

UNIVERSIDAD DE CANTABRIA

UNIVERSIDAD DE LOVAINA

PROGRAMA DE DOCTORADO EN GEOGRAFÍA E HISTORIA



TESIS DOCTORAL

**El desmantelamiento de las
fronteras. Análisis comparativo de
las actividades mercantiles de las
mujeres en Brabante y Vizcaya, ca.
1420-ca. 1550**

PHD THESIS

**Dismantling the borders.
A comparative Analysis of Women's
Market Activities in Brabant and
Biscay, ca. 1420-ca. 1550**

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Santander 2021

DISMANTLING THE BORDERS

A Comparative Analysis of Women's Market Activities
in Brabant and Biscay, ca. 1420—ca. 1550

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor in History



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Leuven, 2021



For Jeroen.

For helping me to get where I am today.

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Acknowledgements

They say writing a PhD is a lonely business. But nothing could be further from the truth. Throughout these years, even amid a pandemic, I have always been surrounded by people who supported me along the way and ultimately made it possible to complete this dissertation/study.

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisors, Jelle Haemers and Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea. I could always count on Jelle's readiness to help and advise me. His ideas for my thesis, his support, and the countless S.O.S.-PhD conversations and calls have successfully helped me navigate through the last five years. Jesús' recommendations, his keen knowledge of Bilbao and its source records, and his help to deal with the Spanish paperwork have been indispensable for this study. But most of all, he has given me a warm welcome during my research stays in Cantabria, making Santander really feel like home.

During my archival work in Valladolid, María Isabel del Val Valdivieso guided me during my study of the Bilbao source corpus. The advice of Peter Stabel during my Post Graduate Seminar has helped me tackle the more conceptual questions of the study. Shennan Hutton's enthusiasm encouraged me from the start of this project onwards. I am incredibly grateful for her extremely thorough language edits of this book. Maïka De Keyzer devoted time and patience to brainstorm and help me with the more quantitative parts of this study, which I could not have analysed without her help. On top of that, she proved to be an excellent horse riding buddy. Furthermore, without the assistance of the countless people in the archives, libraries, and the University of Leuven, I could not have carried out this research. I also want to thank Ellie Laurent for her help and her inspiring thesis on women's activities in the Mechelen fishmongers guild.

In between lockdowns and research stays, I've had the good fortune to be part of the group of 'colleagues of the fifth floor'. I enjoyed our lunches, ABAP weekends, parties, attempts for sports events, and many other activities. I especially want to thank Hein for the many climbing sessions and Jolien and Isabel for making it a real 'climbing club'. In the past five years,

not only they but also many colleagues have provided me with feedback, advice but, most of all, a lot of very welcome fun.

When arriving in the Research Unit of Medieval History, I had the good luck to end up in the 'big office' with Wannes, Minne, Lena, and Mireille. Many plans were made, and some were even executed. I will never forget our board game nights, matching dress-up outfits for office parties, dreaming of an office puppy, our visit to Madrid, dance battles, but mostly the many enjoyable day-to-day conversations in our pre-Covid office. Minne did not only share an office with me, but also an apartment, a birthday, and a love for mashed potatoes. I owe her my deepest gratitude for saving me so many times throughout the last years. More than one word of thanks is needed for Heleen, my sister in arms. We have cultivated numerous 'workskypes', complaining sessions, exchanges of ideas, chai lattés, and a common love for Taylor Swift in the last four years. I can safely say that this book would not have been the same without her support.

Also, many people outside of academia have been very present in my life. Esther, Mattijs, Lieve, and Sophie were always a welcoming haven for my surplus of enthusiasm and noise. They have been a never-waning source of love. Esther and Robbe have also put their creativity and effort into the cover of this book, giving it its splendid look. I want to thank Ximena for being a continuous source of joy and positivity and for the many conversations that helped me through the rougher periods. In the last year of my PhD, I've changed my home base to Denmark, where I quickly found Møllegaard Islandsheste, which has kept me sane in the less rational moments of my writing year.

Without the support and love I have always gotten from my family, this book would not have been here today. First, I want to thank my grandfather, Pieter Dondeyne, for the keen interrogations about all topics related to history. My sister and brothers, Maaïke, Rutger, and Ward, have always been by my side; endorsing, or encouraging, even my most impulsive ideas and actions. But of course, the two people I have always gone to for love and support are my parents. Papa, thank you for carrying me through these years, cheering me on in all my decisions. Mama, thank you for teaching me

that it helps to imagine a soft hand helping you up when climbing a mountain. You and Jos have given me a warm place I will always call home.

Finally, there are not enough ways to thank you, Diego, for everything you have given me in the last four years. Your warmth, advice, and patience helped me overcome many doubts and difficulties. But more importantly, the conversations, laughter, worries, and new horizons we have shared, have made these years an unforgettable adventure. I am looking forward to every step that is yet to come.

Abbreviations

AFB: Statutory Archives of Biscay (Archivo Foral de Bizkaia)

ARChV: Archives of the Real Audience and Chancellery of Valladolid
(Archivo de la Real Audiencia y Chancillería de Valladolid)

SAA: City Archives of Antwerp (Stadsarchief Antwerpen, FelixArchief)

SAL: City Archives of Leuven (Stadarchief Leuven)

SAM: City Archives of Mechelen (Stadsarchief Mechelen)

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Introduction

In 1566, Joachim Beuckelaer painted his *Market in the Square* (see cover).¹ Against a background of Italian infrastructure, the Antwerp painter depicted a market scene that would have been very familiar to him.² A group of vendors sold fruit, vegetables, poultry, and dairy products in a busy market square. He did not have to look far for inspiration. Being from Antwerp, he would have almost daily come into contact with food vendors of this type. The actual men and women like those he depicted in the *Market in the Square* were probably not members of the guild of vegetable and fruit sellers. These vendors traded informally, under the authority of Antwerp regulations that enabled them to sell fruits and vegetables 'taken from their own premises' or bought from guild members for the purpose of selling them at retail.³ As in Mechelen, another Brabantine town twenty kilometres south of Antwerp, informal vendors in Antwerp had to consider a set of regulations promulgated by the town government. In Mechelen, fruit and vegetable sellers had to wait until a certain hour of the day before they were

¹ Beuckelaer, Joachim, *Mercato in Piazza*, Oil on Canvas, 1566, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples, <http://mdc.netgroup.mobi/index.php/en/component/k2/item/2049>.

² For an analysis of Beuckelaer's use of Sebastiani Serlio's drawings of Italian buildings, see: Margreet Wolters, "Creativity and Efficiency: Aspects of Joachim Beuckelaer's Use of Patterns and Models," in *Making and Marketing: Studies of the Painting Process in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Netherlandish Workshops*, ed. Molly Faries (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2006), 155–78. On the interpretation of the northern market scenes paintings, see, among others: Margaret A. Sullivan, "Aertsen's Kitchen and Market Scenes: Audience and Innovation in Northern Art," *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 2 (1999): 236–66; Stefanie Wyssenbach, "Riches of the Sea: Collecting and Consuming Frans Snijders's Marine Market Paintings in the Southern Netherlands," in *Sites of Mediation. Connected Histories of Places, Processes, and Objects in Europe and Beyond, 1450–1650.*, ed. Susanna Burghartz, Lucas Burkart, and Christine Göttler (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 328–52.

³ L. Bisschops, "Oudt register, mette berderen, 1336-1439 (Vervolg)," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 28 (1891): 29–30, 27 June 1428; SAA, GA#4650, fol. 99r-101r, 20 December 1452.

allowed to begin buying commodities from guild members in order to resell them.⁴

If Beuckelaer had travelled to other regions, he would have found similar sources of inspiration. In Bilbao, a town in the north of the kingdom of Castile, groups of women retailers played an important role in the distribution of the town's food supplies. In shops and stalls along Bilbao's streets, women sold 'apples and pears, plums, cherries, peaches, and other victuals', as well as other items, after they had received licenses to do so from town authorities.⁵ Bilbao's town council had difficulty controlling women's trade practices. In 1503, the council promulgated a lengthy ordinance limiting female vendors to purchase commodities in Bilbao only after two o'clock, a measure designed to give other citizens a chance to purchase products for their own use first. Moreover, the women had to sell produce at prices set by the council.⁶ The ordinance probably had little effect. The town council of Bilbao had to repeat their decision in 1513 and again in 1515.⁷

On the one hand, both Beuckelaer's Antwerp market scenes and the Bilbao ordinances regulating fruit traders provide insight into women's activities in premodern urban economic life. Both sources offer evidence of women's regular and irregular sales of food at the retail level. On the other hand, these sources only offer limited information and leave many questions unanswered. For instance, who were the women who were active in

⁴ SAM, C. Magistraat (Ordonnantiën) - Serie V, nr. 1, fol. 106v-107v, 6 February 1533.

⁵ '[...] algunas regateras desta villa e por las de los reiales se fazian muchos fravdes en conprar viandas, bituallas de gallinas e pollos e ansarones e otras aves, e mançanas e peras e ygos, çiruelos, çerezas, friscos e durasnos e vilos e otras qualesquier vituallas [...].' Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévales Del País Vasco 70 (Donostia, 1995), fol. 52r-52v, 5 June 1495. Evidence of the women's licenses, can be found in: Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévales Del País Vasco 56 (Donostia, 1995), fol. 18v, 9 February 1509.

⁶ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 109v-110r, 11 January 1503.

⁷ Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 146r-146v, 18 February 1513; Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 17v, 18 April 1515.

informal trade? Under what circumstances did they practice their activities? How did urban governments deal with these women and their trade? The most important question perhaps is whether the situations of women were really as similar in the two towns as these brief glimpses suggest. In this study, which compares women's labour activities in premodern Brabant and Biscay, I suggest an alternative explanation for regional differences in women's labour opportunities. Combining distinct yet comparable types of sources facilitates the comparison of case studies as an approach to interregional comparative research.

1. Historiography

The sources that provide evidence of women food sellers in Antwerp and Bilbao are inextricably connected to an extensive historiographical framework. Since the 1980s, numerous studies have addressed the economic position of women in premodern urban societies. These studies attempted to identify the factor(s) that influenced the range of economic possibilities for women. In premodern Europe, women performed economic activities within the constraints of a patriarchal society.⁸ Nevertheless, when they looked past the 'grand narratives' of the limitations on premodern women, scholars uncovered women engaged in a broad, diverse range of activities.⁹ While there is widespread agreement on the vast range of occupations at which premodern women worked, there is far less consensus on the underlying structures that influenced which labour positions would be open to them. Most researchers have gravitated towards one of two schools of debate in premodern gender studies: the north-south thesis and the decline thesis.

⁸ Martha C. Howell, "The Problem of Women's Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe," in *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, ed. Amanda Pipkin and Sarah Joan Moran (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 22; Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman, "Women's Work, Gender Conflict, and Labour Markets in Europe, 1500-1900," *The Economic History Review* 44, no. 4 (1991): 609.

⁹ Anna Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights in Early Modern Urban Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 13.

The idea that women in northwestern Europe had more economic opportunities than women in southern Europe is one widespread paradigm in gender and women's studies. The so-called 'north-south thesis' originated in David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's study of the Italian *catasto* from 1427. In this study, the authors tried to reconstruct late medieval Tuscan families and households and their economic and social lives. They found that the dominance of extensive male lineages in urban (and rural) society diminished women's roles in public life. In order to marry, young women depended on dowries provided by their families. There were few opportunities for women other than marriage. If their dowries were insufficient, they had little chance of economic prosperity.¹⁰ Following the structure of Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber's research, scholars found that women in Italy and the Mediterranean area held few public positions. They concluded that distinct legal and demographic structures in the north and south gave northern women more opportunities for agency than southern women.¹¹

The north-south thesis centres on distinct family and household forms in European regions. Scholars supporting the thesis have also connected the effects of regional household structures to the amount of wealth and economic opportunity available to women. Two main arguments have been given to explain the divergence of women's economic access between the

¹⁰ David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans et leurs familles : une étude du catasto Florentin de 1427* (Paris: Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1978). For this study, I used the English translation, see: David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹¹ Dennis Romano, "Gender and the Urban Geography of Renaissance Venice," *Journal of Social History* 23, no. 2 (1989): 339–53; Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten Van Zanden, "Girl Power: The European Marriage Pattern and Labour Markets in the North Sea Region in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Period," *Economic History Review* 63, no. 1 (2010): 1–33; Jeremy Goldberg, "Household Economics: Money, Work, and Property," in *The Medieval Household in Christian Europe c.850-c.1550: Managing Power, Wealth, and the Body*, ed. Cordelia Beattie, Anna Maslakovic, and Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 223–29; Samuel K. Cohn Jr., *Women in the Streets: Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4–16.

two regions. First, an important difference was caused by the legal systems of the two regions. Roman law, used throughout southern Europe, made it more difficult for women to obtain property and enter into legal transactions with this property. This was exacerbated by the dominance of male lineages. The single-heir system prevented the division of properties, and as the single heir was usually a son, daughters were left only with their dowries.¹² Moreover, spouses would keep their properties separate, discouraging spousal cooperation in household workshops.¹³ By contrast, the common law prevalent in parts of (continental) northwestern Europe permitted women to inherit the same amount of property as men did. Inheritance customs in northwestern Europe not only granted daughters and sons equal shares but also favoured married women and widows. Upon marriage, the property of both spouses was joined into a communal account. Widows inherited a large part of this conjugal property. The advantages of enlarging their shared assets throughout their marriage worked in both spouses' favour, thus encouraging women's labour activities.¹⁴

Scholars also pointed out that the distinct household organisations in northern and southern Europe influenced women's economic roles. In northwestern Europe, married couples from middling social groups formed nuclear households away from direct control of their extended families. Urban men and women married relatively late in life and were close in age. The couple was forming a new household while they were in the same stage in their life cycles.¹⁵ The structuring of urban economies in northwestern Europe around this 'European marriage pattern' encouraged the spouses' economic entrepreneurship.¹⁶ Northwestern Europeans therefore considered women's work as complementary to men's and even as necessary

¹² Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, 311–13.

¹³ De Moor and Van Zanden, "Girl Power," 8.

¹⁴ Myriam Carlier, "The Household: An Introduction," in *The Household in Late Medieval Cities, Italy and Northwestern Europe Compared*, ed. Myriam Carlier and Tim Soens (Leuven and Apeldoorn: Garant, 2001), 2–3.

¹⁵ Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Gender and Economic History. The Story of a Complicated Marriage," *TSEG/ Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 11, no. 2 (2014): 192.

¹⁶ De Moor and Van Zanden, "Girl Power."

to guarantee the survival of the family.¹⁷ In southern Europe, both customary law and household organisation were structured around extended family connections, which tended to constrain women's agency. Women only received their share of the family's property when they married. Moreover, the size of the dowry depended on the parents' goodwill, which gave the parents more influence over their daughters' age at marriage and choice of spouse. The married couple was thus more dependent on the extended families' contributions. Moreover, since the couple did not share their assets, making ties to their own lineages assumed more importance. Because women were younger when they married and had children, they would have less youthful experience in the labour market.¹⁸ Finally, married couples in southern Europe were less likely to begin their conjugal life in a newly-formed, independent household because methods of property acquisition depended more on the extended family's decisions than was common in northern Europe. Most households did not have a nuclear structure but were composed of complex or multiple structures, which limited the economic agency of married women and widows.¹⁹

Over the last few decades, criticism of the north-south thesis has grown. Scholars have found that the overly general conclusions drawn from the north-south binary did not take into account differences in local contexts. Ellen Kittell pointed out that many of the differences in women's positions between the two regions can be attributed to differences in the scope of studies.²⁰ Although historians have accepted the thesis for a long time, the southern archetype is largely based on Italian case studies, especially of

¹⁷ Martha C. Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 9–26.

¹⁸ De Moor and Van Zanden, "Girl Power," 8–10.

¹⁹ Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*; Pier Paolo Viazzo, "What's so Special about the Mediterranean? Thirty Years of Research on Household and Family in Italy," *Continuity and Change* 18, no. 1 (2003): 111–14.

See also: Nena Vandeweerd, "Women, Town Councils, and the Organisation of Work in Bilbao and Antwerp: A North-South Comparison (1400–1560)," *Continuity and Change* 36, no. 1 (2021): 61–87.

²⁰ Ellen E. Kittell, "Testaments of Two Cities: A Comparative Analysis of the Wills of Medieval Genoa and Douai," *European Review of History* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 47–82.

Florence.²¹ They have pointed out that Tuscany does not represent all of Italy, let alone southern Europe. In a study of eighteenth-century Turin, Zucca Micheletto found a situation similar to that of northwestern Europe. Women of the 'middling sort' worked as a part of the household in public space at most occupations.²² The conclusions may differ because the Tuscan research focused on higher social (non-artisan) groups, while northwestern European research more often investigated women from artisan and middle groups.²³

A second challenge to the north-south thesis comes from Anna Bellavitis and Beatrice Zucca Micheletto, who question the emphasis on legal systems as an explanation for regional differences. They charge that the influence of Roman law might not have been as strong outside central Italy. Throughout Europe, legal systems were often a complex mixture of Roman law and individual customary laws.²⁴ Furthermore, similar customary laws did not automatically generate the same economic opportunities for women in every town. Andrea Bardyn found substantial differences in women's activities in the credit market in different towns within the duchy of Brabant.²⁵

²¹ Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*; Cohn Jr., *Women in the Streets*.

²² Beatrice Zucca Micheletto, "Reconsidering the Southern Europe Model: Dowry, Women's Work and Marriage Patterns in Pre-Industrial Urban Italy (Turin, Second Half of the 18th Century)," *The History of the Family* 16, no. 4 (2011): 354–70; Beatrice Zucca Micheletto, *Travail et propriété des femmes en temps de crise (Turin, XVIIIe siècle)* (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Presses universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2014).

²³ This criticism of the thesis has been given by different scholars, such as Zucca Micheletto, Anna Bellavitis, Ellen Kittell, and Carlier. See: Kittell, "Testaments of Two Cities"; Zucca Micheletto, "Reconsidering the Southern Europe Model"; Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights*, 9; Carlier, "The Household," 2.

²⁴ Anna Bellavitis and Beatrice Zucca Micheletto, "Introduction. North versus South: Gender, Law and Economic Well-Being in Europe in the Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries," in *Gender, Law and Economic Well-Being in Europe from the Fifteenth to the Nineteenth Century: North versus South?*, ed. Anna Bellavitis and Beatrice Zucca Micheletto (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 1–27.

²⁵ Andrea Bardyn, "Crediting Women? A Comparative Perspective on Credit Markets and Gender Inequality in Late Medieval Brabant" (*Women's fortunes. Social and economic changes in the position of late medieval women (1300 - 1600)*, Leuven, 2016).

Conversely, towns with different legal systems did not always provide different economic opportunities to women. Shennan Hutton found that women's agency in fourteenth-century Ghent, a Flemish town with a customary law system, was similar to other European towns, such as Genoa, Paris, and Rouen.²⁶ Laura Van Aert has shown similar legal practices in Brabant and Holland, even though the legal structures of these regions differed.²⁷ The existence of complex and overlapping legal systems of southern and northern Europe was not the only criticism of the argument that legal systems determined the position of women in each region. The effects of legal customs posited by early scholars have been called into question by contradictory evidence. For example, Dana Wessell Lightfoot demonstrated that the dowry system, traditionally blamed for women's lack of financial independence, in fact promoted the active engagement of lower-status and middling women in the urban economies of fifteenth-century Valencia.²⁸

Today, the north-south thesis is no longer automatically accepted. Valid counterarguments suggest that other factors might have generated the diverse economic positions of women found by scholars in different European regions. Nevertheless, as Bellavitis, Zucca Micheletto, and others have stated, there is a serious deficit of comparative empirical studies.²⁹ The results of the case studies I add to this debate cannot, of course, be applied to Europe in general. Instead, I try to answer Pier Paolo Viazzo's call, from his study of Mediterranean household structures, for a more nuanced comparative 'approach where economic, demographic, ecological, and cultural factors are taken into account in order to properly address the

²⁶ Shennan Hutton, *Women and Economic Activities in Late Medieval Ghent* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

²⁷ Laura Van Aert, "Tussen norm en praktijk. Een terreinverkenning over het juridische statuut van vrouwen in het zestiende-eeuwse Antwerpen," *TSEG/ Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 2, no. 3 (2005): 22–42.

²⁸ Dana Wessell Lightfoot, *Women, Dowries and Agency: Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Valencia*, *Gender in History* (Manchester: University Press, 2013). See also: Vandeweerd, "Women, Town Councils, and the Organisation of Work."

Anna Bellavitis has similar findings in her study of early modern women's work opportunities in Europe in general. See Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights*, 80–81.

²⁹ Bellavitis and Zucca Micheletto, "Introduction."

problems raised by the unexpected degree of variability disclosed by research in areas.'³⁰

Studies of north-south differences have emphasised family forms (assisted by customary law) as the central explanatory factor to the exclusion of other factors that might have affected women's economic opportunities. One factor largely ignored in north-south comparisons is the influence of institutions responsible for the organisation of work, despite the development of an entire area of research around the effects of these institutions (among other things) on women's work and the changes these institutions generated. I argue that the integration of these studies is essential to enhance comparative research into the economic status of women.

In the study of premodern women's work, scholars have debated the degree of change in women's labour opportunities over the course of the Late Middle Ages and early modern period. The stage was set in 1919 by Alice Clark, who claimed that the Late Middle Ages was a 'golden age' for women's labour. The corporative period enabled women to undertake market-oriented work not available to them before. In the sixteenth century, with the emergence of capitalism, she argued that this 'golden age' ended, and the public roles of women were circumscribed.³¹ In the 1980s, scholars revisited Clark's decline thesis. Merry Wiesner and Martha Howell agreed that women's labour opportunities and public position in general declined, but, in contrast to Clark, they argued that the corporative world was responsible. According to them, corporations pushed women out of high-status work in order to sustain their own hegemony.³² Other scholars, such as Natalie Zemon Davis, also argued that the corporative craft guilds precipitated a decline in work open to women. Davis pointed out that the

³⁰ Viazzo, "What's so Special about the Mediterranean?," 116.

³¹ Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, New impr., Reprints of Economic Classics (London: Cass, 1968).

³² Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy*; Merry E. Wiesner, "Guilds, Male Bonding and Women's Work in Early Modern Germany," *Gender & History* 1, no. 2 (1989): 125–37.

limited role allowed to women in the guilds pushed them into the lower ranks of society.³³

Scholars have continued to consider the decline thesis since the 1980s. Judith Bennett, for instance, argued that the relegation of women to low-status, low-paying labour positions was not a novelty of the Late Middle Ages or early modern period. Rather, Bennett sees this as a continuous pattern throughout the whole premodern period, which even stretches until the modern period.³⁴ However, most scholars agree that there were changes in the position of women during the premodern period, although they hold different views about the initiation, causes, and persistence of these changes.³⁵

More recently, scholars have circumvented the larger question of change to focus (again) on concrete questions about women's economic opportunities. Ariadne Schmidt stated that 'too strong a focus on the question [of women's declining labour positions] blinds us to the question of what work women actually did.'³⁶ In their introduction to *Women and work in premodern Europe*, Merridee Bailey and her collaborators call for more research on women's work even if it does not reveal transitions.³⁷

³³ Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth-Century Lyon," in *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 198–221.

³⁴ Judith M. Bennett, "'History That Stands Still'. Women's Work in the European Past," *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988): 269–83.

