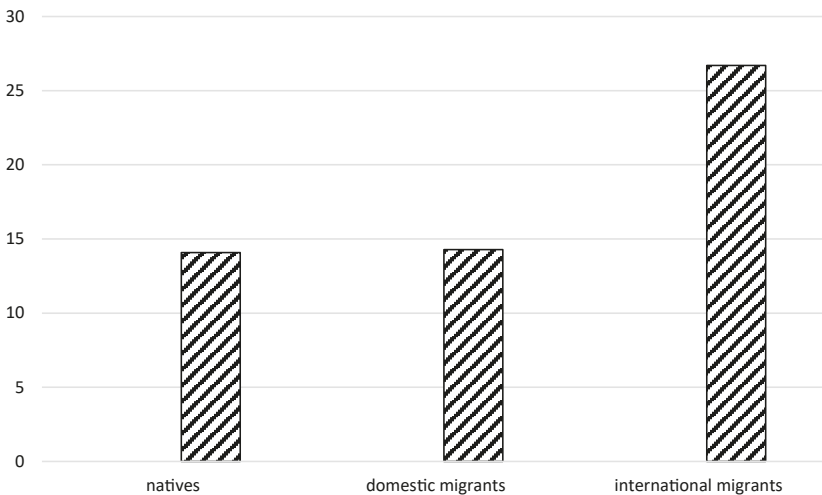
82 Ibid.

these women married. Perhaps these mothers married less socially attractive partners due to their illegitimate child.

A bastardy-prone sub-society?

According to Laslett, repeaters – women who give birth to more than one illegitimate child – are an indication for the presence of a bastardy-prone sub-society.⁸³ Out of all unmarried mothers, 14.4 percent had multiple illegitimate children. Graph 8 suggests that mothers with an international migration background were more likely to be repeaters. However, the number of mothers in this subcategory was small (N= 15). The difference in repeatership between natives and domestic migrants was negligible.

Laslett argues that repeaters were part of a marginal societal group that displayed alternative sexual behaviour.⁸⁴ It is debatable, however, whether repeaters indeed represented an intentional defiance of social norms. For example, Kok has argued for the province North Holland that repeaters did not form a sexual subculture, but were simply unable to meet social norms due to a weak position in the marriage market.⁸⁵

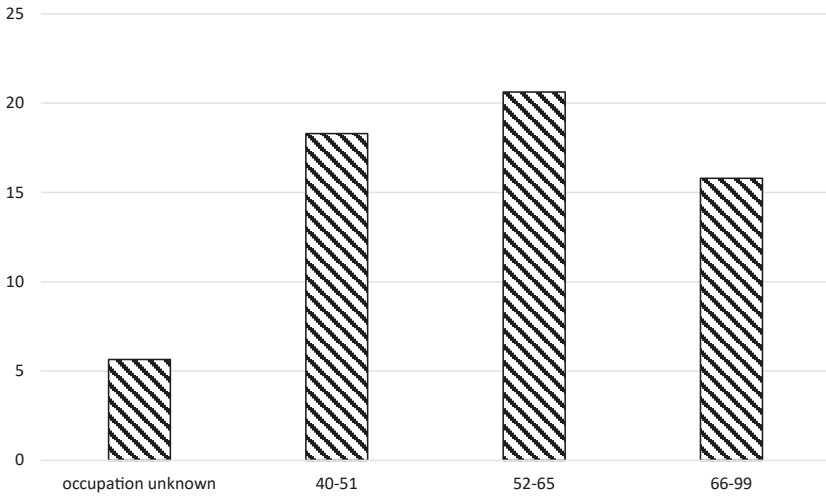


Graph 8 Percentage of repeaters by migration status.
Source: Antwerp COR*-database, release 2010.

83 Laslett, 'The bastardy prone sub-society'.

84 Ibid.

85 Kok, *Langs verboden wegen*, 145.



Graph 9 Repeatership by social status (HISCAM).
Source: Antwerp COR*-database, release 2010.