³⁵ See, among others: Hutton, *Women and Economic Activities in Late Medieval Ghent*; Peter Stabel, "Women at the Market: Gender and Retail in the Towns of Late Medieval Flanders," in *Secretum Scriptorum: Liber Alumnorum Walter Prevenier*, ed. Willem Pieter Blockmans, Walter Prevenier, and Thérèse de Hemptinne (Leuven: Garant, 1999), 259–76; Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Segmentation in the Pre-Industrial Labour Market: Women's Work in the Dutch Textile Industry, 1581–1810," *International Review of Social History* 51, no. 2 (2006): 189–216.

³⁶ Ariadne Schmidt, "Vrouwenarbeid in de vroegmoderne tijd in Nederland," *TSEG/ Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 2, no. 3 (2005): 14.

Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood ask a similar question in their more recent article. See: Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood, "The Gender Division of Labour in Early Modern England," *The Economic History Review* 73, no. 1 (2018): 4.

³⁷ Merridee L. Bailey, Tania M. Colwell, and Julie Hotchin, "Approaching Women and Work in Premodern Europe," in *Women and Work in Premodern Europe*:

Nevertheless, earlier studies on the decline in women's opportunities have provided the explanatory framework even for this new angle in premodern gender studies. Guilds and corporatism reappear in arguments supporting the decline thesis. Even Bennett, who questions the complete validity of the thesis, associates changes in women's participation in the brewing industry with male institutionalisation of the trade.³⁸ Although I discuss the significant role of changing circumstances and context to women's work in Chapters 2 through 4, I mostly support the decline thesis as a useful tool for explanation. Specifically, I compare the effects of the presence and absence of guilds on women's market activities in premodern Brabant and Biscay.

Guilds are significant in studies of women's economic opportunities in premodern towns for more than the decline thesis. In many premodern European towns, these corporations were the institutions with the most prominent influence on women's labour, and they left their mark on urban society as a whole.³⁹ Sheilagh Ogilvie has argued that guilds and local communities played key roles restricting economic opportunity for women. In these institutions, which needed to limit the number of members, women were one of the groups most prominently excluded.⁴⁰ Although some aspects of Ogilvie's argument have been called into question, other scholars have drawn similar conclusions about the effect of guilds on women's labour

Experiences, Relationships and Cultural Representation, c. 1100-1800, ed. Merridee L. Bailey, Tania M. Colwell, and Julie Hotchin (London: Routledge, 2018), 12.

³⁸ Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (New York: Oxford university press, 1999), 145-47.

³⁹ Jan Dumolyn, for example, has shown how in the urban Low Countries the guilds tried to embody and position themselves as representatives of the whole urban commune. See: Jan Dumolyn, "Guild Politics and Political Guilds in Fourteenth-Century Flanders," in *The Voices of the People in Late Medieval Europe. Communication and Popular Politics*, ed. Jan Dumolyn et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 30-31.

⁴⁰ Sheilagh Ogilvie, "How Does Social Capital Affect Women? Guilds and Communities in Early Modern Germany," *American Historical Review* 109, no. 2 (2004): 325-59; Sheilagh Ogilvie, *The European Guilds. An Economic Analysis* (Princeton: University Press, 2019).

opportunities.⁴¹ While Maarten Prak has sharply criticised Ogilvie's hypothesis that guilds caused economic stagnation, he has also stated that 'guilds were a contributory factor in preventing women from independently establishing themselves as producers or traders in the Dutch marketplace.'⁴² Even though guilds constrained opportunity for some women, this study shows that the restrictions did not apply to all women. There were women – women belonging to the families of guild members and women members of all-female guilds – who were included under the corporative umbrella. They enjoyed the privileges of guild membership and, as Daryl Hafter has found, suffered from the abolition of guilds in the eighteenth century.⁴³ Even though guilds excluded most female urban residents, they did benefit members of their own communities.

2. Scope

This study compares women's market-oriented activities in Bilbao, a town in the lordship of Biscay in the north of the kingdom of Castile, and Mechelen and Antwerp, two towns in the duchy of Brabant, then under Burgundian and Habsburg rule, in the Southern Low Countries, between approximately 1420 and 1550. The three towns investigated are Antwerp, Mechelen, and Bilbao. Previous research has revealed a broad range of economic positions for women in the lordship of Biscay and the Iberian Atlantic region in general.⁴⁴ For Brabant, there are also several in-depth studies of women's

⁴¹ Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights*, 52–53; Janna Coomans, "Policing Female Food Vendors in the Late Medieval Netherlands," *Yearbook of Women's History* 36 (2017): 97–113; Clare Crowston, "Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe: An Overview of Recent Research," *International Review of Social History* 53, no. 16 (2008): 19–44; Grethe Jacobsen, "Women's Work and Women's Role: Ideology and Reality in Danish Urban Society, 1300–1550," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 31, no. 1 (1983): 3–20.

⁴² Maarten Prak, "Corporatism and Social Models in the Low Countries," *TSEG/ The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 11, no. 2 (2014): 287.

⁴³ Daryl M. Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ See, among others: Janire Castrillo Casado, *Las mujeres vascas durante la baja edad media: vida familiar, capacidades jurídicas, roles sociales y trabajo* (Madrid, España: Sílex, 2020); María Isabel del Val Valdivieso, "El trabajo de las mujeres en el Bilbao

economic activities.⁴⁵ The choice of towns allows me to strengthen the argument put forward by Dana Wessel-Lightfoot, Anna Bellavitis, and Beatrice Zucca Micheletto that differences between regions seem to have arisen from distinct local contexts rather than universal regional factors. While the different customary laws in the two regions might have an impact on higher social groups, for middling and lower classes, they seem to have made little difference. Women of these classes, the focus of this study, worked regardless of rules about women inheriting property from their families.⁴⁶ Economic motives seem to have influenced their labour opportunities and agency to a greater extent than property and inheritance laws.

A survey of economic productivity in and organisation of the three towns are crucial factors to consider in an assessment of the effect of institutions on women's labour opportunities. The distinct organisations of work in Bilbao, Mechelen, and Antwerp show the importance of the socio-economic context of each town in the comparison of women's work. In the period under study, all three towns experienced economic changes, particularly a shift of focus to commerce rather than industry (see Chapter

tardomedieval," in *Las mujeres vascas en la historia* (Bilbao: IPES, 1997), 65–92; Jesús Angel Solórzano Telechea, "La villa de las 'Buenas Dueñas Honradas': la condición de las mujeres en el Santander medieval," *Edades. Revista de Historia* 5, no. 1 (1999): 23–46; María Jesús Cruchaga Calvin, "La mujer en las villas portuarias del Cantábrico: el ejemplo de Santander en la Baja Edad Media" (Santander, Universidad de Cantabria, 2012); Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, "Neighbors and Traders in a Seventeenth-Century Port Town," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37, no. 3 (2012): 581–87.

⁴⁵ For an overview of earlier studies on women and work in Brabant, see: Jan Van Gerven, "Vrouwen, arbeid en sociale positie. Een voorlopig onderzoek naar de economische rol en maatschappelijke positie van vrouwen in de Brabantse steden in de late middeleeuwen," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'histoire* 73, no. 4 (1995): 947–66. More recent studies include: Andrea Bardyn, "Women's Fortunes. Gender Differences, Asset Management, and Investment in Late Medieval Brabant" (PhD Dissertation, Leuven, KU Leuven, 2018); Ellen Burm and Bert De Munck, "Het Broodje gebakken? Huwelijksstrategieën en partnerkeuze van de bakkers(kinderen) te Brussel in de overgang van het Ancien Régime naar de negentiende eeuw," *Stadsgeschiedenis* 2, no. 5 (2010): 148–68.

⁴⁶ Bellavitis and Zucca Micheletto, "Introduction"; Wessel Lightfoot, *Women, Dowries and Agency*.

1). Although there are significant differences in the scale of economic productivity among Antwerp, Mechelen, and Bilbao, this factor seems less influential than the local organisation of work. In Brabant, craft guilds were politically powerful, which gave them control over the Brabantine market.⁴⁷ In contrast, there were only a few occupations organised in collective associations (*cofradías*) in Biscay, and corporations there were still struggling to acquire an effective political voice in the fifteenth century.⁴⁸

The concept 'work' needs clarification. Recent studies have criticised the definition of 'work' as remunerated activities with economic value that sufficed for earlier scholars.⁴⁹ Critics point out that men and women's work in premodern society extended beyond this. Much of their work was focused on their own households rather than on the market. Most of this 'reproductive'⁵⁰ work was carried out by women, in combination with their market-oriented work.⁵¹ Work for premodern people requires a broader interpretation than our current questionable definition. While recognising this broad range of labour activities, this study centres on women's positions

⁴⁷ Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Werken volgens de regels: ambachten in Brabant en Vlaanderen 1500 - 1800* (Brussel: VUB press, 1994).

⁴⁸ Jesús A. Solórzano Telechea, "The Politics of the Urban Commons in Northern Atlantic Spain in the Later Middle Ages," *Urban History* 2, no. 41 (2014): 183–203.

⁴⁹ The introduction of Sarti, Bellavitis, and Martini's *What is work?* as well as that of Bailey, Colwell, and Hotchin's *Women and work in premodern Europe* provide a good overview of the discussion about the modern and premodern definitions of work, as well as the transitions in the concept. See: Raffaella Sarti, Anna Bellavitis, and Manuela Martini, "Introduction. What Is Work? Gender at the Crossroads of Home, Family, and Business from the Early Modern Era to the Present," in *What Is Work?: Gender at the Crossroads of Home, Family, and Business from the Early Modern Era to the Present*, ed. Raffaella Sarti, Anna Bellavitis, and Manuela Martini (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 1–84; Bailey, Colwell, and Hotchin, "Approaching Women and Work in Premodern Europe."

⁵⁰ Merry Wiesner defined reproductive work as 'not only the bearing and rearing of children, but the care and nourishment of all family members.' See: Merry E. Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," in *Germany: A New Social and Economic History, Vol. 1: 1450-1630*, ed. Bob Scribner, vol. 1 (London: Arnold, 1995), 209.

⁵¹ Jane Whittle, "A Critique of Approaches to 'Domestic Work': Women, Work and the Pre-Industrial Economy," *Past & Present* 243, no. 1 (2019): 62–63.

in small-scale trade and retail occupations. Comparison of a narrow range of market sectors facilitates inclusion of broad geographical areas.

Most of the work of the Brabantine women in this study took place within guilds. As stated, the presence or absence of corporations in the towns was an important factor influencing women's labour opportunities. Therefore, some context about the guilds is necessary.⁵² As studies have indicated, guilds existed throughout premodern Europe, although they did not play the same political, social, and economic role everywhere.⁵³ Scholars traditionally distinguish between craft guilds (*ambacht* in Middle Dutch) and merchant guilds (*gilde*). While craft guilds focussed on production, trade involving these products, and small-scale retail sales,⁵⁴ merchant guilds concentrated on wholesale trade, often over long distances.⁵⁵ However, Sheilagh Ogilvie cautions us to avoid too sharp a distinction, as these two institutions shared many characteristics. Both guaranteed the quality of their wares and services; they shared common or similar occupations. Moreover, both featured a select group of insiders ('members') and exercised considerable influence on (urban) economies.⁵⁶ In this study, I will use 'guilds' and 'craft guilds' to refer to the craft guilds. I will use the term 'merchant guilds' when referring to the collective associations of wholesale

⁵² The first problem in the study of the guilds is terminology. As several scholars have stated, in each language, different words circulated that described the three most common types of premodern corporations – merchant guilds, craft guilds, and confraternities. This study will use the term 'guilds' and 'craft guilds' together, as scholars have done as well. See: Dumolyn, "Guild Politics and Political Guilds in Fourteenth-Century Flanders," 17–18; Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy*.

⁵³ Coomans, "Policing Female Food Vendors," 104; Dumolyn, "Guild Politics and Political Guilds in Fourteenth-Century Flanders," 17–18.

⁵⁴ Not all guilds were in productive occupations, since there were also many service occupations organised in craft guilds. See: Ogilvie, *The European Guilds. An Economic Analysis*, 10.

⁵⁵ The two types of corporations were intertwined. In Brabant, as well as in other regions, craft guilds had developed as close-knit political bodies reacting to exploitation by the wool-cloth merchant guilds. See: Carlos Wyffels, *De oorsprong der ambachten in Vlaanderen en Brabant* (Brussel: Koninklijke Vlaamse academie voor wetenschappen, letteren en schone kunsten van België, 1951), 85–142.

⁵⁶ Ogilvie, *The European Guilds. An Economic Analysis*, 10–11.

and interregional traders. Most evidence of women's work in the Brabantine towns comes from the craft guilds (*ambachten*).

Marc Jacobs defines a guild as 'an institution that has obtained official privileges from a higher government, making them a 'collective entity' that can recognise people as members and in which members are granted jurisdiction over a specific professional skill or manipulation of material products (as resource, tool, or commodity).' The guilds were also legal entities, which facilitated renegotiation of their privileges.⁵⁷ Nico Slokker also defines guilds in terms of their jurisdiction and economic authority.⁵⁸ There were, however, many more aspects of guild life. They had often started as communities of urban residents who worked in the same occupation and provided religious, cultural, and social outlets. These functions were an integral part of guild life until their abolition at the end of the eighteenth century.⁵⁹ The guilds' political role was a crucial element. In the Southern Low Countries after 1300, guilds 'were both instruments of popular politics and mobilisation, and deputised branches of the urban government which carried out military and legal functions.'⁶⁰ After 1300 guilds obtained political privileges in other regions of Europe as well. The guilds' political power could lead them to push for *Zunftdwang* – the requirement of guild membership or license for every actor involved in the guilds' occupations. Along with the many political, social, cultural, and religious functions of the corporations, *Zunftdwang* involved the guilds in almost every aspect of their members' life cycles.⁶¹ In most Brabantine towns,

⁵⁷ Marc Jacobs, "De ambachten in Brabant en Mechelen," in *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Brabant en Mechelen tot 1795* (Brussel: Algemeen rijksarchief, 2000), 588–89.

⁵⁸ Slokker defined a guild as 'a statutory organisation of fellow practitioners of an occupation, which has the authority to regulate admission and practice of the trade.' See: Nico Slokker, *Ruggengraat van de stad: de betekenis van gilden in Utrecht, 1528-1818*, ed. Marjan Muntinga (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2010), 11–12.

⁵⁹ Konrad Eisenbichler, "Introduction: A World of Confraternities," in *A Companion to Medieval and Early Modern Confraternities*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 2.

⁶⁰ Dumolyn, "Guild Politics and Political Guilds in Fourteenth-Century Flanders," 31.

⁶¹ Ogilvie, *The European Guilds. An Economic Analysis*, 11; Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy*, 106.

in specific circumstances, such as 'free market days', local governments did not require urban residents to be in the guild to perform an occupation. Nevertheless, the guilds in these towns often made strenuous efforts to gain monopolies and become the exclusive providers of commodities, even if in practice they were never able to attain complete monopolies.⁶² Moreover, as I will discuss throughout this study, guilds tried to prevent loss of income to informal competitors, often at the expense of women and other guild outsiders.

3. Sources and methodology

This study has a broad geographical, chronological, and thematic scope. In this way, it differs from many valuable earlier studies that could 'interlink different sources' from the same micro-case study in order to reconstruct in a 'sophisticated way how the whole society worked on the local level'.⁶³ Nevertheless, as Harald Deceulaer and Bibi Panhuysen have stated, it has become more common for historians to ask questions about variations in women's economic opportunities in time and space. A comparative study, such as this one, therefore helps to reveal new factors that influenced those opportunities.⁶⁴

The use of disparate yet comparable documents allows for a more penetrating examination of women's work opportunities and possible causality. One of the types of sources this study analyses are normative

⁶² Bert De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic: Fabricating Community in the Southern Netherlands, 1300-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 185. As Peter Stabel has argued, only a few corporations actually tried to win a full monopoly in their market sectors. Interestingly enough, most of those sectors were in food trades or sales of basic essential products. As I will show in this study, in the absence of masculine guilds, these sectors were dominated by women workers. See: Peter Stabel, "Guilds in Late Medieval Flanders: Myths and Realities of Guild Life in an Export-Oriented Environment," *Journal of Medieval History* 30, no. 2 (2004): 193–94.

⁶³ Sheilagh Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living: Women, Markets, and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: University Press, 2006), 6.

⁶⁴ Harald Deceulaer and Bibi Panhuysen, "Dressed to Work: A Gendered Comparison of the Tailoring Trades in the Northern and Southern Netherlands, 16th to 18th Centuries," in *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries*, ed. Maarten Prak et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 134–35.

sources, specifically, town ordinances. This normative group provides a substantial body of sources that are similar in the two regions and thus comparable. A second group of documents, which record actual, daily interactions, verifies the normative structure and clearly represents women's agency. The third group, Brabantine guild membership lists, allow for a similar comparison of norm and practice. Finally, Chapter 1 provides a brief analysis of taxation registers surviving from the three towns under study. The tax registers are invaluable for assessing women's wealth.

An extensive number of town ordinances from Antwerp, Mechelen, and Bilbao provide comparative sources for the period of this study because they enable contrasting the rules and regulations each town council imposed on working women with actual, day-to-day practices. The sources also reveal the town councils' concerns while they were in the process of imposing the regulations.⁶⁵ Ordinances' represent fairly *ad hoc* responses to existing economic and political contingencies'.⁶⁶ Some '*ad hoc* responses' were made explicit by a *narratio* at the beginning of the ordinance. The documents from Bilbao contain particularly vivid descriptions of the daily practices that prompted the council to put each regulation in place. A careful reading of the ordinances not only allows the drawing of conclusions about women's formal and informal activities and opportunities but also reflects the decision-makers' perceptions of female labour. Given that certain ordinances were issued repeatedly, it would appear that citizens did not always obey the new rules, and the town councils found it difficult to implement them effectively.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Peter Stabel, "From the Market to the Shop: Retail and Urban Space in Late Medieval Bruges," in *Buyers and Sellers. Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruno Blondé et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 102; Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights*, 53.

⁶⁶ Ellen E. Kittell and Kurt Queller, "'Whether Man or Woman': Gender Inclusivity in the Town Ordinances of Medieval Douai," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 1 (2000): 65.

⁶⁷ Stabel, "Women at the Market," 267; Shennan Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets: The Gendering of Market Space in Late Medieval Ghent," in *Urban Space in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 416.

There are 81 ordinances from Antwerp and 66 from Mechelen concerning decisions about women's work between 1331 and 1595, of which 76 per cent were dated between 1414 and 1557. Most ordinances were preserved in the guilds' registers of statutes, privileges, and ordinances granted to them by local governments or regional lords. Until the mid-fifteenth century, Bilbao was torn apart by the political struggles between the 'bandos', the ruling elites of Biscay. As a result, the composition of the town council and its administration did not stabilise until the second half of the fifteenth century. Moreover, the conflict kept the town from developing a stable economic administration.⁶⁸ The result is that there is almost no evidence about trade and occupations dated before approximately 1460. There are 141 ordinances regulating (women's) labour for the period from 1458 to 1592, of which 91 per cent come from 1458 through 1520.

Analysis of judicial sources shows the extent to which women (mis)used their economic rights in formal and informal markets. Some court cases and dispute settlements contain evidence of problems between guild members or with people trading in the informal market that are not mentioned in the town ordinances. Although relatively few acts survive, they are the best sources to shed light on this aspect of women's labour. Howell's use of the *Correxieboeken* from Leiden to analyse commercial conflicts led her to point out that a careful approach minimises the potential pitfalls of these sources.⁶⁹ A careful examination of sources that reflect daily practice, even if they are only a few, can tell us a great deal about women's labour. The court case records and sentence books from Mechelen, Antwerp, and Bilbao reveal the difficulties that institutions had regulating working men and women. Moreover, they reveal urban residents' awareness of regulations and loopholes.

There are some judicial sources involving women's work in Brabant and Biscay in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Antwerp' correction

⁶⁸ Teófilo Guiard y Larrauri, *Historia Del Consulado y Casa de Contratación de Bilbao y Del Comercio de La Villa*, vol. 1 (Bilbao: Imprenta y Librería de José de Astuy, 1913), 70; José Ignacio Salazar, "Gobierno Local En El Bilbao Bajomedieval," *Bidebarrieta* 12 (2003): 189–90.

⁶⁹ Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy*.

books', records of the sentences of the town courts on offenders, occasionally record market-related violations. In two correction books, running from 1414 through 1568, there are eleven sentences relating to women and their market activities. Other published registers contain a few judgements relating to women's employment issued by Antwerp's aldermen and town council.⁷⁰ In Mechelen, the limited archival documents from the guilds sporadically preserve most judicial sources. Nevertheless, the Mechelen fishmongers guild kept sentence books that offer a more systematic source for daily practice. They record ninety-four sentences dated between 1492 and 1558 that were addressed to women or men and women together. For the Antwerp mercers guild, there is a similar – though more concise – register that contains fifty-one sentences addressing women or men and women together. These registers facilitate analysis of women's irregular practices. Moreover, they provide insight into the guilds' stance on women's work in specific circumstances. In Bilbao, there are court documents generated by the Royal Chancellery of Valladolid (*Real Chancillería de Valladolid*), which heard disputes that one of the parties said could not be settled impartially in the local courts. Several saleswomen involved in disputes with Bilbao's town council appealed to the *Chancillería*. The case reports give details of the women's appearances and include records of the elaborate arguments and testimonies presented, as well as of the evidence produced.⁷¹

The Brabantine guild membership lists provide a useful tool to address scholars' earlier concerns about using ordinances. While ordinances regulating guild work 'can unveil the realities women experienced at the market'⁷², they do not give any information about the number of women in the guilds or factors influencing women's work opportunities in guild occupations.⁷³ Therefore, analysis of guild membership lists, along with the evidence from ordinances, widens the resulting view of women's labour in

⁷⁰ Most of the registers containing such conflicts and settlements are published in the *Antwerps Archievenblad*.

⁷¹ For the section on sources and methodology, some parts can also be found in my publication, see: Vandeweerd, "Women, Town Councils, and the Organisation of Work."

⁷² Stabel, "Women at the Market," 266.

⁷³ Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living*, 23; Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights*, 53.

premodern Brabant (see Chapter 2). There is no evidence of women's work within the few Bilbao brotherhoods that are identified. Instead, women's work took place outside of these masculine institutions, for which no membership lists survive in any case. However, there are some ordinances that provide the names – and sometimes the marital and social statuses – of the women addressed in the new regulations, evidence which permits limited conclusions about the backgrounds of the women named.

The final type of source, tax registers, is available for Bilbao, Mechelen, and Antwerp. These allow quantitative analysis and comparison of inequality between men and women in the three towns. These registers include a 1470 tax list from Bilbao, a taxation register based on a 1544 survey of house values from Mechelen, and two 1537 lists of house values from four districts (the 4th, 6th, 8th, and 11th) in Antwerp. Chapter 1 analyses these censuses of taxpayers for evidence about the position of women in the labour markets of Antwerp, Mechelen, and Bilbao.