Others have pointed to the role of cohabitation. Sandra Bree for example found that a large share of the illegitimate births in nineteenth-century Paris can be attributed to cohabitation, or at least to unmarried couples.⁸⁶ Cohabitation was not uncommon among the urban working classes, due to financial and legal marriage obstacles. Certain groups, such as soldiers, were forbidden to marry. It is thus possible that mothers with multiple illegitimate children were not sexually deviant, but were in a stable long-term relationship. As demonstrated, international migrants were repeaters relatively often, perhaps because they often faced various difficulties when getting married, as with the application for and delivery of necessary legal documents.⁸⁷

Graph 9 shows that, remarkably, it were not the women with the lowest social status but those from the middle category who had an increased likelihood of giving birth to multiple illegitimate children. The results show no clear evidence of economic vulnerability as an explanation for having more than one illegitimate child. Therefore it is more plausible that for these women 'repeatership' was mainly the result of stable consensual relationships which, because of various

86 S. Bree, *Paris l'inféconde. La limitation des naissances en région parisienne au XIXe siècle* (Paris 2017).

87 Puschmann, Grönberg, Schumacher and Matthijs, 'Access to marriage', 35-36, 46; Schumacher, Ryczkowska and Perroux, 'Unwed mothers', 194. Kok, *Langs verboden wegen*, 145.

obstacles, did not lead to marriage. This requires further investigation, however, which falls beyond the scope of this article. As we have seen in graph 6, women with an unknown occupation had little chance of marrying. Nevertheless, their likelihood of having a second illegitimate child was very low. This suggests that many women with an unknown occupation did not conceive within a stable relationship and also did not engage in a new relationship but remained alone, making them a particularly vulnerable group.

Conclusion

By studying the reproductive life courses of 1,110 mothers in the Antwerp district between 1821 and 1920 using data in the Antwerp COR*-database, we sought to unravel whether unmarried mothers and women with bridal pregnancies formed a vulnerable group in society. First, we compared the profiles of unmarried mothers, mothers who experienced bridal pregnancies, and mothers who were married at the time of conception. In their characteristics and behaviours, unmarried mothers seemingly deviated more from married mothers (and therefore the social norm) than from mothers with bridal pregnancies. Illegitimacy was primarily an urban phenomenon occurring mainly among lower social classes. Married mothers and their peers with bridal pregnancies showed many similarities. These similarities and the observed slightly younger age at marriage of women with bridal pregnancies suggest that premarital conception was predominantly the result of stable relationships and sex in anticipation of a marriage, and that the pregnancy only motivated marrying earlier.

Numerous historians have highlighted sexual activity in anticipation of a marriage that never happened as an important cause of increasing illegitimacy.⁸⁸ The results presented here demonstrate, however, that unmarried mothers were on average considerably younger than their married peers at first birth, making this explanation unlikely in this context. The results rather suggest that the rise of illegitimacy in the Antwerp district was mainly due to (economic) vulnerability and the related weak bargaining position during courtship. It is no coincidence that the rise of illegitimacy coincided with Antwerp's transition from a regional textile center to a port city and the proletarianization

88 Tilly, Scott and Cohen, 'Women's work', 465; Devos, De Langhe and Mechant, 'Regionale verschillen', 13; Fairchild, 'Female sexual attitudes', 643, 650-651.

of its hinterland. This economic transition caused lower incomes, increased economic instability and fewer job opportunities for women. Our findings therefore align with the conclusions of historians who emphasize the role of economic insecurity, anonymity and mobility in the cities.⁸⁹ Low wages and poverty might indeed, as argued by Tilly *et al.*, have motivated women to find a partner earlier, which also explains the strikingly young age of unmarried women at the birth of their child.⁹⁰

Migrants have frequently been associated with (the rise in) illegitimacy, mainly due to their alleged social isolation. We investigated whether women with a migration background were indeed more prone to premarital and extramarital fertility. Our results showed that international migrant women indeed had a higher share of illegitimate births. However, the share of illegitimate children of domestic migrants was even lower than that of native Antwerp women. This makes it plausible that domestic female migrants maintained a social network and in most cases were less vulnerable than native women. The category of rural-to-urban migrants may have been an exception to this, as these women had a relatively high share of illegitimate children. It may be, as argued by Tilly *et al.*, that rural-to-urban migrants continued their rural courtship practices in the city.⁹¹

As underlined by Schumacher *et al.*, vulnerability might not only be a cause but also a consequence of out-of-wedlock fertility.⁹² However, our analysis of the marriage opportunities of mothers with an illegitimate child suggests, in contrast to what is often argued by historians, that the disastrous effects of giving birth out of wedlock for the women's subsequent life course should not be exaggerated, at least not regarding marriage opportunities. An exception were the international migrant women who often remained unmarried and often gave birth to multiple illegitimate children. For this specific group of women illegitimacy might have been part of a negative vicious cycle. An alternative explanation, however, is that these women were in stable consensual relationships but simply lacked the means or documents to marry, which, as other historians have argued, was not unusual for foreign migrants.⁹³ An especially insightful result is that unmarried mothers from higher social classes had lower chances of securing a marriage

89 Tilly, Scott and Cohen, 'Women's work', 454-465; Fairchilds, 'Female sexual attitudes', 633-654.

90 Tilly, Scott and Cohen, 'Women's work', 464-465, 473, 476.

91 *Ibid.*, 452, 464-470, 475-476.

92 Schumacher, Ryczkowska and Perroux, 'Illegitimate fertility', 190-191.

93 Kok, 'Deconstructing illegitimacy', 160-163; Kok and Leinarte, 'Cohabitation', 494-498.

partner later in life than women from lower classes. Illegitimate fertility was likely considered less acceptable among higher social classes, resulting in a more negative impact on their marriage opportunities and life chances. This indicates that vulnerability is not only the result of poverty but is also determined by dependency on others. Stricter sexual norms in certain circles of society made women from those social classes more susceptible to rejection by their surroundings when failing to adhere to those norms.

Lastly, we examined the ‘profile’ of women who gave birth to multiple illegitimate children to see if there are indications that those women belonged to a bastardy-prone sub-society. Overall, the results suggest that ‘repeatership’ was the result of stable consensual relationships and cohabitation that did not lead to marriage due to a variety of obstacles. All things considered, there are no indications that illegitimacy in the Antwerp district marked an early sexual revolution among working-class women, as argued by Shorter, or that the rise in illegitimacy in the district can be ascribed to the presence of a bastardy-prone sub-society, as argued by Laslett.

All in all, this paper has found evidence in support of the vulnerability hypothesis for the Antwerp district as put forward by a variety of scholars and has provided valuable insights into the consequences of illegitimate fertility for women’s marriage opportunities. The rise in illegitimacy in the Antwerp district seems to have resulted from a group of vulnerable women in society that was growing as a consequence of economic transformations.

This research was only a first step in unravelling the causes and consequences of illegitimacy in the nineteenth-century Antwerp district. The logical next step is to turn to multivariate analysis, although this would require an expansion of the database. Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate who unmarried women lived and migrated with – before their extramarital pregnancy – to test the social isolation hypothesis and explore the role of cohabitation. It is useful, for example, to distinguish between women with illegitimate children that were recognized and those whose children were not, as recognition can serve as an indicator of the birth being the result of a stable relationship and perhaps even cohabitation. Furthermore, it is important to look at other life course transitions, apart from marriage, of women and their offspring, such as social mobility and mortality, to get a more complete picture of the long-term consequences of out-of-wedlock

fertility. Finally, it would be interesting to explore the socio-economic and demographic background of the male counterparts: the men these women married eventually, the men who legitimized the child, or the men the women were living with.

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