4. Chapter overview

This study has been divided into two comparative sections that address two questions: how was women's work in Brabant and Biscay organised, and what did women do with the normative structure of their town? Chapter 1 provides the necessary context for these two questions. It begins with a brief introduction of the three towns, Antwerp, Bilbao, and Mechelen, featuring the economic focus and political organisation of each town. This is followed by a discussion of the customary law of the three towns on the topics of women's legal capability and (conjugal) property rights, as well as inheritance systems. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the taxation registers of the three towns and the resulting assessment of the social class of the women who are the subjects of this study. In the Brabantine towns, most women's work in the occupations central to this study was organised in craft guilds. Many of those women belonged to the middling classes. By contrast, in Bilbao, the independent saleswomen that we will encounter belonged to lower social groups.

Part I examines the organisation of work in Brabant and Biscay. Its key focus is on the influence of applicable institutions on women's market

activities. Chapter 2 studies the normative structure established by town councils and craft guilds to reveal women's access to (guild) work in Antwerp and Mechelen. Based on analysis of a careful reading of the ordinances and their gendered discourse, I argue that the highly masculine guilds created a gendered context for women's work. In that gendered context, most opportunities for women depended on their marital status and position in a guild household. Nevertheless, explicit prohibitions against women are not common in urban regulations. The conclusions drawn from analysis of the ordinances are confirmed in the second section of Chapter 2, an inquiry into the Brabantine guilds' membership lists. While these sources show the importance of marital status for women's labour opportunities, they also highlight other factors that might also have played a role. Parentage and social status were decisive factors in women's labour opportunities as well.

Chapter 3 conducts an analysis for Bilbao similar to the Chapter 2 investigation into Antwerp and Mechelen. Based on the content and gendered language of the town ordinances, I study women's labour positions in the Biscayan town, where there were several occupations either partially or completely in the hands of women. As a consequence, the town council regulated occupations rather than sexes. As women were active in the trades that provided daily commodities for urban residents, the council generally promulgated these regulations for economic rather than gendered reasons. Nevertheless, the Bilbao town council also imposed limitations on the saleswomen, even though their labour activities were an accepted component of the town's economy.

The final chapter of Part I, Chapter 4, looks at a third institution that played an important role in the organisation of women's work: the household. In both regions, the organisation of the household had a definite impact on women's market activities. The impact was clearest in the Brabantine towns because guild work was often centred around spousal cooperation. In Bilbao, by contrast, women worked to distribute daily commodities independently of a household workshop. Moreover, there is little evidence of spousal cooperation or the impact of marital status on women's labour opportunities in the Biscayan sources. I argue that the fact

that these trades are not organised in guilds, as well as Bilbao's maritime orientation, could explain why the household economy operated in one region and not in the other.

Against the background of the normative structure of women's work, analysed in Part I, Part II examines women's agency based on normative and judicial sources. The two chapters focus on women's attitudes towards the normative structures and the institutions that determined and enforced those laws. I analyse women's agency – the capacity that women had to influence or interact with the norms laid out for them – in relation to the evidence and conclusions of Part I. Chapter 5 investigates women's influence over town regulations concerning their work and their authority over other economic actors. This short chapter shows that town councils, particularly in Bilbao, had to consider the needs of female merchants when they made new decisions. Some of these decisions were even prompted by requests from saleswomen. Women's influence over regulations in Brabant is less visible in the historical records, although there is evidence that under certain conditions – again influenced by marital status and the way work was organised – women in the Brabantine towns held positions of authority and tried to influence urban governments.

The final chapter, Chapter 6, looks at women's response to prosecution for offences related to their economic activities. Many urban dwellers resorted to the informal market when they could not work within the formal market or when informality offered more profits. This study interprets informal work as work not organised in a recognised institution or association. In contrast to illicit or irregular work, when actors violated existing regulations, informal work was not prohibited by definition. Local governments and guilds did not always prosecute these informal activities. Only when they thought that the informal practices had a negative economic impact, governing institutions did interfere. In their conflicts with governing institutions, urban residents wielded a diverse set of legal strategies to obtain the best possible outcome for themselves. These strategies are the subject of the final chapter, which will show many similarities between Brabant and Biscay. Nevertheless, the absence of guilds and the use of higher legal courts in Bilbao caused some divergence between the two regions. Because there

was no institution to support them, women in Bilbao, though of lower social standing, took on active roles in formal litigation.

With the six chapters of this study, I hope to spark new interest in the comparative approach to research. Analysis of women's labour opportunities in Antwerp, Mechelen, and Bilbao reveals the complicated consequences of the differing local contexts and institutions for women's economic activities.

CHAPTER 1. ECONOMIC SETTING, CUSTOMARY LAW, AND WOMEN'S WEALTH. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ANTWERP, MECHELEN, AND BILBAO

This chapter provides the socio-economic and political context of the towns in this study. I also discuss customary law in Biscay and Brabant. Finally, I analyse taxation registers from the three towns to identify the financial status of the women who appear in these records.

1. Urban Brabant and Biscay: economies and political organisation

1.1 *Antwerp*

The well-studied history of premodern Antwerp is a narrative of increasing wealth and success – at least until the second half of the sixteenth century. Except for the period from 1357 until 1406, when the count of Flanders conquered and ruled Antwerp, the city belonged to the duchy of Brabant.¹ In the fifteenth century, Antwerp was one of the four principal Brabantine towns that had juridical and economic hegemony over their hinterlands.² The town grew as a commercial centre throughout the fifteenth century and achieved economic supremacy over surrounding regions at the century's end.

In 1400, Antwerp had a population of approximately 15,000, making it one of the middling towns of the Low Countries. Like the surrounding towns, Antwerp profited from its drapery.³ However, in the fifteenth century, the town soon emerged as a centre of trade rather than production. With access to Atlantic commerce and the Hanse towns, its location

¹ Jan Van Gerven, "Antwerpen in de veertiende eeuw. Kleine stad zonder toekomst of opkomend handelscentrum," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'histoire* 76, no. 4 (1998): 907–38.

² Michael Limberger, *Sixteenth-Century Antwerp and Its Rural Surroundings: Social and Economic Changes in the Hinterland of a Commercial Metropolis (ca. 1450 - ca. 1570)* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2008), 216–21.

³ Floris Prims, *Geschiedenis van Antwerpen*. VI. - *Onder de hertogen van Bourgondie-hertogen van Brabant (1406-1477)*. 2e boek - *de economische orde*, vol. 14 (Brussel: Standaard, 1937), 2.

facilitated international trade. The two fairs held yearly in Antwerp gave the town international prestige.⁴ Antwerp's growing economic allure is reflected in growth of the population to 40,000 by the end of the fifteenth century.⁵ Furthermore, the poverty rate in town declined.⁶ While in the beginning of the sixteenth century, trade in Antwerp was still seasonal, bound to the fairs of Antwerp and the northern Brabantine town of Bergen-op-Zoom, by the mid-century, Antwerp had established itself as a permanent trading post for both northern and southern European traders.⁷ It maintained that position until the second half of the sixteenth century, when political instability pushed international traders to Amsterdam.

Antwerp was first and foremost a commercial hub, but the town had industries as well. A large number of artisans supported and benefited from the town's trade.⁸ As in other Brabantine towns, many of these occupations were organised in craft guilds or fell under a corporation's authority. Craft guilds in Antwerp acquired privileges relatively late in comparison to other Brabantine and Flemish towns. In the second half of the fourteenth century, thirty guilds gradually received privileges.⁹ Their autonomy was limited. Craft guilds in Antwerp did not gain the right to participate formally in the city's government until the 1430s. The growth of their economic power gave them the ability to exert political pressure. In 1435, twenty-one craft guilds

⁴ J. A. Van Houtte, "Anvers aux XVe et XVIe siècles : expansion et apogée," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 16, no. 2 (1961): 251.

⁵ Guido Marnef, *Antwerpen in de tijd van de Reformatie: ondergronds protestantisme in een handelsmetropool 1550 - 1577* (Antwerpen: Kritak, 1996), 25.

⁶ Andrea Bardyn, "Women's Fortunes. Gender Differences, Asset Management, and Investment in Late Medieval Brabant" (PhD Dissertation, Leuven, KU Leuven, 2018), 77.

⁷ Oscar Gelderblom, *Cities of Commerce. The Institutional Foundations of International Trade in the Low Countries, 1250-1650* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 15-33.

⁸ Marnef, *Antwerpen in de tijd van de Reformatie*, 23-24.

⁹ Marc Jacobs, "De ambachten in Brabant en Mechelen," in *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Brabant en Mechelen tot 1795* (Brussel: Algemeen rijksarchief, 2000), 560; Prims, *Geschiedenis van Antwerpen*. VI. - *Onder de hertogen van Burgondie-hertogen van Brabant (1406-1477)*. 2e boek - *de economische orde*, 14:9-10.

gained influence over the city's finances and the election of mayors.¹⁰ One year later, they were granted formal participation in urban government, but only in advisory positions.¹¹ Although the guilds in Antwerp had relatively little direct involvement in the town government, they were not powerless institutions. The corporations controlled production of prestigious luxury items, as well as other sectors important to the town's economy. This gave them leverage in town politics.¹²

The Antwerp urban government had three sometimes overlapping institutions: the central magistracy, the Monday Council, and the Broad Council. The central magistracy was the most important. There were twelve aldermen (raised to sixteen in 1490), two mayors, and two treasurers (raised to four in 1435). The magistracy was responsible for regulating and governing daily practice. Moreover, the magistracy was the only institution with judicial authority in Antwerp, except for representatives of Brabant's ruler. The craft guilds had little influence over the Antwerp central magistracy. Except for a short period between 1477 and 1485, guild members could not be elected as aldermen.¹³

The Antwerp craft guilds did not accept their exclusion from the magistracy. Throughout the fifteenth century, they persistently attempted to

¹⁰ Floris Prims, *Geschiedenis van Antwerpen*. VI. - *Onder de hertogen van Bourgondie-hertogen van Brabant (1406-1477)*. 1ste boek - *de politieke orde*, vol. 13 (Brussel: Standaard, 1936), 106.

¹¹ Janna Everaert, "Macht in de metropool. Politieke elitevorming tijdens de demografische en economische bloeifase van Antwerpen (ca. 1400-1550)" (Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Brussels, Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Universiteit Antwerpen, 2021), 21-36.

¹² Ben Eersels has also shown the great impact of guilds without direct political representation on town governments in the eastern part of the Southern Low Countries. See Ben Eersels, "The Craft Guilds Are the City. Political Participation in Late Medieval Towns. Brabant and Liège (c. 1360-1500)" (Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Leuven, KU Leuven, 2018); Bert De Munck, "La qualité du corporatisme : stratégies économiques et symboliques des corporations anversoises, XVIe - XVIIIe siècles," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 54, no. 1 (2007): 116-44.

¹³ Jos Van den Nieuwenhuizen, "Bestuursinstellingen van de stad Antwerpen," in *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Brabant en Mechelen tot 1795*, ed. Raymond Van Uytven et al. (Brussel: Algemeen rijksarchief, 2000), 465-67; Everaert, "Macht in de metropool," 21-36.

gain a direct say in the town's government. However, they only achieved the level of influence held by guilds in other Brabantine towns for a brief period between 1477 and 1485. After 1435 the Monday Council advised the central magistracy of Antwerp. The council members were the magistrates and twelve representatives of Antwerp's privileged guilds.¹⁴ The guilds also had a representative on the Broad Council. Along with the magistracy, former aldermen still performing duties for the town, and the headmen and ward masters as representatives of the citizens, the deans of the privileged guilds were responsible for accepting proposed regulations from the magistracy. Until the end of the sixteenth century, the Broad Council only met sporadically.¹⁵ Although the Broad Council and the Monday Council supervised its activity and decisions, the magistracy was Antwerp's principal governing body.

1.2 Mechelen

The economic and political history of Mechelen follows a pattern familiar from Antwerp. Although the cities were only a few kilometres apart, they belonged to different political territories for most of the premodern period. Before and during the first half of the fourteenth century, Mechelen belonged to the Prince-Bishop of Liège, who 'rented it' to the Berthout family. In 1356, Mechelen was taken by the Count of Flanders for a brief period. By a state marriage in 1384, Mechelen came under Burgundian rule.¹⁶ Even after the Burgundian union, the political entanglement of Mechelen left the city vulnerable to (armed) conflict with the territory of Brabant which

¹⁴ The skippers, gardeners, and retailers always had representatives on the council. The other guilds alternated among each other for the remaining nine positions. Jacobs, "De ambachten in Brabant en Mechelen," 578; Prims, *Geschiedenis van Antwerpen*. VI. - *Onder de hertogen van Burgondie- hertogen van Brabant (1406-1477)*. 1ste boek - *de politieke orde*, 13:123–24.

¹⁵ Guido Marnef, "Multiconfessionalism in a Commercial Metropolis: The Case of 16th-Century Antwerp," *A Companion to Multiconfessionalism in the Early Modern World*, 2011, 86, footnote 40.

¹⁶ Jos Laenen, *Geschiedenis van Mechelen tot op het einde der middeleeuwen*, 2nd ed. (Mechelen: H. Dierickx-Beke Zonen, 1934), 75–106.

surrounded it.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Mechelen's central location in Brabant on the river Dijle also gave the town economic strength, enabling it to control the distribution of merchandise to the surrounding area.

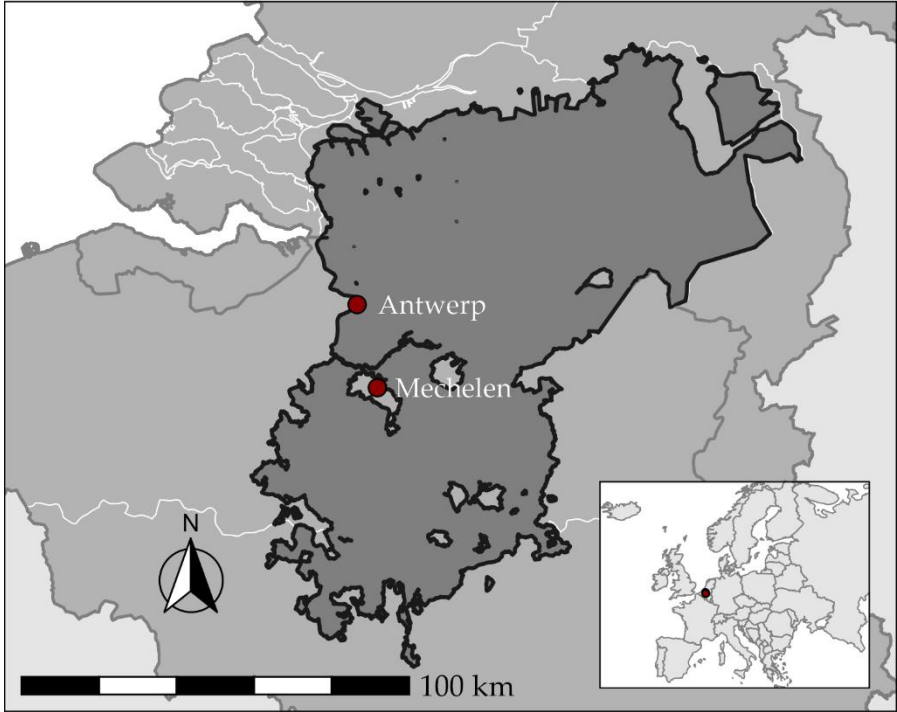


Figure 1. The Duchy of Brabant in the fifteenth century.¹⁸

In the same manner as did many towns in the late medieval southern Low Countries, Mechelen derived its economic power from the drapery, which emerged in the thirteenth century. In the fourteenth century, wool cloth from Mechelen circulated throughout western Europe.¹⁹ In the fifteenth century, the town successfully shifted from mass production of average grades of wool cloth to the production of luxury woollens, a move that

¹⁷ Raymond Van Uytven, *De geschiedenis van Mechelen: van heerlijkheid tot stadsgewest* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1991), 41–42.

¹⁸ The data of the borders of the Duchy of Brabant can be found at: Stapel, Rombert, 2020, "Duchy of Brabant GIS Collection", <https://hdl.handle.net/10622/UOKBYL>.

¹⁹ Van Uytven, *De geschiedenis van Mechelen*, 42–44.

guaranteed economic hegemony over its hinterland. Nevertheless, the Mechelen drapery continually lost market share, struggling along until the mid-sixteenth century, when production was almost nothing.²⁰ Other economic sectors that had blossomed in the fifteenth century – metal foundry, luxury production, and the construction industry – suffered drastic reductions in the mid-sixteenth century.²¹ Finally, Mechelen benefitted from its position as a designated political centre or regional capital of the Habsburg government.

Another income source of late medieval Mechelen came from staple rights on fish, salt, and oats acquired by the city in the fourteenth century. Boats passing through Antwerp to Mechelen paid no taxes in Antwerp, while Mechelen collected transit taxes. Furthermore, merchants passing through Mechelen with fish, salt, and/or oats had to sell these in Mechelen before they were allowed to go on to the next location. Because retail sales of those commodities were limited to Mechelen residents, the staple rights favoured the local economy and enhanced residents' incomes.²² While Mechelen generated income from all boats that continued on to Brussels, Leuven, and other Brabantine towns, the staple rights caused centuries of conflict between Antwerp and Mechelen, causing periodic political and economic crises until 1550, when a new canal was dug to connect Brussels and Antwerp.²³ This produced a sharp decrease in income from staple duties.²⁴

The trend of rise and decline over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also shows in Mechelen's population numbers. At the end of the fourteenth century, Mechelen had approximately 15,000 inhabitants. By 1500, this number had grown to 25,000, and by 1565, the population peaked at roughly

²⁰ G. Daems, "De lakenindustrie in de stad Mechelen en in haar omgeving tussen ca. 1480 en ca. 1580" (Unpublished Master Thesis, Leuven, KU Leuven, 1974), 29–37.

²¹ Marleen Mast, "Politiek, prestige en vermogen: de Mechelse magistraat, 1520-1577" (Unpublished Master Thesis, Leuven, KU Leuven, 1990), 5–11.

²² Van Uytven, *De geschiedenis van Mechelen*, 50–52.

²³ Laenen, *Geschiedenis van Mechelen tot op het einde der middeleeuwen*; Mast, "Politiek, prestige en vermogen," 5–11.

²⁴ Roel Jacobs, *Een geschiedenis van Brussel* (Lannoo Uitgeverij, 2004), 145–48.

30,000. But by the end of the sixteenth century, economic and political crises caused a steep decrease of population to 11,000.²⁵

As in Antwerp, most occupations involving production or small-scale trade in Mechelen were organised in craft guilds. Although the number fluctuated throughout the century, there were approximately thirty-eight privileged craft guilds in Mechelen. Five of these guilds (bakers, brewers, butchers, tanners, and fishmongers), called the 'major craft guilds' (*hoofdambachten*), were directly represented in the town's government.²⁶ Another seventeen guilds, the so-called *grote ambachten* (great craft guilds), were involved in the election of these representatives and could participate in the *Grote Raad* of Mechelen.²⁷ From the thirteenth century, the valuable woollen cloth industry and trade was organised in a merchant guild – the *lakengilde*. The wool cloth merchants influenced the town's economy and politics. They also controlled the different steps of production of woollen cloth, which led to persistent social conflict between the merchants and artisans, especially the weavers.²⁸

The town government of Mechelen contained members of the craft guilds and the urban (merchant) elite. It was headed by a bailiff who represented the feudal lord of Mechelen. There were two mayors, twelve aldermen, and a fluctuating number of officials in the city's magistracy. As in Antwerp, the Mechelen magistracy was responsible for governing the town, as well as administering justice.²⁹ Throughout the late Middle Ages,

²⁵ Van Uytven, *De geschiedenis van Mechelen*, 83; Mast, "Politiek, prestige en vermogen," 5.

²⁶ The guilds represented in the town government changed throughout the fifteenth century. The butchers, bakers, fishmongers, tanners, and brewers remained in the group of represented guilds, but the weavers were replaced by the dyers. Jacobs, "De ambachten in Brabant en Mechelen," 572–73.

²⁷ Laenen, *Geschiedenis van Mechelen tot op het einde der middeleeuwen*, 278–79.

²⁸ Jean-Paul Peeters, "De produktiestructuur der Mechelse lakennijverheid en de ambachten van wevers en volders van 1270 tot 1430," *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Kring Voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren En Kunst van Mechelen* 88 (1984): 93–158.

²⁹ Henri Installé, "Bestuursinstellingen van de Heerlijkheid Mechelen (11de Eeuw-1795)," in *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Brabant en Mechelen tot 1795* (Brussel: Algemeen rijksarchief, 2000), 846–47; Mast, "Politiek, prestige en vermogen," 16.

there were changes in the number of craftsmen serving in town government, and craftsmen's seats eventually decreased in favour of the urban elite. The magistracy regulated and controlled daily life in the city. They had to consider the views and requests of the 'outer council' (*Buitenraad*) of approximately seventy representatives of the craft guilds. In contrast to Antwerp, (the elites of) the Mechelen craft guilds had a strong position in urban government. Of course, as in other Brabantine towns, not all urban residents were represented in local government. Official positions sitting on and appointed by both the magistracy and the outer council were held by a limited number of guild members and an even more limited number of local aristocrats. Moreover, as elsewhere in the Southern Low Countries, the town council's autonomy decreased after the end of the fifteenth century.³⁰

1.3 Bilbao

Bilbao's urbanisation began later than that of Mechelen and Antwerp. Until 1300, Bilbao was one of the nine larger settlements in the Biscayan region.³¹ On 15 June 1300, the lord of Biscay granted Bilbao urban rights, and it became a town (*villa*). The town was granted jurisdiction over the surrounding territory, a yearly fair, the right to elect its own council, and, perhaps most importantly, exemption from seigneurial taxes.³² Little is known about the urban economy and the town's middling groups before the second half of the fifteenth century. Bilbao did not immediately gain hegemony over other Atlantic coastal towns or other Biscayan settlements. Instead, until the mid-fifteenth century, the town was involved in persistent

³⁰ Van Uytven, *De geschiedenis van Mechelen*, 97–125; Jelle Haemers, "Ad Petitionem Burgensium. Petitions and Peaceful Resistance of Craftsmen in Flanders and Mechelen (13th-16th Centuries)," in *Los grupos populares en la ciudad medieval europea*, ed. Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea, Beatriz Arizaga Bolumburu, and Jelle Haemers (Logroño: Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 2014), 371–94.

³¹ Teófilo Guiard y Larrauri, *Historia de la noble villa de Bilbao*, vol. 1 (Bilbao: Imprenta y Librería de José de Astuy, 1905), 72.

³² Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea, "La configuración política de Bizkaia y sus vínculos con Castilla en la plena edad media. Del conde Momo al conde Don Tello de Trastámara" (Unpublished book chapter, 2021), 43–44.

violent conflict between certain Biscayan (urban) elite families – the *banderizos* – and between these families and middling groups.³³

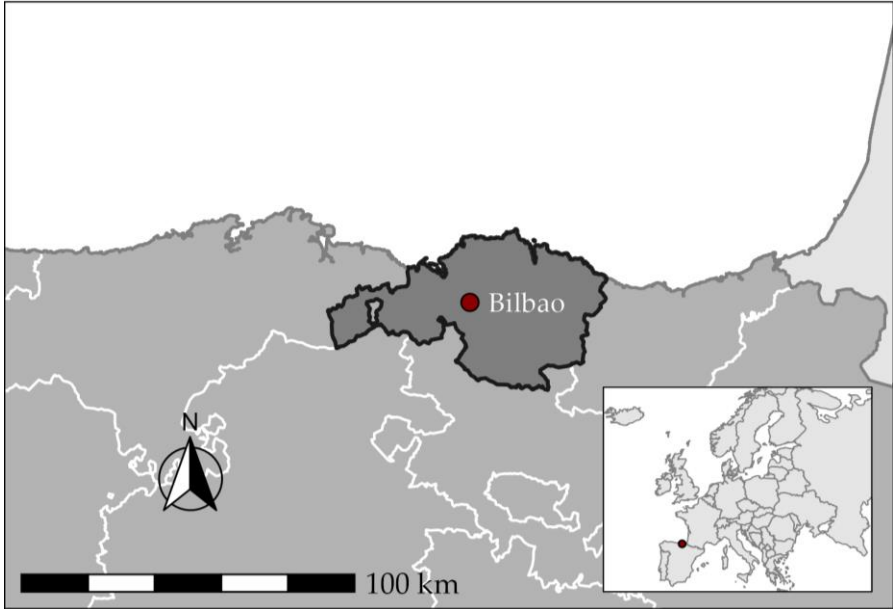


Figure 2. The Lordship of Biscay in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

Although conflict between elite families hindered Bilbao's economic prosperity, city residents did develop the roots of a maritime economy that became so important later. Inaccessible terrain around the town prevented its spatial growth but provided the raw materials – iron and wood – necessary for its maritime industry.³⁴ Iron production and trade were major

³³ The conflict between the Biscayan *bandos* lasted even up to the beginning of the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, from the mid-fifteenth century, Bilbao managed to secure a relatively stable town council. José Ángel García de Cortázar et al., *Vizcaya en la edad media: evolución demográfica, económica, social y política de la comunidad vizcaína medieval*, vol. 3, 4 vols. (San Sebastian: Haranburu, 1985), 350–67; José Ignacio Salazar, “Gobierno local en el Bilbao bajomedieval,” *Bidebarrieta: Revista de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales de Bilbao* 12 (2003): 183–97.

³⁴ Patrick O’Flanagan, *Port Cities of Atlantic Iberia, C. 1500-1900* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 258–69.

drivers of the town's economy.³⁵ Nevertheless, Bilbao was first and foremost a commercial town. In his well-known *Historia del Consulado de Bilbao*, Teófilo Guiard y Larrauri states that: "Bilbao was a commercial settlement before it was a town. Its inhabitants were traders before they were citizens, paid trading levies before they paid urban taxes, and had mercantile judges to decide over trade conflicts before they had magistrates to decide over civil cases."³⁶ Commodities that arrived in Bilbao by sea were transported overland or in smaller boats to the rest of the kingdom of Castile. In this way, Bilbao served as the harbour for most shipping from parts of France, England, the Low Countries, Portugal, Ireland, and Norway.³⁷

Though economically important, Bilbao's population was small, and demographic growth was limited until the eighteenth century. In 1500, Bilbao had approximately 5,600 residents. This number rose sharply in the early sixteenth century, only to decline by 1600 to the earlier figure.³⁸ As the town's economic importance increased, the number of streets and buildings also grew, but Bilbao remained a small settlement (see Figure 3). The narrow streets and town walls allowed for little spatial expansion.³⁹ Most of the town's market places, where women traded actively, were on the edge of town or even outside the walls.

One of the privileges given to Bilbao in 1300 was the right to elect their own town council. Because of the strife between elite families, the town council was not fixed or stable until 1435. In addition, most Biscayan towns were governed by two mayors and the general assembly, or *asamblea general*.

³⁵ José Ángel García de Cortázar et al., *Vizcaya en la edad media: evolución demográfica, económica, social y política de la comunidad vizcaína medieval*, vol. 2, 4 vols. (San Sebastian: Haranburu, 1985).

³⁶ Teófilo Guiard y Larrauri, *Historia del Consulado y Casa de Contratación de Bilbao y del comercio de la villa*, vol. 1 (Bilbao: Imprenta y Librería de José de Astuy, 1913), LXXXI–LXXXII.

³⁷ O'Flanagan, *Port Cities of Atlantic Iberia, C. 1500–1900*, 265–68.

³⁸ Elena Catalán Martínez and Ramón Lanza García, "Crecimiento demográfico en tiempos de crisis: Bilbao en los siglos XVI y XVII," *Revista de Demografía Histórica* 35, no. 1 (2017): 17–54.

³⁹ Beatriz Bolumburu Arizaga and Sergio Martínez Martínez, *Atlas de villas medievales de Vasconia* (San Sebastian: Eusko Ikaskuntza, 2006), 53–106.

All citizens had the right to participate in these open councils, and widowed and single citizens also participated in some Basque towns.⁴⁰ Nevertheless,

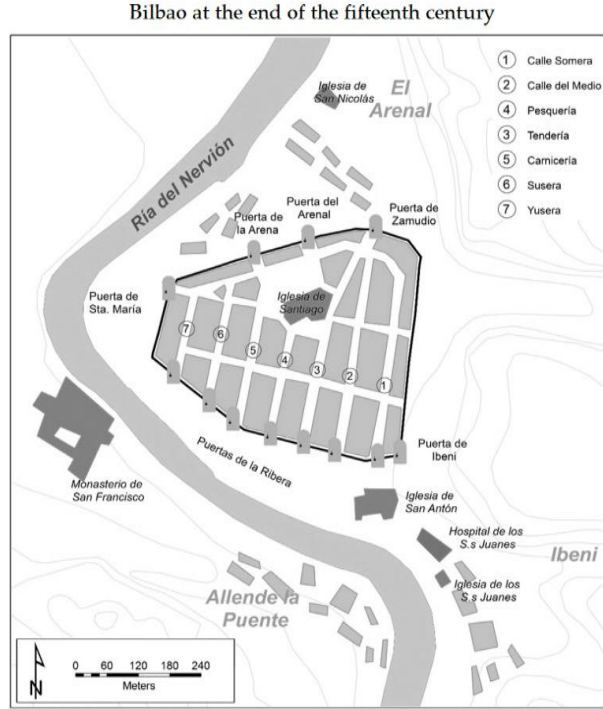


Figure 3. Ground plan of Bilbao at the end of the fifteenth century.

Source: Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea.

there is little surviving evidence of this assembly in Biscay. As Bilbao was able to pacify the fractious elite families and the city grew in population, the closed town council became more dominant at the expense of the general assembly. In the fifteenth century, middling groups' struggle to gain power resulted in political representation. The 'commons' were now allowed to

⁴⁰ Janire Castrillo Casado, "Las mujeres del común y la sociedad política en al País Vasco bajomedieval," in *Los grupos populares en la ciudad medieval europea*, ed. Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea, Beatriz Arízaga Bolumburu, and Jelle Haemers (Logroño, 2014), 516; María Isabel del Val Valdivieso, "Los espacios del trabajo femenino en la Castilla del Siglo XV," *Studia Historica. Historia Medieval* 26 (2008): 69.

choose Bilbao's mayor. Nevertheless, the actual participants in town government were a select group.⁴¹ One mayor headed Bilbao's urban government. On the council, there were two jurors, eight governors, two clerks, and six judges.⁴² Some councillors came from the Biscayan elite families and some from the mercantile class. The overlap between these two groups steadily increased until a few prominent families had established an oligarchy in the Biscayan town by the sixteenth century.⁴³ The council of Bilbao was authorised to make and enforce laws governing urban life. The Bilbao town council controlled its own formation, economic policies, control mechanisms, and criminal courts.⁴⁴ Although its power diminished as the kingdom centralised, the Biscayan commercial hub had a significant say in the organisation of urban life.⁴⁵

Guilds were notably absent from urban life in Bilbao. As a few occupational groups in Bilbao managed to gain some type of community recognition, they were able to organise into brotherhoods. In the sixteenth century, the merchants of Bilbao – already organised as a nation in Bruges – obtained brotherhood privileges, which led to the establishment of the *Consulado* in the *Casa de Contratación*.⁴⁶ The merchant guild of Bilbao was a dominant force in the town.⁴⁷ In other Biscayan towns, the number of

⁴¹ Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea, "Las voces del común en el mundo urbano de la España Atlántica en la baja edad media," in *Los grupos populares en la ciudad medieval europea*, by Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea, Beatriz Arizaga Bolumburu, and Jelle Haemers (Logroño: Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 2014), 301–44.

⁴² Bolumburu Arizaga and Martínez Martínez, *Atlas de villas medievales de Vasconia*, 159–64.

⁴³ Ignacio Salazar, "Gobierno local en el Bilbao bajomedieval."

⁴⁴ José Ángel García de Cortázar et al., *Vizcaya en la edad media: evolución demográfica, económica, social y política de la comunidad Vizcaína medieval*, vol. 4 (San Sebastian: Haranburu, 1985), 50–52.

⁴⁵ Antonio Irigoyen López, "Characteristics of Castilian Cities in the 16th and 17th Centuries," in *The Power of Cities: The Iberian Peninsula from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, by Sabine Panzram (Brill, 2019), 301.

⁴⁶ Guiard y Larrauri, *Historia del Consulado y Casa de Contratación de Bilbao y del comercio de la villa*, 1:66–85.

⁴⁷ Aingeru Zabala Iriarte, "The Consolidation of Bilbao as a Trade Centre in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century," in *Merchant Organization and Maritime*

occupations organised in brotherhoods grew (see Figure 4). In Bermeo and Lequeito, maritime trades and occupations were organised in brotherhoods by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁴⁸ Besides exerting internal control and resolving conflicts between members, the *cofradías de mareantes* in the Biscayan towns tried to regulate the sale of fish so that confraternity members would not have to deal with 'unfair competition'.⁴⁹ However, this did not happen in Bilbao. In Bilbao, there were only a few active brotherhoods, or *cofradías*, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, such as the Brotherhood of San Nicolás, which united the shoemakers, purse makers, and tanners of the town. The brotherhood of San Nicolás obtained a monopoly over their trades and forced potential shoemakers – probably the largest group within the brotherhood – to complete an exam before being allowed to establish a shop. Furthermore, the brotherhood attempted to exert controls on quality and price for products made by its members.⁵⁰

The brotherhoods of Bilbao fulfilled religious and cultural functions, such as organising funerals for members and festivities. Similar to the guilds in the Brabantine towns, the Bilbao brotherhoods provided only a small space for female members by allowing widows to (temporarily) take over their deceased husbands' positions. However, unlike the situation in Brabant, where the guilds were politically powerful, in Bilbao, the *Consulado* was the only institution with direct political influence. This influence was aligned with the policies of the Bilbao council – a logical consequence of the fact that many of the councillors were from merchant families themselves.⁵¹

Trade in the North Atlantic, 1660-1815, ed. Olaf Uwe Janzen (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 155.

⁴⁸ Ernesto García Fernández, "Las cofradías de oficios en el País Vasco durante la edad media (1350-1550)," *Studia Historica. Historia Medieval* 15 (1997): 14.

⁴⁹ García Fernández, 27; Ana María Rivera Medina, "Pescado, tiempo y distancia: las conservas en Bizkaia (s. XIV-XVIII)," in *Arrain Kontserbak Euskal Herrian : Industria Eta Ondarea = Las conservas de pescado en el País Vasco: industria y patrimonio/Arrain kontserbak Euskal Herrian: industria eta ondarea* (Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa/Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia, 1997), 21.

⁵⁰ García Fernández, "Las cofradías de oficios," 30–31.

⁵¹ Ernesto García Fernández, "Las cofradías de mercaderes. Mareantes y pescadores vascos en la edad media," in *Ciudades y villas portuarias del Atlántico en la edad media* (Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 2005), 257–94.

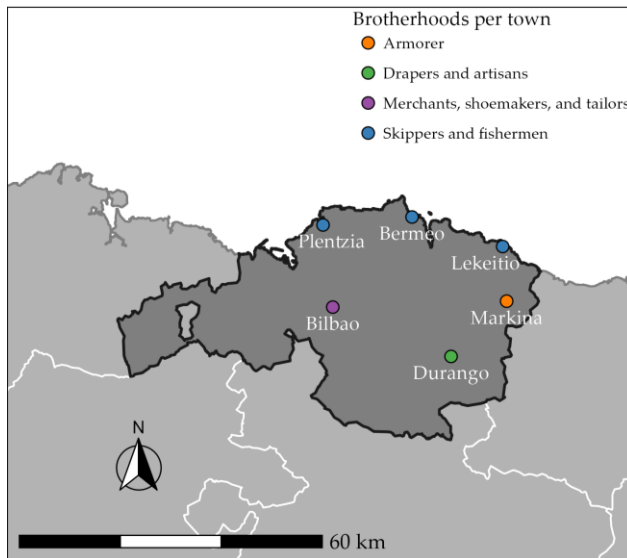


Figure 4. Map of the existing occupational brotherhoods in premodern Biscay.⁵²

In contrast to other Biscayan towns, the Bilbao brotherhoods caused little social conflict.⁵³ Although they could pressure the council into promulgating ordinances, the Crown of Castile would not grant the brotherhoods the right to political participation.⁵⁴ As I will argue in this study, the significant difference in the organisation of work between Brabant and Biscay had important implications for women's economic opportunities in these two regions.

⁵² This map is based on the results of Ernesto García Fernández' study of premodern Basque brotherhoods. See: García Fernández, 15.

⁵³ Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea, "'Por bien y utilidad de los dichos maestros, pescadores y navegantes': trabajo, solidaridad y acción política en las cofradías de las gentes de la mar en la España Atlántica medieval," *Medievalismo*, no. 26 (2016): 329–56.

⁵⁴ García Fernández, "Las cofradías de mercaderes"; AFB, Bilbao Antigua, Municipal, 0017/001/051, 1561.

2. Customary law in Brabant and Biscay

The legal positions of women in Brabant and Biscay influenced their labour opportunities. More specifically, juridical capability, property rights, and inheritance rights affected what women could legally do in the economy. Many scholars have attributed differences in women's labour opportunities between northern and southern Europe to the distinct legal systems of each region. Whereas Roman law, applied in southern Europe, favoured the lineage, therefore denying women extensive inheritance and property rights, northern European common law allowed women more rights to inheritance and property because it favoured the nuclear family and their household production unit.⁵⁵ This section will survey the relevant common law in Bilbao, Antwerp, and Mechelen. In a pattern similar to the one Darlene Abreu-Ferreira found in the Portuguese coastal towns, some features of the common law of Biscay were surprisingly similar to those of Mechelen and Antwerp.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, as I will discuss, there were a few striking differences.

2.1 *Juridical capability*

In Bilbao, both men and women reached adulthood at twenty-five. Until then, they needed a legal guardian for transactions and other juridical activities. Women and men over the age of eighteen could apply for emancipation if they could prove they were capable of managing their

⁵⁵ Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, "The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe, 500-1100," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia press, 1988), 89; Laurence Fontaine, "Makeshift, Women and Capability in Preindustrial European Towns," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Monténach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 56; Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten Van Zanden, "Girl Power: The European Marriage Pattern and Labour Markets in the North Sea Region in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Period," *Economic History Review* 63, no. 1 (2010): 8–10.

⁵⁶ Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, "Fishmongers and Shipowners: Women in Maritime Communities of Early Modern Portugal," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 1 (2000): 7–23; Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, "Women, Law and Legal Intervention in Early Modern Portugal," *Continuity and Change* 33, no. 3 (2018): 293–313.

assets.⁵⁷ In contrast to other Castilian regions but similar to maritime Portugal, women 'whether single, married, or widowed – were legally capable of acquiring and disposing of their own properties, movable or immovable.' Moreover, after reaching legal adulthood, women in Biscay could litigate by themselves in court regardless of their marital status.⁵⁸ Biscayan women might have possessed this particular legal autonomy because of the region's maritime focus. Anna Bellavitis has pointed out that in Italian towns with 'ancient maritime traditions', men's frequent absences 'gave women the opportunity to take on greater responsibility before the law.'⁵⁹ Although women in Bilbao were allowed to manage their own property, widows could appoint a guardian or advisor if they wished to do so.⁶⁰ The idea that it was more appropriate for men to act legally may have induced widows to make such appointments.⁶¹

In the Brabantine towns during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, urban residents reached legal adulthood around the age of twenty-five, which gave them legal capacity without the need for a guardian.⁶² Nevertheless, unlike in Biscay, most women in the Brabantine towns did not become judicially capable upon reaching twenty-five. In Antwerp, both single and married women taking legal action required a guardian. For a married woman, her husband normally served as this guardian, or 'mamboir'. Even though they could own their own property, women could

⁵⁷ Itziar Monasterio Aspuri, "La condición jurídica de la mujer en el derecho civil-foral de Bizkaia," *Iura Vasconiae* 3 (2006): 249–81.

⁵⁸ Abreu-Ferreira, "Women, Law and Legal Intervention in Early Modern Portugal," 294; Gregorio Monreal Zia, *The Old Law of Bizkaia (1452). Introductory Study and Critical Edition* (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, 2005), 23; Janire Castrillo Casado, *Las mujeres vascas durante la baja edad media: vida familiar, capacidades jurídicas, roles sociales y trabajo* (Madrid, España: Sílex, 2020), 101–14; Marjorie Ratcliffe, "'Matris et Munium...': Marriage and Marriage Law in Medieval Spanish Legislation," *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 13 (1988): 94.

⁵⁹ Anna Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights in Early Modern Urban Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 70.

⁶⁰ Castrillo Casado, *Las mujeres vascas durante la baja edad media*, 111–14.

⁶¹ Abreu-Ferreira, "Women, Law and Legal Intervention in Early Modern Portugal," 309.

⁶² Philippe Godding, *Le droit privé dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux du 12e Au 18e Siècle* (Bruxelles: Académie royale de Belgique, 1987), 70–72.

not manage it without a man's permission. However, widows and other women often signed contracts without the presence of a male guardian in daily practice.⁶³

The common law of Mechelen does not specifically state that single women required a guardian, which might mean that Mechelen widows and never-married women of legal age had juridical capacity.⁶⁴ Regarding married women, a stipulation in the written common law of 1535 stated that 'a husband is guardian of his wife and can manage her property, transactions, and debts without the authorisation or consent of his wife.'⁶⁵ Although a husband could not sell or give away goods owned by his wife without her consent, he was the manager of her property. However, in neither Mechelen nor Antwerp did norm and practice always coincide. Previous studies of women's property management in the Low Countries have shown that, in practice, wives did make contracts without their husbands' permission. As long as these benefited the nuclear couple, a husband would usually not intervene.⁶⁶

⁶³ Laura Van Aert, "The Legal Possibilities of Antwerp Widows in the Late Sixteenth Century," *The History of the Family* 12, no. 4 (2007): 285–87; Kaat Cappelle, "'In de macht, plicht en momboorij van heuren man': de rechtspositie van de getrouwde vrouw in Antwerpen en Leuven (16de eeuw)," *Pro Memorie* 18, no. 1 (2016): 61.

⁶⁴ This was also the case in Leuven, Ghent, and Brussels, other towns of the Southern Low Countries. See: Bardyn, "Women's Fortunes. Gender Differences, Asset Management, and Investment in Late Medieval Brabant"; Shennan Hutton, *Women and Economic Activities in Late Medieval Ghent* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 30; Andrea Bardyn, "Vermogende vrouwen. Het vastgoedbezit van vrouwen in laatmiddeleeuws Brussel op basis van cijnsregisters (1356-1460)," *Stadsgeschiedenis* 9 (2014): 4.

⁶⁵ 'Een man is momboir van zijne huysvrouwe, ende mach allen huere goeden, actien ende schulden, als momboir vervolgen, eysschen ende bescudden, sonder auctorizatie oft consent van zijne huysvrouwe.' Guillaume de Longé, *Coutumes de la ville de Malines* (F. Gobbaerts, 1879), 62.

⁶⁶ Bardyn, "Women's Fortunes. Gender Differences, Asset Management, and Investment in Late Medieval Brabant," 57–60; Hutton, *Women and Economic Activities in Late Medieval Ghent*.

2.2 Property rights and marital property rights

Benefits for the nuclear couple were key to property rights in both Biscay and Brabant. In all regions, when a couple married, the spouses' property united to form their conjugal property. Bilbao had a system of 'absolute community property'. The property that both husband and wife brought into the marriage would merge and become the basis of the couple's wealth. Both spouses now owned half of it, 'even if the husband had much property and the wife had little, or the wife had much and the husband little.'⁶⁷ Regardless of this 'absolute community of property', it is clear that the married couple considered the capital they had possessed at the time of their marriage highly significant, as it influenced the husband's management options.

In Biscay, wives had a voice in the management of the married couple's communal property. According to the *Fuero Viejo*, the Biscay common law redacted in 1452, 'the husband may not sell or give away any real estate that belongs to the wife without the wife's consent [...], even if that property came from the husband's side of the family, because it would do great harm to the wife and is unlawful.'⁶⁸ The *Fuero Nuevo* from 1526 has a similar stipulation, except for the clause about the husband not being able to give away his wife's half of the property.⁶⁹ The *Fuero Nuevo* added that the husband, as head of household, could make transactions involving the property acquired during the marriage after the couple's property was conjoined. The wife was allowed to enter into transactions involving her own property. Women could extend this permission quite far, as a complaint from the husband of Catalina de Uribarri from 1516 shows. Catalina's husband, Ochoa de Libarrona, appeared before the mayor of Bilbao, complaining that his wife 'wandered out of the house and his company, stealing communal goods and property to buy sardines, clothes, and iron'

⁶⁷ Monreal Zia, *The Old Law of Bizkaia* (1452), 224.

⁶⁸ Monreal Zia, 225.

⁶⁹ '[...] el marido no pueda vender bienes algunos raíces, muebles, y semovientes, que no sean ganados durante matrimonio, pertenecientes en la su mitas a la muger, sin otorgamiento de la muger, aunque los bienes provengan de parte de el marido.' *Fueros, privilegios, franquexas y libertades del M.N.Y.M.L. Señorío de Vizcaya* (Bilbao: Juan E. Delmas, n.d.), 56.

for resale. Even though Ochoa accused his wife of damaging the couple's conjugal property, the mayor of Bilbao – and later the Corregidor of Biscay and the judges of the Royal Chancellery at Valladolid – supported Catalina, who denied her husband's allegations.⁷⁰ Conflicts like this one were possible in Bilbao because of the Visigothic principle that women were allowed 'to enter contractual agreements without male consent'.⁷¹ This right might be one factor helping to enable the active, enterprising role of women in Bilbao visible in the sources of this study.

At marriage, a spouse might bring inherited property, gifts received, or their own earnings into the couple's communal property. A spouse might also contribute a dowry. While in regions where Roman law defined the dowry system, only women received dowries, in Biscay, either the man or woman might possess a dowry, although the trend was towards origin only from the woman's family. The spouse contributing the dowry to the marriage did not inherit a share of her family's property and could not contribute any immovable property. The dowry might be paid by the parents or an inheriting sibling if there was an agreement by an *inter vivos* exchange or a testament.⁷² As a contract from 1515 indicates, the dowry that the spouse received could come with conditions for the newly-weds. When he married Juana Pérez de Marquina in 1515, Gonzalo de Mamud had to promise to pay off the debts contracted by his father-in-law and provide dowries for his sisters-in-law. In return, Juana received half of a house in the centre of Bilbao as a dowry.⁷³ A dowry could provide a valuable asset to the married couple's communal property. As earlier studies have shown, rather

⁷⁰ '[...] le andaba ausentada de su casa y conpannia, robándole quantos bienes y hacienda tenía y que con los dineros de ellos compraba sardina e panno e azero a quien quería [...].' ARChV, Registro de Ejecutorias, Caja 308, 31, 29 March 1516.

⁷¹ David Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria. Women and Work in Medieval Europe* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 168.

⁷² Monasterio Aspiri, "La condición jurídica de la mujer," 274–78.

⁷³ Javier Enríquez Fernández, Concepción Hidalgo de Cisneros Amestoy, and Adela Martínez Lahidalga, *Colección documental del archivo histórico de Bilbao (1514-1520)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévaleas Del País Vasco 108 (Donostia, 2001), 1499–1500.

than being the sole possession of the wife, the dowry enabled the spouses to invest in their own family business.⁷⁴

While theoretically, the nuclear couple had absolute community of property in Biscay, it seems that practice tended to be closer to the common law of the Brabantine towns. In Antwerp and Mechelen, property rights of the married couple were structured into a 'limited community property regime'. The immovable property that each spouse had brought into the marriage remained their personal property. Their movable goods and property acquired during the marriage were communal.⁷⁵ As I will discuss later, in both the Mechelen and Biscayan common law, whether the community of property was partial or absolute community depended on whether the couple did or did not have children. Due to the impact on inheritance rights, spouses needed to be aware of the division within their property, even if it was communal.⁷⁶

In practice, the communal property regime could be more complicated than the normative law texts expressed since it had to be adapted to individual household situations. In 1417 in Antwerp, for example, Aard van der Stegen declared that he would not be obligated for the debts and transactions of his wife, Liesbet Bantaerts, as they were divorced in practice.⁷⁷ Fifty years later, Jan van den Velde and Ida Smekens declared before the Antwerp aldermen a division of their goods because of their separation. The couple had lived together for several years without being

⁷⁴ Dana Wessell Lightfoot, *Women, Dowries and Agency: Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Valencia*, Gender in History (Manchester: University Press, 2013).

⁷⁵ Bardyn, "Women's Fortunes. Gender Differences, Asset Management, and Investment in Late Medieval Brabant," 28–29; Cappelle, "'In de macht, plicht en momboorje van heuren man,'" 51.

⁷⁶ Laura Vos, "Het huwelijksvermogensrecht in het huidige Vlaanderen van de 16de en 17de eeuw. Een vergelijkende studie van de Costumen van Antwerpen, Brussel, Leuven, Gent en Mechelen" (Unpublished Master Thesis, Leuven, KU Leuven, 2016), 70–72; Janire Castrillo Casado, "Mujeres y matrimonio en las tres provincias vascas durante la baja edad media," *Vasconia* 28 (2012): 30–31.

⁷⁷ Jos Van den Branden, "Oudt register, mette berderen, 1336-1439 (Vervolg)," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 27 (1890): 82, 23 April 1417.

married and divided the goods as a married couple would do.⁷⁸ These examples show the complicated situations of households in the urban Low Countries. In practice, customary law had to be adapted to make sense for these non-traditional households.

2.3 Inheritance

Women had similar property rights in Biscay and the Brabantine towns. In both regions, husbands were the principal managers of married couples' property. Furthermore, both regions had established a system with a community of property. The inheritance systems of the two regions were quite different, however, and as Thomas Keuhn has stated, 'the most important dimension of household unity and family continuity lay in inheritance.'⁷⁹ This factor might have impacted women's social and economic position in these regions, which had distinct common laws.

The inheritance system of Antwerp was the most favourable to the married couple.⁸⁰ In Antwerp, when one of the spouses died, the couple's property was divided in two. The children or other heirs inherited the deceased spouse's personal property and half of the couple's communal property.⁸¹ This was divided equally among the heirs, regardless of their gender.⁸² The widow or widower would keep his or her own property and inherit half of the communal property, as well as the 'urban advantage' (*stads*

⁷⁸ Each spouse would take back the goods they had brought into the household and the couple would divide the goods obtained during the relationship. Pierre Génard, "Register van den dachvaerden," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 20 (1883): 76, 27 March 1468.

⁷⁹ Thomas Keuhn, "Household and Family in the *Ius Commune* and *Ius Proprium*," in *The Household in Late Medieval Cities, Italy and Northwestern Europe Compared*, by Myriam Carlier and Tim Soens (Leuven-Apeldoorn: Garant, 2001), 46.

⁸⁰ Kaat Cappelle, "Law, Wives and the Marital Economy in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice," in *Gender, Law and Economic Well-Being in Europe from the Fifteenth to the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Beatrice Zucca Micheletto and Anna Bellavitis (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 231.

⁸¹ Bardyn, "Women's Fortunes. Gender Differences, Asset Management, and Investment in Late Medieval Brabant," 32.

⁸² John Gilissen, "Le statut de la femme dans l'ancien droit Belge," in *Extrait Des Recueils de La Société Jean Bodin* (Bruxelles: Edde la Librairie encyclopédique, 1962), 257.

voordeel). This was a part of the communal property, set aside for the surviving spouse during the couple's marriage, that the widow(er) would not have to share with the heirs.⁸³ The survivor was therefore able to retain more than half of the communal property. The children and heirs received this after the surviving spouse's death, but it could also be divided among more parties if the widow(er) remarried.

In Mechelen, according to the sixteenth-century common law, the widow(er)'s inheritance was influenced by whether or not the couple had children. If the marriage remained childless, the surviving spouse and the heirs divided the communal property, while the heirs received the deceased spouse's lineal property.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the widow(er) had usufruct on both the movables and immovables from the communal and lineal property.⁸⁵ If the couple had children, the limited communal property system transformed into an absolute system. All immovable property, except for the surviving spouse's lineal property, was distributed equally to the children. All movable property, regardless of its origin, was divided between the widow(er) and the children. The widow(er) had usufruct on all immovable property.⁸⁶ The parallel inheritance rights for marriages with and without children applied throughout the fifteenth or sixteenth century. This provision did not appear in the written customary law of the fourteenth century, while the document from 1535 does contain it.⁸⁷ Common law changed, as we will also see for Bilbao. The change in widow(er)'s

⁸³ Bardyn, "Women's Fortunes. Gender Differences, Asset Management, and Investment in Late Medieval Brabant," 32.

⁸⁴ If the deceased spouse's heirs were not children from an earlier marriage, the surviving spouse would, moreover, have the right to the *weduwe stoel*. This was a number of possessions that a widow or widower could take out of the communal property but would not be counted as part of the inheritance in the division. For women, this would be 'her best dress, [...], her best book of hours, her best bed, best bed sheet and pillow, her chair with a sitting pillow, the best table with the best table cloth and the best tableware [...].' de Longé, *Coutumes de la ville de Malines*, 128.

⁸⁵ Godding, *Le droit privé*, 272.

⁸⁶ Vos, "Het huwelijksvermogensrecht in het huidige Vlaanderen van de 16de en 17de eeuw," 71–72.

⁸⁷ SAM, C. Magistraat (Ordonnantiën) - Serie I, nr. 4, fol. 1r-2v.

inheritance rights in Mechelen might indicate a shift to favouring the extended family, as has been shown for Leuven as well.⁸⁸

Whereas in Antwerp movable and immovable property were divided equally among male and female heirs, the common law of Mechelen favoured masculine heirs. Movable property was divided equally, but for immovable property, 'a son's share would be the same as the share of two daughters'.⁸⁹ Finally, gifts given at marriage or during the children's lives were included in the division of the inheritance.⁹⁰

The Bilbao inheritance system established a single heir system rather than an equal division of goods. In the Biscayan towns, testaments and *inter vivos* donations seem to have been the most common methods of determining inheritance.⁹¹ These acts were limited, however. In the *Fuero Viejo* (1452) and *Fuero Nuevo* (1526), the inhabitants of Biscay could choose to whom they left their movable property. For immovable property, the group of possible heirs was limited, and the testator had to follow a prescribed order. Legitimate children were first in line to inherit. However, 'a man or woman who had no inheriting offspring could not leave any immovable property that they had as an inheritance to anyone else except the closest relative from the line from which the inheritance originated'.⁹² If a married couple could not continue the lineage, property would go back to the family of origin.

Although children were first in line to inherit their parents' immovable property, it was not divided equally among them. In Biscay, parents enjoyed

⁸⁸ Bardyn, "Women's Fortunes. Gender Differences, Asset Management, and Investment in Late Medieval Brabant," 34–43.

⁸⁹ Parents could make testaments dividing their immovable property equally between their sons and daughters if they wished to. 'Item, nae de doot van vade rende moeder soe succederen allen de kinderen evengelijck inde haeffelijcke goeden ; maer aengaende derffelijcke goeden, so deylt een soone tegen twee dochteren, ten sij dat vade rende moeder, sittende in vollen bedde, by testamente oft anderen uutersten wille geordineert ende ghewilt hebben dat soonen ende dochteren evengelijck sullen deylen [...].' de Longé, *Coutumes de la ville de Malines*, 124; Godding, *Le droit privé*, 326–28.

⁹⁰ de Longé, *Coutumes de la ville de Malines*, 124.

⁹¹ Monreal Zia, *The Old Law of Bizkaia* (1452), 126–35.

⁹² Monreal Zia, 130.

the liberty of choosing their successor. Parents had to respect the prescribed order of eligible heirs, but they could choose which person from each of these groups would benefit. This usually took place after a married couple's children had become adults, and the parents could assess who would be the best candidate to continue the lineage. In theory, either a son or a daughter could be chosen as sole heir to the couple's immovable property.⁹³ Nevertheless, premodern patriarchal logic favoured male heirs, as it was considered more appropriate to continue the lineage through a son.⁹⁴ Despite the single heir system, a considerable number of parents divided their property among all the children, although usually when the estate was largely movable. Non-inheriting children typically received a sum of money or movable goods through an *inter vivos* grant or as a dowry.⁹⁵ In her analysis of thirty-eight marriage contracts, Janire Castrillo Casado found that in 60 per cent of them, the husband brought immovable property into the marriage while the wife contributed money. Although a significant number of women inherited immovable property, the pattern confirms that daughters were often at a disadvantage in the inheritance of property before (and at) their marriages.

The *Fuero Viejo* of Biscay paid little attention to the rights of the surviving spouse when the marriage ended. However, as was the case in Mechelen inheritance law, the *Fuero Nuevo* made a clear distinction between marriages ending without children and those with children. If a marriage produced no children, the property brought into the marriage by the deceased spouse returned to the family of origin, along with half of the property acquired during the marriage. The widow or widower received the other half of the acquired goods, as well as retaining his or her own property. Moreover, the surviving spouse had usufruct on the immovable property for

⁹³ Monasterio Aspiri, "La condición jurídica de la mujer," 272–73.

⁹⁴ Castrillo Casado, *Las mujeres vascas durante la baja edad media*, 35–39.

⁹⁵ Ofelia Rey Castelao, "Inheritance, Marital Strategies, and the Formation of Households in Rural North-Western Spain in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: An Overview," in *Inheritance Practices, Marriage Strategies and Household Formation in European Rural Societies*, ed. Anne-Lise Head-König (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2012), 81–82.

a year and a day, or until he or she remarried, whichever came first.⁹⁶ The inheritance system for a marriage that had produced children was different, as the married couple's children (or at least one of them) inherited all the immovable property. The inheriting child was obligated to take care of the surviving parent, however. 'Ingratitude', or not caring properly for his or her surviving parent, could even be used as a reason to revoke the inheritance.⁹⁷

3. Analysis of taxation lists from Antwerp, Mechelen, and Bilbao

Scholars have often stressed the importance of social background in constructing labour options for women.⁹⁸ The comparison of women's work in two regions must take this factor into account. In the sources used for this study, most women are anonymous or, at best, appear by name with little additional personal information. An assessment of fiscal sources from Antwerp, Mechelen, and Bilbao will provide context about the range in amounts of wealth available to women household heads registered as taxpayers. Furthermore, it will facilitate a more nuanced comparison of Biscay and Brabant in a more multifaceted way later in this dissertation.

⁹⁶ Leopoldo Zugaza, *El Fuero Nuevo de Vizcaya* (Bilbao: Graficas Bilbao, 1976), 53–54.

⁹⁷ María Isabel del Val Valdivieso, "La solidaridad familiar en Vizcaya en el Siglo XV," in *Vizcaya en la edad media* (Congreso de Estudios históricos Vizcaya en la Edad Media, Bilbao, 1984), 336; Castrillo Casado, "Mujeres y matrimonio en las tres provincias vascas," 13.

⁹⁸ Janire Castrillo Casado, "Participación de las mujeres en la economía urbana del País Vasco durante la Baja Edad Media," in *Las mujeres en la edad media*, ed. María Isabel del Val Valdivieso and Juan Francisco Jiménez Alcázar (Murcia-Lorca: Sociedad Española de Estudios Medievales, 2013), 214; Daryl M. Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 56; Shennan Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets: The Gendering of Market Space in Late Medieval Ghent," in *Urban Space in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 424.

3.1 Women in the Brabantine and Biscayan taxation registers

The analysis of women's wealth and wealth distribution in the towns of Brabant is based on tax surveys from a partial housing rent levy from 1537 Antwerp and a complete housing rent levy from 1544 Mechelen.⁹⁹ Wouter Ryckbosch has recommended assuming that 'the value of the houses inhabited by a community's households indirectly reflects the distribution of its incomes.'¹⁰⁰ Although I have converted the tax figures from Mechelen and Antwerp to the same monetary unit (*stuivers*), the numbers are not comparable. As can be seen in Table 1, the median tax amount in Antwerp is thirty times more than its counterpart in Mechelen. Even though

⁹⁹ In 1537, Charles V requested an *aide* of 400,000 guilders from the Estates of Brabant to finance his war against France. To pay for the *aide*, the Antwerp craft guilds suggested levying a one-time direct tax, on top of the usual indirect excise taxes. This project provided the impetus for the Antwerp tax survey. However, the city did not collect enough money from this direct tax and decided to increase the beer and wine excises instead. The FelixArchief of Antwerp still holds the estimates for the sixth, eighth, and eleventh and part of the fourth neighbourhoods of the city, a valuable source for information about the housing values and ratios of owners to leaseholders. See: Michael Limberger, "The Making of the Urban Fiscal System of Antwerp until 1800: Excises, Annuities and Debt Management," in *Taxation and Debt in the Early Modern City*, by Michael Limberger and José Ignacio Andrés Ucendo (London: Routledge, 2012), 141; Thierry Masure, "De stadsfinanciën van Antwerpen, 1531-1571. Een poging tot rekonstruktie" (Unpublished Master Thesis, Ghent, UGent, 1986), 218-19;

Source: SAA, HN#103, Belastingscohieren van 1537. Huizentelling: 4de en 6de wijk, buitenijen (PK 2559 en 2566). The tax survey for Mechelen was made for a 10th and 20th penny tax on the housing value of Mechelen inhabitants. Using a method similar to that used in Antwerp, authorities registered the value of houses in the city centre and the outer streets. Furthermore, the household head was identified as owner-tenant or leaseholder. See: Maarten F. Van Dijck, "Towards an Economic Interpretation of Justice? Conflict Settlement, Social Control and Civil Society in Urban Brabant and Mechelen During the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period," in *Serving the Urban Community. The Rise of Public Facilities in the Low Countries*, by Manon Van der Heijden (Aksant Academic Publishers: Amsterdam, 2009), 78; Mast, "Politiek, prestige en vermogen," 66-67;

Source: SAM, K. Geldwezen, IV. Belastingen op de huizen, Serie I, nr. 1, 1544.

¹⁰⁰ Wouter Ryckbosch, "Economic Inequality and Growth before the Industrial Revolution: The Case of the Low Countries (Fourteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)," *European Review of Economic History* 20, no. 1 (2016): 5; Philip T. Hoffman et al., "Real Inequality in Europe since 1500," *The Journal of Economic History* 62, no. 2 (2002): 337.

Antwerp's economic boom gave its population more wealth, the enormous difference between the Mechelen and Antwerp tax amounts is probably the result of different methods of registration or calculation.¹⁰¹ As the sources do not discuss how tax figures were calculated, it is not possible to compare the specific amounts and the degrees of wealth held by women between Antwerp and Mechelen. However, the calculation of deciles (see Figure 5) enables a relative comparison of women's wealth in Antwerp, Mechelen, and Bilbao.

The Bilbao data derives from a direct taxation register from 1470, supplemented by the hearth count of 1492.¹⁰² In Biscay, as in Brabant, most of the city governments' income came from excise taxes on consumable products. When debts increased, as in 1470, the town often needed to levy a direct tax to compensate.¹⁰³ The taxation census of Bilbao differs from the censuses of Antwerp and Mechelen. Because Bilbao levied direct taxes based on citizens' property, both movable and immovable, more people were registered. Javier Enríquez Fernández et. al. have suggested that officials did not base their calculations on individual possessions for most inhabitants of Bilbao. Officials did calculate the estates of wealthier inhabitants, but most of residents paid a pre-set sum based on the 'quality of the citizen'.¹⁰⁴ A combination of social status, the size of the house and household, and a general assessment of possessions probably determined the tax amount for most taxpayers in Bilbao. Distinct methods of levying taxes and assessing amounts make it difficult to compare women's wealth in Brabant and Biscay. However, the results illuminate women's social positions in each town itself.

¹⁰¹ The amount registered on the taxation list of Antwerp might be the value of the house, whereas in Mechelen the amount of tax was recorded. This could explain the enormous difference between the two towns. Nevertheless, the sources do not clarify exactly what was being recorded, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions.

¹⁰² Source: Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Repartimientos y foguera-vecindario de Bilbao (1464-1492)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévales Del País Vasco 71 (Donostia, 1996).

¹⁰³ Ana María Rivera Medina, "'E tobimos por bien echar sisa'. Los impuestos al consumo como media de financiación concejil. Bilbao, 1300-1550," in *La gobernanza de la ciudad europea en la edad media*, by Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea and Beatriz Arizaga Bolumburu (Logroño: Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 2011), 427-43.

¹⁰⁴ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Repartimientos y foguera-vecindario de Bilbao (1464-1492)*.

Many citizens were not registered in the tax surveys. In Mechelen, with an approximate population of 28,000 in 1544, there were 4,563 taxpayers registered.¹⁰⁵ Some people were exempt from paying taxes. The towns' clerics, the poor, and the aristocracy did not have to contribute to the direct taxation fund and thus were not counted on most lists.¹⁰⁶ There are a few poor residents and exempt people on the list. Fifty-five households on the list did not have to pay the tax, and 139 inhabitants were registered as poor (sixteen of them did not pay taxes at all). Nevertheless, the enumerators who recorded the house rent levy did not write down most exempt residents. They were not the only inhabitants of Mechelen missing from the house rent levy. Marleen Mast has calculated that approximately 18 per cent of the town's population did not appear on the house rent levy because they were either poor or held a status exempting them from the taxation.¹⁰⁷ For Antwerp, comparable calculations are impossible, as only partial registers survive from the house rent levy from 1537. There were 1,242 inhabitants from four neighbourhoods of the Scheldt town registered;¹⁰⁸ a negligible proportion of the 55,000 to 84,000 inhabitants living in Antwerp in 1537.¹⁰⁹

Many of the inhabitants not counted in the house rent levy of Mechelen were hidden behind one of the registered household heads.¹¹⁰ Women's visibility in the sources is especially low.¹¹¹ Servants, wives, children, and other cohabitants of the (male) household head were not registered. Women who were registered in the house rent levies of Antwerp and Mechelen were heads of household or lived alone. Only 12 per cent of the Antwerp taxpayers were women, whereas in Mechelen this increased to almost 20 per

¹⁰⁵ Van Uytven, *De geschiedenis van Mechelen*, 119.

¹⁰⁶ Jord Hanus, *Affluence and Inequality in the Low Countries: The City of 's-Hertogenbosch in the Long Sixteenth Century, 1500-1650* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2014), 300–303; Ryckbosch, "Economic Inequality and Growth before the Industrial Revolution," 7.

¹⁰⁷ Mast, "Politiek, prestige en vermogen," 64.

¹⁰⁸ There were 1,269 entries in the taxation list, but the 27 entries without a registered tax amount are not included in the calculations.

¹⁰⁹ Guido Marnef, *Antwerpen in de tijd van de Reformatie: ondergronds protestantisme in een handelsmetropool 1550 - 1577* (Antwerpen: Kritak, 1996), 24–26.

¹¹⁰ Ryckbosch, "Economic Inequality and Growth before the Industrial Revolution," 6.

¹¹¹ Van Aert, "The Legal Possibilities of Antwerp Widows," 284.

cent (see Table 1). Although the number of female taxpayers was small, the figure coincides with scholars' previous findings. In the early modern Dutch tax registers, Ariadne Schmidt and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk found that 'only 15-30 per cent of all household heads were women [...].'¹¹² There are similar low numbers in other regions and for other time periods.¹¹³

The Bilbao taxation list included a larger percentage of residents than did the Mechelen records. In a town with a population of approximately 5,600, more than one-third of the population was registered as taxpayers in 1470 (see Table 2).¹¹⁴ Due to Bilbao's rapid population growth, multiple households often lived together in one house.¹¹⁵ In the hearth count of 1492, there were 573 houses and 1257 hearths.¹¹⁶ Approximately 85 per cent of Bilbao's households shared a house with at least one additional adult other than a spouse. Almost double the number of taxpayers (2,075) were registered on the 1470 taxation list, showing that hearths in the town were often shared by several adult citizens, because in 1470, each adult resident was registered for the tax payment. As a result, the financial status of a larger

¹¹² Ariadne Schmidt and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Reconsidering the 'Firstmale-Breadwinner Economy': Women's Labor Force Participation in the Netherlands, 1600–1900," *Feminist Economics* 18, no. 4 (2012): 73.

¹¹³ For Portugal, Amélia Polónia found 18 percent of the taxpayers on a taxation register from 1568 from the Vila do Conde were female. In the German Stuttgart in 1545, that number was even lower: 14.5 percent. Some centuries later, in 1735, 22 percent of the taxpayers in Grenoble were women, as Anne Montenach has shown. See: Amélia Polónia, "Women's Participation in Labour and Business in the European Maritime Societies in the Early Modern Period" (Il ruolo economico della famiglia. Secs. XIII-XVIII. Atti delle "Settimane di studio," Prato: Istituto Internazionale di Storia Economica "F. Datini," 2009), 7; Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights*, 32; Anne Montenach, "Creating a Space for Themselves on the Urban Market. Survival Strategies and Economic Opportunities for Single Women in French Provincial Towns (Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries)," in *Single Life and the City 1200-1900*, by Julie De Groot, Ariadne Schmidt, and Isabelle Devos (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 50.

¹¹⁴ Jesús A. Solórzano Telechea, "The Politics of the Urban Commons in Northern Atlantic Spain in the Later Middle Ages," *Urban History* 2, no. 41 (2014): 185.

¹¹⁵ O'Flanagan, *Port Cities of Atlantic Iberia, C. 1500-1900*, 269.

¹¹⁶ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Repartimientos y foguera-vecindario de Bilbao (1464-1492)*.

Table 1. Total number and percentage of taxpayers per demographic category and marital status (for men and women) in the tax registers of Mechelen (1544) and Antwerp (1537), and median tax amount in stuivers (st) for these demographic groups.

Demographic category	Mechelen			Antwerp		
	#	%	Median tax amount (st)	#	%	Median tax amount (st)
Men	3639	79.8	24	1084	87.3	720
Widowed	2	/	15.5	/	/	/
Unknown	3637	79.7	24	/	/	/
Women	869	19	16	151	12.2	300
Married	1	0	49	1	0.1	1020
Single	/	/	/	1	0.1	480
Widowed	480	10.5	20	82	6.6	675
Unknown	388	8.5	12	67	5.4	150
Married couple	/	/	/	1	0.1	120
Widow and heirs	/	/	/	1	0.1	3000
Heirs	/	/	/	4	0.3	1267.5
Other	52	1.1	35.5	1	0.1	120
Unknown	3	0.1	4	/	/	/
Total	4563	100	21	1242	100	660

Source: SAM, K. Geldwezen, IV, Serie I, nr. 1, 1544; SAA, HN#103, 1537.

slice of the population is visible in Bilbao in comparison to Antwerp and Mechelen. Combined with a larger percentage of women with occupational identifiers in the tax registers, this access to information about more people allows for a more detailed analysis of women's financial positions in Bilbao. Nevertheless, the percentage of women on the Bilbao lists is not significantly greater than the percentage that appears on the Mechelen house rent levy. On the Bilbao taxation list, married women also disappeared behind the names of their husbands, the male taxpayers. Most of the 21.5 per cent of women visible in the list were widows and never-married women who were heads of household. They lived by themselves or shared hearths or houses with other inhabitants of Bilbao.

Table 2. Total number and percentage of taxpayers per demographic category and marital status (for men and women) in the tax register of Bilbao (1470), and median tax amounts in maravedís (mrs) for these demographic groups.

Demographic category	#	%	Bilbao
			Median tax amount (mrs)
Men	1320	63.6	187
Married	11	0.5	125
Unknown	1309	63.1	187
Women	446	21.5	31
Married	35	1.7	62
Single	36	1.7	31
Widowed	31	1.5	62
Unknown	344	16.6	31
Married couple	17	0.8	62
Widow and heirs	168	8.1	293
Heirs	121	5.8	169
Other	3	0.1	31
Total	2075	100	156

Source: Javier Enríquez Fernández et. al., *Repartimientos y foguera-vecindario de Bilbao (1464-1492)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 71 (Donostia, 1996).

This section makes it clear that there was wealth inequality between male and female taxpayers in all three case studies, but Bilbao presents the most extreme example. In the Biscayan town, female household heads were clustered among the least wealthy residents of the town. The median tax paid by female household heads was the same amount as the lowest standard taxation rate: thirty-one *maravedís*. That median was 80 per cent lower than the median amount paid by male taxpayers (see Table 2). In Antwerp and Mechelen women taxpayers also paid the lowest rates. In Mechelen, the median house rent levy on female inhabitants was 30 per cent below the male median. In Antwerp, the median of women's payments was 60 per cent less than the median paid by men (see Table 1). The difference between men and women in Antwerp is statistically greater than the difference in its neighbour, Mechelen. Nevertheless, this could be an anomaly caused by the smaller sample of Antwerp taxpayers or different registration methods in the two towns. It is not surprising that women in all

three towns held lower amounts of wealth, as previous studies have pointed out the economic difficulties of urban single women in premodern Europe.¹¹⁷

Figure 5 shows the overall distribution of wealth between men and women in Mechelen, Antwerp, and Bilbao. The tax surveys of each town were categorised into ten groups (deciles), each with 10 per cent of taxpayers, in order from highest to lowest in either tax amount or housing value, a categorisation which allows for a relative comparison of women's social position in the three cities. Amounts paid were also compared to a similar baseline – the median amounts of tax paid by carpenters in the three lists. In all three towns, most women taxpayers paid amounts well under this baseline. In Bilbao and Mechelen, the median amount of carpenter taxpayers appeared in the sixth decile. In Antwerp, the carpenters' median was in the fifth decile.¹¹⁸ In all the towns, most women taxpayers were in the lower deciles. In other words, most single women belonged to the lowest financial classes in every town, but their wealth was lowest in Bilbao. This is a clear distinction between the Brabantine and the Biscayan taxation registers. In Bilbao, the number of women taxpayers in the lowest two deciles is even larger than the number of male taxpayers. In comparison to the 'middling' carpenters, more of the women registered on the taxation lists belonged to lower social groups in Bilbao than in Mechelen or Antwerp.¹¹⁹ Although scholars are in agreement that single women held a lower socio-economic position in premodern Europe, not all these women were extremely poor.

¹¹⁷ Fontaine, "Makeshift, Women and Capability," 59; Julie Marfany, "Family and Welfare in Early Modern Europe: A North-South Comparison," in *Population, Welfare and Economic Change in Britain, c.1270-1834: Historical Studies.*, ed. Chris Briggs, P.M. Kitson, and S.J. Thompson (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2014), 125; Montenach, "Creating a Space for Themselves on the Urban Market."; Mireia Comas-Via, "Widowhood and Economic Difficulties in Medieval Barcelona," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 43, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 94.

¹¹⁸ In Bilbao, 28 carpenters paid a median amount of 187 *maravedís*, corresponding to the median amount of all male taxpayers in Bilbao. In Mechelen, 7 carpenters paid a median amount of 24 *stuivers*, which also corresponds with the median amount of all male taxpayers. In Antwerp, the 8 carpenters were registered with a median housing value of 540 *stuivers*, which corresponds to the fifth decile and is a little less than the median amount of all male taxpayers in general (720 *stuivers*).

¹¹⁹ The absolute numbers corresponding to Figure 5 can be found in Appendix 1.

As Hanus has argued, 'among the 'poorest' 40% of taxpayers, the majority were actually small-scale households, often numbering only one adult.' Single women – living alone without responsibility for other household members – did not need the same income as larger households did in order to cover their expenses. Nevertheless, many would not have had sufficient resources to maintain a household of more than one person.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Hanus, *Affluence and Inequality in the Low Countries*, 156–60.

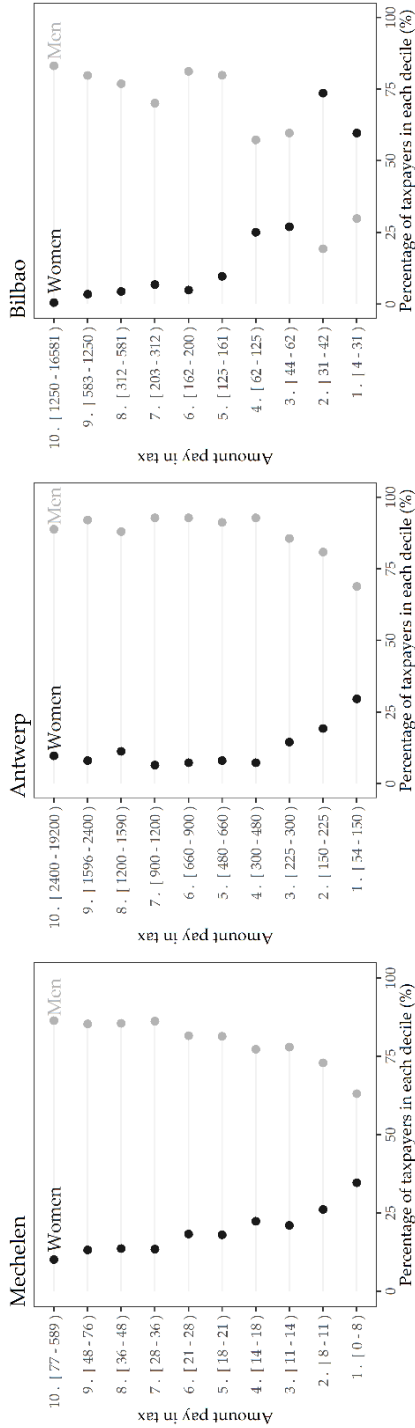


Figure 5. Deciles of taxpayers, by amount paid in tax, in the tax registers of Bilbao (1470), Antwerp (1537), and Mechelen (1544) showing the percentage of women and men in each decile. Amounts paid in Bilbao given in maravedís; amounts paid in Antwerp and Mechelen given in stuivers. Source: SAM, K. Geldwezen, IV, Serie I, Nr. 1, 1544; SAA, HN#103, 1537; Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Repartimientos y foguerav vecindario de Bilbao (1464-1492)*, Fuentes Documentales Mediévalas Del Pais Vasco 71 (Donostia, 1996).

3.2 *Marital status, occupational identifiers, and women's wealth*

As can be expected, the tax amounts paid by women do not represent the distribution of wealth for all women. There was a significant difference based on marital status. In both Brabantine towns, slightly over half of the registered women were widows, an unsurprising result since medieval society had normalised widows as legitimate heads of household.¹²¹ There was a marked difference between the wealth of widows and the wealth of other women. In these urban societies, (female) widowed household heads enjoyed a higher standing. In Mechelen, widows were charged a median 40 per cent higher than the median charged to the group of unknown women, who might have been single. In Antwerp, the median paid by widows was 80 per cent higher than that paid by women of unknown status. In both Antwerp and Mechelen, widows' tax median approached the median paid by the male taxpayers (see Table 1). This suggests that widows enjoyed preferable status, not only in legal matters but also economically.

While in Antwerp and Mechelen, women's marital status had a great influence on their financial status, the Bilbao taxation lists do not reveal such a significant impact. In contrast to the Brabantine fiscal sources, the Bilbao tax register did not identify most women by marital status. Of the 446 women on the list, only 31 were registered as widows. As Table 2 shows, the 31 widows paid a higher median amount (62 *maravedís*) than the 344 women whose marital status is unknown (31 *maravedís*). Although widows enjoyed a higher standard of living than women who were living on their own wealth or earnings, the median amount they paid does not project the image of 'the wealthy widow'. The median amount that widows paid, 62 *maravedís*, was still figured in the lowest quarter of the taxation list (see Appendix 2). Because widows in Bilbao appeared lower on the taxation lists, they were in the lower middling or even poor urban social groups.¹²² The Bilbao widowed

¹²¹ Fontaine, "Makeshift, Women and Capability," 60.

¹²² Cristina Ayuso Sánchez, "El mundo laboral femenino en el País Vasco medieval," *Sancho El Sabio: Revista de Cultura e Investigación Vasca* 30 (2009): 126; Castrillo Casado, "Las mujeres del común y la sociedad política," 516; Rosa Iziz and Ana Iziz, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria. 1. Prehistoria, romanización y reino de Navarra* (Tafalla:

saleswomen we will encounter in this study were probably among the large number of women who traded out of necessity.¹²³

While marital status was a minor factor on the Biscayan taxation register, occupational identifiers for women were more common than on the Brabantine lists. In Bilbao, 32 per cent of the men and 17.9 per cent of the women in the census were registered with their occupations. The majority of men with occupations listed worked in the towns' artisan labour sectors. Shoemakers, blacksmiths, and carpenters were common, as well as rope makers and butchers. Furthermore, service was one of the most common occupations for both men and women in the taxation register. In Bilbao, servants were generally single and young(er) women and men, but there were also 'amas de casa' (housekeepers) who had turned service into a lengthy career.¹²⁴ As Deborah Simonton has shown, this was not unique to

Txalaparta, 2016), 258; Marfany, "Family and Welfare in Early Modern Europe," 125; Comas-Via, "Widowhood and Economic Difficulties."

¹²³ A second group of widows appears in the taxation register of 1470 as well. Some widows were registered together with the other heirs of their late husband. The taxpayer category of 'widow and heirs', as can be seen in Table 2, paid a median tax amount of 293 *maravedís*, more than what male household heads paid and five times as much as what most widows in Bilbao paid. As Laura Van Aert has stated: 'A widow's previous marriage could be a source of empowerment and provide her with greater financial awareness and expectations [...].' Depending on age and the prosperity of the household before the husbands' death, widows' wealth varied considerably.

See: Van Aert, "The Legal Possibilities of Antwerp Widows," 288.

On the financial position of widows, see also: Comas-Via, "Widowhood and Economic Difficulties"; Fontaine, "Makeshift, Women and Capability," 59–60; Marfany, "Family and Welfare in Early Modern Europe," 125; Montenach, "Creating a Space for Themselves on the Urban Market," 50.

¹²⁴ María Isabel del Val Valdivieso, "El trabajo de las mujeres en el Bilbao tardomedieval," in *Las mujeres vascas en la historia* (Bilbao: IPES, 1997), 84; Ana María Rivera Medina, "Superando fronteras. Mujer y cultura laboral en los puertos del norte peninsular, Siglos XIV-XVI," in *Fronteras de agua. Las ciudades portuarias y su universo cultural (Siglos XIV-XXI)*, ed. Manuel García Hurtado and Ofelia Rey Castelao (Santiago de Compostela: Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, 2016), 28.

Bilbao. There were life-long servants throughout premodern Europe.¹²⁵ There is little evidence of the commercial and maritime focus of Bilbao from the occupations registered in the taxation survey of 1470. Most of the taxpayers with the last names of known Biscayan merchant families were not identified by occupation.¹²⁶

In the Bilbao tax list, the occupations of eighty women taxpayers are identified (see Table 3). Several held typical female occupations, such as seamstress and laundress. Furthermore, twenty-one women worked in the towns' retail and food trades. The appearance of these occupations is not surprising, as certain branches of Bilbao's retail and food trades were dominated by women. The taxation list reveals that these women could be widows and single women, but married women practising these trades would not appear on the taxation list since they were subsumed under their husbands, who were registered as heads of household.

There was little diversity in the financial standing of women registered with occupations on the Bilbao taxation list. Of the eighty occupations registered, only fourteen paid more than thirty-one *maravedís* (and five of these paid only thirty-three *maravedís*, see Table 3). Retailers and food sellers were key figures in Bilbao's daily commerce and distribution of food in town. Yet, they were in the lowest urban social classes, as previous studies have shown.¹²⁷ Noting this pattern in early modern Copenhagen, Carol Gold concludes that: 'Widowed, single or married, they sold small amounts of food and clothing, most of which they did not produce themselves, but

¹²⁵ Deborah Simonton, "'Birds of Passage' or 'Career' Women? Thoughts on the Life Cycle of the Eighteenth-Century European Servant," *Women's History Review* 20, no. 2 (2011): 207–25.

¹²⁶ The 'Marquina', 'Arriaga', 'Arbierto', and 'Arbolancha' family names that José Ignacio Salazar and Téofil Guiard identified as merchant families in Bilbao appear regularly in the 1470 taxation survey. It cannot be established with certainty that all taxpayers with these last names were really members of the leading merchant families of Bilbao, seeing as no further identification is given for most of them. One of them, Sancho de Agurto, who was a town councillor in 1498, might be the same Sancho de Agurto registered as shopkeeper in 1470. No claims can be made for certain. See: Ignacio Salazar, "Gobierno local en el Bilbao bajomedieval," 195–96.

¹²⁷ Ayuso Sánchez, "El mundo laboral femenino," 116; Castrillo Casado, "Participación de las mujeres en la economía urbana," 214.

rather had bought for resale. These women were not at the very bottom of the social structure, but only slightly above it.¹²⁸

Table 3. Women's occupations in the taxation survey of Bilbao (1470) in order from lowest to highest by median tax amounts in maravedís (mrs).

Occupation	#	Median tax amount (mrs)
Housekeeper (f)	15	31
Sardine seller (f)	2	31
Fruit seller (f)	3	31
Seamstress	23	31
Retailer (f)	11	31
Servant (f)	12	31
Unknown	366	31
Bread seller (f)	5	33
Laundress	6	47
Shopkeeper	1	62
Linen seller (f)	2	125
Total	446	31

Source: Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Repartimientos y foguera-vecindario de Bilbao (1464-1492)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 71 (Donostia, 1996).

In Brabant, there were fewer women registered with an occupational identifier, but the tax amounts they paid reflect more diversity than the Bilbao pattern. The Mechelen house rent levy listed the occupations of an extremely small number of men and women (2.6 per cent for women and 4.9 per cent for men). Women were less frequently identified with their occupation and possibly even forced (at least in fiscal sources) not to clarify their occupational status.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, this was also true for most men.

¹²⁸ Carol Gold, "On the Streets and in the Markets: Independent Copenhagen Saleswomen," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 36.

¹²⁹ Schmidt and van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Reconsidering the 'Firstmale-Breadwinner Economy,'" 73; Carmen Sarasúa, "Women's Work and Structural Change: Occupational Structure in Eighteenth-century Spain," *Economic History Review* 72, no. 2 (2019): 492; Jane Humphries and Carmen Sarasúa, "Off the Record: Reconstructing Women's Labor Force Participation in the European Past," *Feminist Economics* 18, no. 4 (2012): 46.

Or, as Anna Bellavitis has stated, 'a professional identity was a privilege relatively few people in society possessed.'¹³⁰

In the house rent levies from Antwerp and Mechelen, there were only a few women identified with occupations. Most of them worked in low-status occupations, which is reflected in the amount of tax they paid. The disparity between median tax paid by women with occupational identifiers and by women, in general, is especially significant in Mechelen. Almost all of the registered laundresses, seamstresses, and women drapery workers paid less than the median tax amount paid by all female taxpayers, as did the two women shopkeepers registered in Antwerp and Mechelen (see Table 4). Given the occupational identifier of these shopkeepers, both women were probably members of the mercers guilds. They had been able to pay the guilds' entrance fee, notwithstanding the low value of their houses.¹³¹ As previous scholars have shown, guild membership was no guarantee of wealth and prosperity. This was even more applicable in the retail sector, which was considered 'low status, low pay', and thus accessible for women.¹³² The account book of the Mechelen mercers guild indeed shows that between 1466 and 1498, women constituted 19 per cent of the guild members in arrears for their yearly contribution to the guild, but only 13 per cent of new members.¹³³ Although women had access to the guild, it seems that the women who joined had less economic security. Most other occupations practised by female taxpayers on the Antwerp and Mechelen housing value lists were similar 'low status, low pay' occupations. However,

¹³⁰ Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights*, 31.

¹³¹ Danielle van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women in Early Modern Dutch Towns," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy*, ed. Deborah Simonton and A. Montenach (New York: Routledge, 2013), 116–33.

¹³² Peter Stabel, "From the Market to the Shop: Retail and Urban Space in Late Medieval Bruges," in *Buyers and Sellers. Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruno Blondé et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 81; Van Aert, "The Legal Possibilities of Antwerp Widows," 292; Gold, "On the Streets and in the Markets," 36.

¹³³ SAA, FA#22; SAA, 860#7761.

women with guild occupations other than mercery or with occupations requiring more practical skills figured in wealthier groups.

Table 4. Women's occupations in the house rent levies of Mechelen (1544) and Antwerp (1537) in order by median tax amount in stuivers (st) from lowest to highest.

Mechelen			Antwerp		
Occupation	#	Median tax amount (st)	Occupation	#	Median tax amount (st)
Beggar	1	0	Shopkeeper	1	150
Stud worker	1	0	Unknown	151	300
Caretaker ¹³⁴	2	7,5	Laundress	1	300
Wheelbarrower	1	8	Seamstress	1	390
Spinner	1	10	Pastry seller (f)	1	720
<i>Lateres</i>	2	10,5	Midwife	1	840
Flax worker	1	12	Total	156	300
Laundress	5	12,5			
Seamstress	3	14			
Shopkeeper	1	15			
Unknown	845	16			
Teacher	1	18			
Postmaster	1	23			
Baker	1	24			
Wet nurse	2	33			
Total	868	16			

Source: SAM, K. Geldwezen, IV, Serie I, nr. 1, 1544; SAA, HN#103, 1537.

4. Concluding remarks

This chapter began with an overview of the relevant political and economic context surrounding women's labour opportunities in Mechelen, Antwerp, and Bilbao. While in the period under study all three towns were transitioning from an industrial to a commercial focus, there were a few crucial differences that made a significant impact on the organisation of (women's) work. Politically, Bilbao was governed by a more limited group of aristocrats and elite merchants. Through the fourteenth and the fifteenth

¹³⁴ *Achterwarersse*. *Achterwaren* in Middle Dutch means 'taking care of', 'safeguarding'. It is not entirely clear what the occupation *achterwarersse* was. Anthonie Cornelis Oudemans, *Middel- en Oudnederlandsch woordenboek*, vol. 1 (Arnhem: H.W. Van Marle, 1870), 109.

century, the number of participants in the town governments of Antwerp and Mechelen expanded because of the increasing importance of craft guilds. These same guilds gained much influence over the towns' economies and tried to use this clout to organise occupations to their own advantage. In this study, I argue that the factor of guilds had a tremendous effect on women's labour opportunities, and one cause of the differences in women's economic positions in Brabant and Biscay was the absence of these powerful corporations in Bilbao. Because of this focus on guild work in Brabant, differences in the scale of economic output between Antwerp and Mechelen are not as clear as differences between the two regions. Since the two Brabantine towns do not have many surviving sources of daily practice, it is challenging to assess the effect of diverging economic outputs on women's labour opportunities.

While customary law in Brabant and Biscay differed on a few crucial points, particularly inheritance law, the impact of these legal differences on daily practice is uncertain. Previous research has indicated that divergence between norms and practice is especially striking for women in the low and middling classes. As Laura Van Aert concluded about early modern Antwerp; 'women active in (proto) industry usually did not have to buy and sell or make contracts, etc. They were not in need of a legally capable status to do their jobs.' Women in wholesale and interregional trade, on the other hand, might have experienced the impact of legal barriers.¹³⁵ Merry Wiesner found that in early modern urban Europe many married women worked in their own names, without their husbands' supervision. Therefore only a few women who were active in trade needed to use the status of *feme sole*, which granted a married woman the right to enter into transactions in her own name.¹³⁶ Most women appearing in my source base probably did not belong to the highest social classes. This is particularly true of Bilbao, where most women trading and working in public space were poor or belonged to the lowest middling groups. For the Brabantine towns, it is harder to estimate the financial situations of women, but many of the peddlers and saleswomen

¹³⁵ Van Aert, "The Legal Possibilities of Antwerp Widows," 292.

¹³⁶ Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 130–31.

in the sources likely did not belong to the rich classes. For these groups of women, the need for an income might have determined daily practice instead of normative customary law. There are no references to these legal norms in the sources themselves. Further comparative research on the uses of common law is necessary.

Analysis of the taxation registers reveals that many female taxpayers were among the least wealthy groups of the urban population. In Antwerp and Mechelen, widows were an exception to this, as they took over their husbands' social standings after their deaths. This was not true for all widows in Bilbao. Widows managing their own households were wealthier than single women or women listed without a marital status but still had to live with less income and property than most men in town. Moreover, Bilbao's retail women were clearly poor. Finally, in both regions, women registered with an occupation were rarely engaged in a trade that was not female. Even widows who took over their husbands' businesses were not identified by those occupations in the lists. Nevertheless, the differences in the percentage of women taxpayers registered with an occupation between Brabant and Biscay accords with the conclusions of this dissertation. Whereas women's work in Bilbao took place outside of the household and in their own names, in Mechelen and Antwerp, women's work took place behind men and masculine institutions and was more stable.

Part I. The Organisation of Work in Brabant and Biscay. Local Governments and Economic Institutions

The three chapters of Part I analyse the influence of three prominent urban institutions on women's labour opportunities. Guilds, urban governments, and households have all figured in earlier studies on women and work. Although often interlinked, each of them played a role in the gendering of work. As a result, local institutions influencing the organisation of work are important elements to take into account when assessing north-south differences in women's market activities. In Mechelen and Antwerp, guilds and the household economy were significant factors that shaped women's labour opportunities. In the Biscayan commercial hub of Bilbao, historical records emphasise the important interaction between groups of saleswomen and the town council.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I analyse gendered discourse in the town ordinances of Antwerp, Mechelen, and Bilbao. Towns often generated regulations of women's work for economic reasons. However, there is a difference between the regulations of the Brabantine towns and those of Bilbao, as Chapter 2 shows with its focus on Brabantine guild regulations and women's guild membership. The chapter opens with an analysis of the gendered language used in the ordinances from the Antwerp old clothes sellers guild and the Mechelen fishmongers guild that reveals the guilds' gendered policy. While most regulations were directed only at male guild members, there are a few decisions that explicitly included women in or excluded them from guild work. The next section examines these regulations to interpret guild policies towards women. The final part of Chapter 2 analyses guild membership lists, which confirm conclusions drawn earlier in the chapter: women's membership in a guild was rare and highly dependent on marital status and parentage. Chapter 3 investigates the same type of sources, town ordinances, from Bilbao. Organisation of retail and food trades in Bilbao allowed widespread participation of women. The first

section illuminates these 'female' market sectors, followed by an assessment of the town council's policies towards saleswomen and motives for regulating women's work in Bilbao.

Chapter 4 studies the third institution responsible for the organisation of work: the household. Women's economic activities were often directly linked to their position in a household. In premodern European towns, many spouses worked together for the household's benefit. Many spouses worked in the same market sector or even in the same business. Consequentially, marital status was a major influence on women's labour positions. The historical records from Mechelen and Antwerp highlight spousal cooperation and the prevalence of the household economy. In Chapter 4, I analyse different types of household cooperation and the attitude of the guilds towards this system. In Bilbao, spousal cooperation and women's position in the household workshop is rarely visible in the documents. The final part of this chapter examines the household economy and its different forms in Bilbao. Moreover, it suggests an explanation for the apparent absence in the Biscayan harbour town of forms of the household economy which are so prominent in the Brabantine towns.

CHAPTER 2. URBAN LAW, GUILD MEMBERSHIP, AND WOMEN'S LABOUR OPPORTUNITIES IN BRABANT

In 1474, an internal quarrel arose in the glove and purse makers guild of Antwerp. In contrast to guild custom, one group of masters had hired several women and apprentices to stuff gloves and knit gloves and purses. The masters claimed that women could do this, as they '[...] did not do anything other than knitting gloves or purses and stuffing them, which is women's work and should be done by women.'¹ To counter the first group's argument, a second group of masters argued that the glove and purse makers guild was a men's guild and only men should practice the occupation.² Moreover, they claimed that previous regulations had explicitly prohibited women from participating in the guild's work.³ Although women played a key role in the origin of the conflict, they were not active participants in the dispute or the subsequent regulation. The underlying reason for the conflict was the continual desire of the guilds to limit competition for guild masters. The craft guilds' attempts to win a monopoly of production in their crafts and trades often resulted in the limitation of women's participation in guild life outside of the household workshop. It comes as no surprise that in 1474 the aldermen of Antwerp confirmed the guild's masculine character by prohibiting the employment of women

¹ '[...] noch anders en doen dan dat zy deselve hantschoene oft tesschen naeyen ende stofferen, dwelke vrouwenwerc is ende vrouwen betaemt te doene [...].’ Pierre Génard, “Register van den dachvaerden,” *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 20 (1883): 400–401.

² '[...] ende dat ooc de voerscreven hantieringe den voerscreven vrouwen nyet en betaemt noch en behoort te doene, want de voerscreven hantieringe een ambacht is van mannen, die metten ambachte moeten scoten, loten ende te laste staen, ende dat bider hantieringen vanden voerscreven vrouwen de voerscreven neringe den goeden mannen vanden selven ambachte soude moegen ontrocken worden [...].’ Génard, 400–401.

³ The purse and glove makers of the neighbouring Brabantine city of Leuven filed a similar ban on female work in 1403. The regulation to which the Antwerp craft members referred could possibly have been promulgated in the same period, since craft regulations were often similar in the Brabantine cities. SAL, 1523, fol. 207r-210v, 22 August 1403.

working for wages. Scholars have often pointed to the craft guilds as the instigators of the decline in women's labour opportunities in the transition from the Late Middle Ages to the Early Modern period.⁴ Nevertheless, the Antwerp and Mechelen guild regulations contain few explicit prohibitions on women, such as the above example. In fact, guild regulations contain few references to women at all.⁵

Throughout the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, town councils increased their promulgation of ordinances regulating guild members' activities and opportunities. In this chapter, I will analyse the ways that these normative documents from Antwerp and Mechelen represented guilds' attitude towards working women. Furthermore, I will specify which women could be included in the guilds' organisation. Craft guilds and town councils designed regulations that reflected their viewpoints and the needs of their institutions. The ordinances were responses to practices that bothered the corporations, who were often the instigators of new decisions.⁶ As such, it is

⁴ Janna Coomans, "Policing Female Food Vendors in the Late Medieval Netherlands," *Yearbook of Women's History* 36 (2017): 97; Anna Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights in Early Modern Urban Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 52–53; Martha C. Howell, "The Problem of Women's Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe," in *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, ed. Amanda Pipkin and Sarah Joan Moran (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 30–31; Grethe Jacobsen, "Women's Work and Women's Role: Ideology and Reality in Danish Urban Society, 1300–1550," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 31, no. 1 (1983): 11.

⁵ Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, "Fishmongers and Shipowners: Women in Maritime Communities of Early Modern Portugal," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 1 (2000): 7–23; Coomans, "Policing Female Food Vendors"; Danielle van den Heuvel, "The Multiple Identities of Early Modern Dutch Fishwives," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37, no. 3 (2012): 587–94; Jacobsen, "Women's Work and Women's Role"; Daryl M. Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 13; Shennan Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets: The Gendering of Market Space in Late Medieval Ghent," in *Urban Space in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 429; Anne Montenach, "Trades in Lyon in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640–1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 17–34.

⁶ Bert De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic: Fabricating Community in the Southern Netherlands, 1300–1800* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 142; Ellen E. Kittell

not surprising that these ordinances matched the guilds' highly patriarchal character.

In the first section of this chapter, I look at the normative framework that town councils and craft guilds established for women accessing guild work. First is a general assessment of the language used in the ordinances of two craft guilds in Antwerp and Mechelen. Each ordinance contained different pronouncements, which I will henceforth refer to as 'decisions'. I specifically examine the type of regulation that employed feminine or masculine language and the changes in these patterns over the course of the period. Since their regulations rarely mentioned women's work, I argue that the Mechelen and Antwerp town councils reflected the highly masculine character of the craft guilds by excluding women by the language deployed in these ordinances. Nevertheless, the near absence of women in the ordinances does not mean women were completely absent from guild life. Rather, guild ordinances addressed groups of women in specific labour and/or family contexts. Next, I look at the decisions of the town councils of Mechelen and Antwerp that concerned women's work opportunities in the guilds. Regulations rarely prohibited women from conducting certain tasks or engaging in guild work, as the exclusion of particular groups of women was already implied in guild regulations. The exceptional cases that directly attacked or scrutinised women's work were caused by several factors, with charges of unfair competition (according to the guild authorities) as the main one.

The second part of this chapter analyses the membership lists of a few craft guilds in Antwerp and Mechelen. The list of the Antwerp mercers guild is especially valuable. Town councils and guilds established a limited normative framework for women's guild activities. These limitations are

and Kurt Queller, "'Whether Man or Woman': Gender Inclusivity in the Town Ordinances of Medieval Douai," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 1 (2000): 65; Peter Stabel, "From the Market to the Shop: Retail and Urban Space in Late Medieval Bruges," in *Buyers and Sellers. Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruno Blondé et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 102; Stabel, "Women at the Market," 267.

reflected in the membership lists; women were rarely members. Marital status defined women's opportunities in most of the guilds.

1. Craft guilds and gendered regulation

1.1 *Guild regulation: a masculine business*

Guild regulations allow a precise assessment of the work practices that authorities tried to institute for town residents. Although practice did not always correspond to these norms, the source type reveals a great deal about the gendered viewpoints of town and guild governments. An analysis of the language deployed in the ordinances of the Mechelen fishmongers and the Antwerp old clothes sellers supports this point.⁷ I analysed five ordinances, spread over an extensive time period, of the Mechelen fishmongers and six ordinances of the Antwerp old clothes sellers.⁸ These two guilds do not represent the view of the town councils of Mechelen and Antwerp on women's work in all guilds. Rather, these guilds were supposed to have been 'accessible' to women. Earlier studies have shown women's involvement in fishmongering and secondhand trade elsewhere, especially in informal settings. Consequentially, the councils' views on women's work are more visible in the regulations of these guilds than in guilds where women's exclusion was a given.

The ordinances were sorted based on the gender of those to whom the councils addressed the ordinances. Each decision in the ordinances got two

⁷ The old clothes sellers were second hand dealers. They bought goods sold by town residents in the markets, auctions, and houses in mourning. They sold 'old clothes, old ironware, old linen, trifles, and other old stuff', as well as various other goods SAA, PK#915, fol. 58r, 16 August 1544; SAA, GA#4273, fol. 17r-19r, 3 December 1505.

⁸ For the Mechelen fishmongers, see: SAM, C. Magistraat (Ordonnantiën) - Serie I, nr. 3, fol. 29r-30v, 3 February 1440; SAM, Visverkopers 14, 26 July 1454; SAM, Visverkopers 23, 16 October 1508; SAM, Visverkopers 26, 8 October 1551; SAM, Visverkopers 30, 16 June 1584.

For the Antwerp old clothes sellers, see: Edmond Geudens, *Dit raect het oude cleercoopers ambacht binnen der stede van Antwerpen ende is eene verleeninge vanden jaere M vierhondert ende sessendertich* (Brecht: Braeckmans, 1905); SAA, GA#4001, fol. 32r-33v, 24 October 1452; SAA, GA#4001, fol. 49v-50r, 3 December 1505; SAA, GA#4273, fol. 26r-29v, 15 October 1526; SAA, GA#4273, fol. 7v-13v, 19 January 1550; SAA, GA#4001, fol. 173v-177r, 7 December 1556.

tags: the decision topic and the gendered language of the decision. While I am aware that categorising the ordinances' decisions precludes a precise overview of their content, it does help expose general conclusions in stark relief. The most common topic, work arrangements, includes all decisions regulating the actual work or trade of the occupation. Other common topics are guild organisation (decisions regulating the organisation of the guild as an institution), entrance arrangements (decisions regulating new membership), and the cultural and religious aspects of guild life.

Each decision received a 'language' tag. These tags classify the gendered language used to describe the subjects of the ordinance. There are four tags: masculine, feminine, mixed, and neutral. In masculine decisions, the town council addressed male guild members or involved actors, as well as guild members holding guild offices, such as the deans, jurors, and other guild officials. The decision that 'the deans of the foresaid craft guild can choose two jurors from their foresaid guild yearly', for example, got the tag 'masculine'.⁹ In feminine decisions, the town governments addressed only women. As I will argue in this section, they rarely addressed all women. Instead, they usually refer to either female members of the household production unit or groups of women involved in the occupations in other ways. The category of 'mixed' language can refer to two types of decision subjects. First, it involved the dyad formulations that Ellen Kittel and Kurt Queller have studied for the town ordinances of fourteenth-century Douai, such as 'man or women', or *poortere oft poorteresse* (the masculine and feminine Middle Dutch words for citizen).¹⁰ This category also includes decisions in which the town government addressed both men and women separately. The fishmongers' ordinance of 1454, for example, prohibits anyone from selling herring without being a craft member, while the same decision allows fishmongers' wives and female herring sellers to sell the

⁹ 'Item, dat de dekens van den voirscreven ambachte jaerlix sullen moegen kyesen twee geswoernen uute haeren voirscreven ambachte [...].' Edmond Geudens, *Dit raect het oude cleercoopers ambacht*, 5.

¹⁰ Ellen E. Kittell and Kurt Queller, "'Whether Man or Woman': Gender Inclusivity in the Town Ordinances of Medieval Douai," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 1 (2000): 63–100.

fish.¹¹ Finally, neutral decisions do not contain any gendered language for the subjects. In these types of decisions, the town council addressed 'all persons', for example. The language tags do not indicate the content of the decisions. Decisions that restrict women to certain tasks still receive the feminine language tag.

As can be seen in Table 5, masculine language is predominant in the regulations of both the Antwerp old clothes sellers guild and the Mechelen fishmongers guild, while feminine or mixed language appears rarely. Taking the fishmongers' and old clothes sellers' ordinances together, 58 per cent of the 192 decisions addressed only men, whereas only 16 per cent were directed to women, or men and women together. Most ordinances were silent about women's work practices, as women were excluded from most (independent) guild work. Women often could not buy entrance into a guild or acquire formal membership.¹² Kittell and Queller found that the use of dyads in the Douai ordinances became increasingly rare throughout the fourteenth century. In Douai, old ordinances written with dyad formulation were renewed using only masculine language by 1403.¹³ The very infrequent use of the dyad formulation in the eleven Brabantine ordinances analysed in this section coincides with Kittell and Queller's findings. The ordinances of the two guilds in Antwerp and Mechelen exemplify the scant attention town authorities paid to women's work. The governing institutions indeed thought of guild work as masculine business.

Not only was masculine language dominant in the regulations concerning both guilds, but the attention given to possible female

¹¹ '[...] Dat nyement die int voirscreven ambacht niet gevrijdt en is binnen Mechelen tonneharing, meyling oft roxhoren en sal mogen vercoopen anders dan met lasten met halven lasten [...], uutgenomen de visschers ende hare wiven ende de vrouwen die dat gewoonlic sijn te doene die selen nair der ouder coustumen alsulken haring ende boxhoren mogen vercoopen ende penneweerden tusschen den Oort ende den Vleeshuyse ende aende twee poirten dairt gewoonlic is [...].' SAM, Visverkopers 14, 26 July 1454.

¹² De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic*; Maarten Prak, "Corporatism and Social Models in the Low Countries," *TSEG/ The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 11, no. 2 (2014): 281–304.

¹³ Kittell and Queller, "Whether Man or Woman."

participants was also not evenly distributed between the decision topics (see Table 5). For the Antwerp old clothes sellers, only a few decisions in the category of work arrangements contain feminine or mixed language. The twenty-two decisions with feminine or mixed language dealt with the cultural or religious elements of guild life.¹⁴ Furthermore, the guild's entrance arrangements were framed in the dyad formulation. In 1436 and again in 1550, for example, the town council of Antwerp stipulated that 'anyone who wants to come into the foresaid guild [the old clothes sellers guild] has to be a *poortere oft poortersse* from Antwerp [...].'¹⁵ In general, the town government of Antwerp had little immediate concern with women in the old clothes sellers guild. Work arrangements were only made for the *uitdraagsters*, a group of women itinerant traders working parallel to the old clothes sellers guild.

The ordinances of the Mechelen fishmongers had an even more masculine focus than those of the Antwerp old clothes sellers. The town council of Mechelen addressed mainly work practices when regulating the fishmongers, whereas the decisions concerning the Antwerp old clothes sellers also regulated the organisation of guild life. More than 80 per cent of the decisions in the five fishmongers' ordinances regulate work arrangements (see Table 5). One example of these work arrangements is a decision from the 1508 ordinance that fishmongers who were not members of the guild could only sell freshwater fish in Mechelen before noon.¹⁶ Most decisions in the ordinances of the Mechelen fishmongers, which included mixed or feminine language, involved work arrangements. Since entrance arrangements only mention potential male members, it seems that the guild

¹⁴ In 1556, for example, the guild ordinance stipulated the right of craft members' widows to poor relief from the guild's poor box as long as they remained unmarried. Furthermore, widows had to contribute to the poor box along with male guild members. SAA, GA#4001, fol. 173v-177r, 7 December 1556.

¹⁵ SAA, GA#4273, fol. 7v-13v, 19 January 1550.

¹⁶ 'Item, dat alle visschers van buyten int voirscreven ambacht niet wesende, die gewoonlick zijn riviervisch te vangene in loepende wateren ende die bynnen der stad van Mechelen brengen om te penneweerden, dat die dien selen moegen vercoepen totter noenen toe dien dach ende niet langer [...].' SAM, Visverkopers 23, 16 October 1508.

Table 5. Language use per topic in the ordinances of the old clothes sellers guild of Antwerp (1436-1556) and the fishmongers guild of Mechelen (1440-1584).

Antwerp old clothes sellers	#	%	Mechelen fishmongers	#	%
Feminine	13	12	Feminine	5	6
Work arrangements	5	38	Work arrangements	5	100
Entrance arrangements	4	31	Masculine	56	64
Cultural/Religious	4	31	Work arrangements	42	75
Masculine	55	52	Guild organisation	9	16
Cultural/religious	16	29	Entrance arrangements	3	5
Work arrangements	11	20	Offences	2	4
Guild organisation	9	16	Mixed	4	5
Entrance arrangements	7	13	Work arrangements	4	100
Estimators	6	11	Neutral	22	25
Debts	2	4	Work arrangements	20	91
Exit arrangements	2	4	Offences	2	9
Double membership	2	4	Total	87	100
Mixed	9	9			
Cultural/religious	3	33			
Estimators	2	22			
Work arrangements	2	22			
Entrance arrangements	2	22			
Neutral	28	27			
Entrance arrangements	10	36			
Guild organisation	7	25			
Work arrangements	4	14			
Cultural/religious	4	14			
Estimators	2	7			
Offences	1	4			
Total	105	100			

Source: Edmond Geudens, *Dit raect het oude cleercoopers ambacht binnen der stede van Antwerpen ende is eene verleeninge vanden jaere M vierhondert ende sessendertich* (Brecht: Braeckmans, 1905); SAA, GA#4001, fol. 32r-33v, 24 October 1452; SAA, GA#4001, fol. 49v-50r, 3 December 1505; SAA, GA#4273, fol. 26r-29v, 15 October 1526; SAA, GA#4273, fol. 7v-13v, 19 January 1550; SAA, GA#4001, fol. 173v-177r, 7 December 1556; SAM, C. Magistraat (Ordonnantiën) - Serie I, nr. 3, fol. 29r-30v, 3 February 1440; SAM, Visverkopers 14, 26 July 1454; SAM, Visverkopers 23, 16 October 1508; SAM, Visverkopers 26, 8 October 1551; SAM, Visverkopers 30, 16 June 1584.

leadership intended these ordinances strictly for men. In 1454 and again in 1508, the town government of Mechelen decided that 'the son of a "free" fishmonger's daughter' could enter for half the usual fee, as could bastards and sons of masters.¹⁷ This particular formulation indicates that a fishmonger's daughter herself was not allowed to enter the guild. However, fishmongers' daughters could keep the occupation in the family through their children, which facilitated the guild's wish for exclusivity.¹⁸ Nevertheless, guild regulation did not address daughters nor take them into account as possible guild members in their entrance arrangements. By using male language only when addressing guild members, the Mechelen fishmongers guild reaffirmed their masculine character.

Although most ordinances of the Antwerp old clothes sellers and the Mechelen fishmongers were promulgated using masculine language, there was some deployment of feminine language. Whereas masculine language principally referred to male guild members as one group, the town councils used feminine language almost entirely for specific groups of women working in or parallel to the regulated occupations. As craft guilds rarely or never allowed membership to women, there is little regulation that addresses female craft members. Two groups of women were repeatedly addressed in the fishmongers' and old clothes sellers' ordinances.

Most common in the ordinances is a reference to the female members of guild masters' households. This was the case for four of the nine decisions in

¹⁷ 'Item, die een yegelic wettich zoon van eens vrije visschers dochter van der voirscreven stad ende een yegelic bastaertzoon van eenen vrijen visscher die int voirscreven ambacht sal willen comen ende gevrijde zijn sculdich sal sijn te gevene voir sijn incompst int voirscreven ambacht twee pond grote vlaams gelds te bekeeren in drijen gelijc voirscreven staet.' SAM, *Visverkopers* 14, 26 July 1454; SAM, *Visverkopers* 23, 16 October 1508.

¹⁸ Ellen Burm and Bert De Munck, "Het Broodje gebakken? Huwelijksstrategieën en partnerkeuze van de bakkers(kinderen) te Brussel in de overgang van het Ancien Régime naar de negentiende eeuw," *Stadsgeschiedenis* 2, no. 5 (2010): 148–68; Jacobsen, "Women's Work and Women's Role," 14–16; Anne Montenach, "Creating a Space for Themselves on the Urban Market. Survival Strategies and Economic Opportunities for Single Women in French Provincial Towns (Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries)," in *Single Life and the City 1200-1900*, ed. Julie De Groot, Ariadne Schmidt, and Isabelle Devos (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 55.

the Mechelen fishmongers ordinances that utilised feminine and mixed language. For example, in 1454, the town council of Mechelen promulgated the decision that 'everyone from the foresaid guild [the fishmongers] can only have one market stall for himself and for his wife to practice his craft.'¹⁹ This type of decision, which emphasises the work of a guild master's wife together with her husband, is common in the Brabantine guild ordinances.

The leeway allowed to female members of a masters' household production unit has been the subject of a number of studies. In 1995, Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks argued that 'there were girls and women working alongside the journeymen and apprentices in many capacities, but their ability to do so was not officially recognised or discussed in guild ordinances.'²⁰ Although their work was rarely recognised, guild masters' family members were allowed and even expected to collaborate in the family workshop. Ordinances rarely prohibited them from practising (parts of) the husband's craft.²¹ Some scholars have even equated claiming the title 'wife of' to claiming an occupational title.²² Nevertheless, the assumption that masters' wives would participate in household workshops without formal recognition corresponded to the lack of an individual occupational identity for most (married) women.²³ Moreover, in a later chapter, I will argue that the normative allowances for spouses should not be generalised to all

¹⁹ This decision in the 1454 ordinance of the Mechelen fishmongers will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

'Item, dat nyement van den voirscreven ambachte van den visschers en sal mogen hebben mair een banc op te vischmerct voir hem ende voir sijn wijf om sine neringe dairop te doene.' SAM, Visverkopers 14, 26 July 1454.

²⁰ Merry E. Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," in *Germany: A New Social and Economic History, Vol. 1: 1450-1630*, ed. Bob Scribner, vol. 1 (London: Arnold, 1995), 222.

²¹ Danielle van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women in Early Modern Dutch Towns," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy*, ed. Deborah Simonton and A. Montenach (New York: Routledge, 2013), 130.

²² Bart Lambert, "Double Disadvantage or Golden Age? Immigration, Gender and Economic Opportunity in Later Medieval England," *Gender & History* 31, no. 3 (2019): 11; Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights*, 31; Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," 213.

²³ Kittell and Queller, "Whether Man or Woman," 84.

contexts. Guild masters' wives' activities could be problematic in the prestigious guilds.

The second group of women addressed in the ordinances of the Antwerp old clothes sellers and Mechelen fishmongers were informal itinerant traders. They were saleswomen working in a branch of a guild occupation without guild membership. In contrast to some crafts guilds, both the fishmongers and old clothes sellers had to deal with a recognised group of itinerant traders who worked in parallel to the guild. To the old clothes sellers, *uitdraagsters* proved to be serious competitors. As the old clothes sellers did, the *uitdraagsters* sold other people's goods for a fixed fee. In Mechelen, the fishmongers experienced competition from the *harincvrouwen*, a group of non-guild saleswomen who sold herring at retail in town.

In Antwerp, the *uitdraagsters* competed with official guild members. Previous studies have paid little attention to these saleswomen in Brabant and the other parts of the Southern Low Countries because most of their activities were concealed by the work of the officially organised old clothes sellers. The *uitdraagsters* of Antwerp had to swear an oath yearly to the dean of the old clothes sellers guild.²⁴ They also had to answer to the guild for offences and fraud. The saleswomen were addressed as a group of women working under the same statute but not organised in a separate economic institution. By regulating their activities, the town government (and the craft guild) recognised them as economic players. Authorities paid particular attention to their activities, as their work was not part of a (guild) household workshop. As a result, regulation of the *uitdraagsters* focussed on the guild's control of their work. In 1551, for example, the council of Antwerp ruled that 'no *uitdraagster* can have a window shop'.²⁵ The women worked under

²⁴ 'Item, dat de dekens van den voorscreven ambachte jaerlicx zullen moghen hebben eenen eedt van elcken uuytdraechsteren weder zij innecoopen oft niet [...].' Geudens, *Dit raect het oude cleercoopers ambacht*, 6–7.

²⁵ 'Item, dat van nu voerdane gheene uutdraeghsteren voervensteren houden en sal opte peyne van twee ouden schilden, te verbueren, te believen in drien als voerscreven es.' SAA, GA#4001, fol. 32r-33v, 19 January 1551.

certain restrictions but were nevertheless allowed to buy and sell alongside the old clothes sellers.

The *uitdraagsters* of Antwerp were neither a strictly controlled group nor independent entrepreneurs. This might have been the result of the existence of the guild. The women worked in a parallel fashion to the old clothes sellers guild but were submissive to the corporation at the same time. The attitude of the guild towards such informal traders, even when the guild recognised them, was sometimes conflicted. In the Southern Brabantine town of Leuven, a group of *uitdraagsters* was active together with the old clothes sellers guild. In 1478, the saleswomen complained to the town council that the guild required them to pay high fees for each sale they made. Their complaint was not heeded, and it is likely that the town council reaffirmed the *uitdraagsters'* submission to the guild.²⁶

The conflict between itinerant saleswomen and guild members is striking because it suggests a direct effect of guild organisation on women's labour opportunities. In regions where the secondhand trade was not organised in guilds, such as the German town of Nuremberg, the saleswomen worked together and forced the hand of town authorities.²⁷ Jacobsen has also suggested that women's position in the fishmongers guild of sixteenth-century Malmö decreased as soon as it was organised by a male-headed guild.²⁸ As we will see for Bilbao, the absence of guilds facilitated more closely-knit female occupational groups. However, even in the absence of a guild, women secondhand dealers were subjected to male control. In the French town of Amiens, which had no guild organisation, the town council strictly controlled the town's women secondhand dealers.²⁹

²⁶ SAL, 1524, fol. 9r, 15 July 1478.

²⁷ Merry E. Wiesner, "Paltry Peddlers or Essential Merchants? Women in the Distributive Trades in Early Modern Nuremberg," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 12, no. 2 (1981): 3–13.

²⁸ Jacobsen, "Women's Work and Women's Role," 11.

²⁹ Julie Pilorget, "Circulations féminines et encadrement de l'espace urbain à la fin du Moyen Âge: l'exemple d'Amiens," in *Mobilités et déplacements des femmes dans le nord de la France du Moyen Âge à nos jours*, ed. Youri Carbonnier, Stéphane Curveiller, and Laurent Warloutzet (Arras Cedex: Artois Presses Université, 2019), 24.

The situation of the *harincvrouwen* in Mechelen is similar to that of the Antwerp *uitdraagsters*. Even though entrance to the fishmongers guild in Mechelen was reserved for men, the ordinances and sources of daily practice both show women's independent involvement in the herring trade. Wives, daughters, servants, and even craft members' mothers cooperated in household workshops. But the guild did not have a monopoly over the entire fish trade. The 'herring women' worked on the margins of the guild, as they were licensed to sell herring without needing guild membership.³⁰ Ordinances regulating their work focus on the quality of the fish they sold, as well as on the market space they occupied.³¹ Five of the sentences in the sentence books of the fishmongers guild (to be discussed further later) also refer specifically to the herring sellers.³² The sentences show that the women were considered responsible for their own businesses, in a similar manner to the Dutch female eel sellers studied by Danielle van den Heuvel.³³ The more lucrative fish sales, as well as wholesale dealing, were in the hands of men, both interregional merchants, and local guild members.³⁴ Nevertheless, the regulations show that these herring traders were a recognised group of saleswomen. Their work paralleled the activities of the corporation, although they never officially belonged to it.³⁵ Although guild life was a

³⁰ The licenses in the case of the women herring sellers might not have been explicit permits. In the ordinance of 1454, the town council promulgated that 'de vrouwen die dat gewoonlic sijn te doene die selen nair der ouder coustumen alsulken haring ende boxhoren mogen vercoopen ende penneweerden [...]'. SAM, Visverkopers 14, 26 July 1454.

³¹ SAM, Visverkopers 30, 16 June 1584; SAM, C. Magistraat (Ordonnantiën) - Serie I, nr. 3, fol. 29r-30v, 3 February 1440.

³² In 1537, for example, a group of women selling herring in the streets of Mechelen were sent on a pilgrimage to Halle for selling herring. SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 138v, 1537.

³³ van den Heuvel, "The Multiple Identities," 590.

³⁴ Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman, "Women's Work, Gender Conflict, and Labour Markets in Europe, 1500-1900," *The Economic History Review* 44, no. 4 (1991): 611; Judith M. Bennett, "'History That Stands Still'. Women's Work in the European Past," *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988): 274; Jacobsen, "Women's Work and Women's Role," 11.

³⁵ Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton, "Introduction. Gender, Agency and Economy: Shaping the Eighteenth-Century European Town," in *Female Agency in the*

masculine business, the presence of these women itinerant traders forced the council to include them in guild regulation.

There are a number of potential causes for the general absence of feminine and mixed language in the guild ordinances. First, the small number of women in the guilds may be the reason for the dominant use of masculine language. The old clothes sellers of Antwerp did admit women, as can also be found in their decision that anyone 'who wants to come into the foresaid craft guild, has to be a *poortere oft poortersse* from Antwerp first.'³⁶ However, this is one of the few decisions that mention female members. New members had to take an oath when entering the old clothes sellers guild. The written version of this oath only contains masculine language.³⁷ Perhaps absence of women guild members prevented the need for feminine language in the guild ordinances. However, scholars have shown that the presence of women was common in guild life. Guild masters were regularly assisted by their spouses, children, and other members of the household.³⁸ Furthermore, a group of women was active in the informal market, which operated in tandem with the guild-based market.³⁹ As a result, it is possible that women had more presence in guild life and work than the ordinances indicate, even if that was not through official guild membership.

A second reason that regulations did not address women might be that the tasks women did in these guilds were considered normal. In the Mechelen fishmongers' ordinances, there are few references to either female members of the household production unit or informal traders. Only a few ordinances discuss female herring retailers and fishmongers' spouses. On

Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 8.

³⁶ 'Item, zoe wie int voorscreven ambacht comen wille, die sal eer poortere oft poortersse moeten zijn t' Antwerpen oft worden [...].' Geudens, *Dit raect het oude cleercoopers ambacht*, 6.

³⁷ SAA, GA#4273, fol. 5r-5v.

³⁸ Kristien Harmsen and Helene Hubers, "'En zij verkocht de vis ...'. Visverkoopsters in Utrecht en Antwerpen van de veertiende tot en met de zeventiende eeuw," *Dinamiek* 8, no. 2 (1991): 33; Ariadne Schmidt and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Reconsidering the 'Firstmale-Breadwinner Economy': Women's Labor Force Participation in the Netherlands, 1600–1900," *Feminist Economics* 18, no. 4 (2012): 75.

the other hand, the guild's sentence book shows that the authorities had to deal with precisely these groups because of their trade activities. In a later chapter, I will discuss the specific sentences from the Mechelen fishmongers from 1457 to 1561 because there are so many women in the guild's sentence books. However, it is possible that the town council did not question these women's activities as they were normalised or considered to be 'female' activities. Even if the guilds sometimes problematised women working, as I will argue in Chapter 4 and Chapter 6, the council might not have seen the need to regulate them.

Finally, gendered language deployed by town councils may not have been an exact representation of gendered practices. Although the councils' language may specify which actors and practices they wanted to control, evidence suggests that masculine language use did not necessarily mean women would not be involved in the occupation.⁴⁰ A decision from an ordinance of the Mechelen shopkeepers' guild shows the pattern. In 1519 the town government decided that 'all apprentices [*leerjongens*], whether they are boys or girls [*knechtken oft meysken*],' had to pay six shillings to support the guild's chapel.⁴¹ 'Leerjongens' in this case was used as a gender-neutral term, notwithstanding its masculine gender. The opposite could also happen. As Danielle van den Heuvel posited for the regulation of retailers' guilds in the early modern northern Low Countries, 'we cannot assume that if explicit gender notions are absent from guild policies, their policies did not shape the gender balance.'⁴² Implied gendering can also be found in the town ordinances of Antwerp and Mechelen. For example, in contrast to the Antwerp guild, the Mechelen old clothes sellers did not explicitly prohibit women from being estimators. The town government clarified that guild members could only estimate after three years of guild membership but 'if he is the son of a free old clothes seller, and for the time of a year and a half.' This formulation might imply that women were excluded from the position. Guild ordinances were generally made in reaction to existing practices (or

⁴⁰ Kittell and Queller, "Whether Man or Woman," 75.

⁴¹ SAM, Kramersambacht 1, 2 May 1519.

⁴² van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women," 129–30.

problems, in the eyes of the parties asking for or designing the ordinance).⁴³ Possibly, an explicit rule excluding women from the position of estimator was not necessary as that exclusion was generally accepted and did not need further clarification.⁴⁴

While most guild regulations used masculine language, some ordinances refer to women involved in the Mechelen fish trade and secondhand sales in Antwerp. Throughout the fifteenth and start of the sixteenth centuries, the number of decisions regulating women's work stayed low. In 1550, the Antwerp town government renewed the 1436 ordinance for the old clothes sellers without changing any provisions.⁴⁵ Topics of importance in the mid-fifteenth century seem to have been the same a century later. Since the inception of women's history and gender studies, scholars have debated changes in women's economic opportunities during the late medieval and early modern periods. Scholars have established that women's labour opportunities changed depending on their social class and economic status. The economic position of women was influenced by different elements.⁴⁶

There are few changes in norms in the ordinances of the Mechelen fishmongers and the Antwerp old clothes sellers. Over the entire period, the ordinances of the period were predominantly masculine. Decisions considering the work of craft members were generally written in masculine language. As Tables 6 and 7 show, the use of feminine and mixed language did not decline or change but remained steady at a low level throughout the period of time studied. Women's work was always a low priority in the regulation of guild activities. Between 1436 and 1556, the use of feminine language in the Antwerp old clothes sellers' ordinances varied between 0

⁴³ van den Heuvel, 118–30; Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights*, 53.

⁴⁴ '[...] zoe verre hij vrij oudecleercoopers zoen es den tijt van anderhalff jaer' SAM, Oudkleerkopersambacht 1, fol. 1r-29v, 16 December 1577.

⁴⁵ SAA, GA#4273, fol. 7v-13v, 19 January 1550.

⁴⁶ Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights*, 43–56; Clare Crowston, "Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe: An Overview of Recent Research," *International Review of Social History* 53, no. 16 (2008): 19–44; Marc Gil, "Les femmes dans les métiers d'art des Pays-Bas Bourguignons au XVe siècle," *Clio* 34 (2011): 244; Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*, 17.

and 27 per cent (see Table 6). The five ordinances of Mechelen fishmongers dated between 1440 and 1584 included between 0 and 20 per cent (see Table 7). There is no steady pattern of either increase or decline in the ordinances' use of gendered language. Although the fishmongers and old clothes sellers guilds are not representative of all labour in Mechelen and Antwerp, these normative sources offer little evidence that women's opportunities changed in these two guilds. As I will discuss in section 2 of this chapter, an analysis of guild entrance lists shows a similar steadiness in women's guild participation.

Even though the councils' attention to women's work in guild ordinances changed little throughout the period from 1450 to 1550, there was a notable exception at a later point. Sometimes, changing local contexts contributed to (temporary) limitations on women's labour opportunities. In 1584, the town government of Mechelen ordered that 'from now on, no fishmonger's wife can stand with fish in the market, nor can they receive or sell or give to anyone else to sell [...]. The man will be obliged to sell in his own person or to let it be sold by another free fishmonger [...].'⁴⁷ In contrast to usual practice, the town government promulgated an ordinance hindering wives' participation in the household production unit. Guild regulations might have been highly gendered, but they rarely explicitly excluded wives' work. As I will argue in Chapter 4, the ordinance was the result of an older policy and might reflect a rising trend in the Mechelen fishmongers guild. The butchers of Leuven made a similar decision in 1566 when they requested an ordinance that would prohibit butchers' widows from selling in the Meat Hall. The craft members complained that the widows were depriving younger craft members of opportunity. While the town council of Leuven approved the ordinance, it is clear that they knew

⁴⁷ 'Item, dat van nu voirtaen gheenen vischcoopers vrouwen met visch op de merct in de bancken mogen voortstaen, noch dien lonen oft vercoopen noch te doen loven oft vercoopen bij yemanden anders directelijc oft indirectelijc in eeniger manieren. Maer zullen de mans schuldich wesen hunzels visch in persooene te vercoopen oft bij yemanden anders vrij vischcooper wesende doen vercoopen [...]' SAM, Visverkopers 30, 16 June 1584.

Table 6. Language use per topic in six ordinances from the old clothes sellers guild of Antwerp (1436-1556).

Ordinance decision	1436		1452		1505		1526		1550		1556	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Feminine	3	12	/	/	3	27	2	20	3	12	2	8
Work arrangements	1	33	/	/	2	67	1	50	1	33	/	/
Cultural/ religious	1	33	/	/	/	/	/	/	1	33	2	100
Entrance arrangements	1	33	/	/	1	33	1	50	1	33	/	/
Masculine	14	54	5	83	1	9	8	80	14	54	13	50
Work arrangements	4	29	1	20	/	/	2	25	4	29	/	/
Guild organisation	3	21	1	20	/	/	2	25	3	21	/	/
Entrance arrangements	3	21	/	/	1	100	/	/	3	21	/	/
Estimators	/	/	3	60	/	/	3	38	/	/	/	/
Cultural/religious	1	7	/	/	/	/	1	13	1	7	13	100
Debts	1	7	/	/	/	/	/	/	1	7	/	/
Exit arrangements	1	7	/	/	/	/	/	/	1	7	/	/
Double membership	1	7	/	/	/	/	/	/	1	7	/	/
Mixed	4	15	/	/	1	9	/	/	4	15	/	/
Cultural/religious	1	25	/	/	1	100	/	/	1	25	/	/
Estimators	1	25	/	/	/	/	/	/	1	25	/	/
Work arrangements	1	25	/	/	/	/	/	/	1	25	/	/
Entrance arrangements	1	25	/	/	/	/	/	/	1	25	/	/
Neutral	5	19	1	17	6	55	/	/	5	19	11	42
Estimators	1	20	/	/	/	/	/	/	1	20	/	/
Work arrangements	1	20	1	100	1	17	/	/	1	20	7	64
Entrance arrangements	3	60	/	/	4	67	/	/	3	60	/	/
Cultural/religious	/	/	/	/	1	17	/	/	/	/	3	27
Offences	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	1	9
Total	26	100	6	100	11	100	10	100	26	100	26	100

Source: See Table 5.

Table 7. Language use per topic in five ordinances from the fishmongers guild of Mechelen (1440-1584)

Ordinance decision	1440		1454		1508		1551		1584	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Feminine	1	5	/	/	1	13	/	/	3	20
Work arrangements	1	100	/	/	1	100	/	/	3	100
Masculine	14	70	8	67	5	63	21	66	8	53
Work arrangements	10	71	1	13	4	80	19	90	8	100
Guild organisation	3	21	4	50	/	/	2	10	/	/
Entrance arrangements	/	/	2	25	1	20	/	/	/	/
Offences	1	7	1	13	/	/	/	/	/	/
Mixed	/	/	3	25	/	/	/	/	1	7
Work arrangements	/	/	3	100	/	/	/	/	1	100
Neutral	5	25	1	8	2	25	11	34	3	20
Work arrangements	5	100	/	/	2	100	10	91	3	100
Offences	/	/	1	100	/	/	1	9	/	/
Total	20	100	12	100	8	100	32	100	15	100

Source: See Table 5.

they were contradicting older customs. That same year they made an exception for two butchers' widows. Four years later, a new regulation stipulated that widows could again manage their husbands' stalls but only to sell certain types of meat. By 1655, the ordinance had been completely annulled.⁴⁸ Even though these changes in women's work opportunities in Brabant might have merely been fluctuations, shifts in the production and commercialisation processes of guilds did have an impact on women's access to work. The context varied by guild, but the result was a similar pattern of exclusion.

1.2 Regulation and exclusion: gendered arguments in guild regulation

As the last paragraph highlights, guild ordinances focus on regulating men's work. However, the councils rarely promulgated a regulation with gender as an explicit argument. As I will show in this section, to legitimise a regulation, they emphasised other factors than gender, such as loss of income to the guild or informal competition. Most regulations concerned daily practice and did not stress the masculine character of guilds. However, two Brabantine guild ordinances reveal that town councils were just as aware of the masculine character of guilds as craft members were and were prepared to offer it as a valid argument. In the first example, the dispute between the masters of the Antwerp glove and purse makers from 1474, one group of masters argued against women working for wages. They claimed that:

'[...] no one can have more than two apprentices, and neither should the aforesaid work be done by the foresaid women, because the aforesaid work is a craft of men, who have to work and be burdened with the craft, and that with the work of the foresaid women the good men of the craft guild would be deprived of the work [...]'.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Nena Vandeweerd, "'Van den vleeschouweren oft pensvrouwen.' De economische mogelijkheden voor vrouwen in het leuvense vleeshouwersambacht in de vijftiende en zestiende eeuw," *TSEG/ Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 15, no. 1 (2018): 27–28; Alfons Meulemans, "Leuvense ambachten: de beenhouwers," *Eigen Schoon En de Brabander*, no. 42 (1958): 296–97.

⁴⁹ '[...] nyement sculdich en is te houdene meer leernapen dan twee, ende dat ooc de voers. hantieringe den voers. vrouwen nyet en betaemt noch en behoort te doene,

The masters were protesting that two groups that did not fit into their patriarchal structure – female wagedworkers and apprentices – were too involved in the guild's work.⁵⁰ The masculine character of the guild alone seems to have been enough of an argument to exclude both these groups. Bert De Munck has stated that, at least during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, 'corporate and patriarchal values and practices' overlapped.⁵¹ During this period, guilds and their household workshops were indispensable for urban economies, at least in the Southern Low Countries. Town councils replicated the guilds' values in ordinances.

The same pattern appears in the Mechelen glove makers guild. In an ordinance from the sixteenth century, the town council of Mechelen pronounced that 'if man and wife live in one household, the man will contribute to the poor box weekly and not the wife because he is the breadwinner.'⁵² The use of gendered language shows a conscious strategy. Urban authorities used patriarchal, masculine values to legitimise the operation of the guild's poor box. While it was rare for guilds to explicitly prohibit women from working, guilds certainly did not encourage women to join their prestigious corporations. Most mechanisms in place favoured men's work over women's work.⁵³ Nevertheless, it is clear that women's work also had a place inside or next to the patriarchal craft guilds.⁵⁴

want de voers. liantieringe een ambacht is van mannen, die metten ambachte moeten scoten, loten ende te laste staen, ende dat bider hantieringen vanden voers. vrouwen de voers. neringe den goeden mannen vanden selven ambachte soude moegen ontrocken worden [...]. Génard, "Register van den dachvaerden," 400–401.

⁵⁰ De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic*, 180–210.

⁵¹ De Munck, 181.

⁵² '[...] als man ende wijf levende bijeen huyshoudende dat die man sal alle weke heffen die busse ende die vrouwe niet want hij dat broot winnende es [...].' SAM, Handschoenmakers-, tescmakers-, riem(be)slagers-, witledermakers- en schedemakersambacht 554bis, fol. 6v-7r. Although this ordinance does not have an exact date, I suspect it to be from around 1550 judging by the records surrounding it in the register. The explicit reference to the man as breadwinner is a particularly significant counterpoint to the argument of earlier studies that the idea of the male breadwinner model emerged in a later century.

⁵³ Montenach and Simonton, "Introduction," 8–9.

⁵⁴ Shennan Hutton has argued that market space was strategically divided by gender. The women and men using this market space, however, found bridges to use this

The craft guilds, although masculine, left room for women to operate within or on the margins of their organisation. On rare occasions, craft guilds instituted regulations to protect or include female work. When women's work was needed, craft guilds expanded the female wage work force if they did not threaten the guilds' monopoly.⁵⁵ As Jane Humphries and Carmen Sarasúa have argued, these wage workers were not privileged guild members. They worked with limited benefits and usually received a lower wage than that given to male wage workers or other guild workers.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the guild needed these women wage workers, which generated the need for regulations to protect their working conditions. In 1493 an ordinance from the Mechelen hatters stated that 'if any *steeckeressen* or female worker comes to make any complaint about her master to the foresaid dean and jurors of the foresaid craft guild', that the deans and juror of the craft guild would order the master to pay or heed the complaint. If the woman wanted to go and work for someone else, she would be allowed to do so in this situation. Moreover, a clause protected female employees from retribution by the masters. When a complaint was filed against a craft master, he could not slander or scold the employee who had filed it.⁵⁷ Female wage workers were thus not an unwelcome workforce. They were a

division to their benefit (as much as possible). The same can be said for guild regulation and guild organisation in general. Although most women were excluded as guild members, they still had different other ways to access the same work opportunities. Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets," 410.

⁵⁵ This was also the case with the spinners of Leuven in [...]. The weavers filed a petition on their behalf. As the spinners were indispensable workers in the production of cloth, it is not surprising that guild members facilitated their own work by sharing the spinners' complaints with the town council. See: Nena Vandeweerd, "Women, Town Councils, and the Organisation of Work in Bilbao and Antwerp: A North-South Comparison (1400–1560)," *Continuity and Change* 36, no. 1 (2021): 71.

⁵⁶ Jane Humphries and Carmen Sarasúa, "The Feminization of the Labor Force and Five Associated Myths," in *The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Economics*, ed. Günseli Berik and Kongar Ebru (London: Routledge, 2021), 175.

⁵⁷ 'Item, dat als eenighe steeckerssen oft werckvrouwen over haren meester daerse wrachte clachtich quame aen den voirscreven deken en de geswoornen van den voirscreven ambachte van quader betalinghen, quaden loone, quaden ghereetscape van garen ende vilten te gheven [...]'. SAM, Hoedenmakersambacht 1, fol. 1r-8v, 12 November 1493.

recognised part of the industry, which meant that their interests sometimes overlapped to a certain extent with those of the guild and town authorities.

Although rare, there are explicit regulations prohibiting women from participating in guild life in the ordinances. Guilds striving to obtain exclusivity found certain groups of women easy targets.⁵⁸ Guilds required regulation when women's work ran counter to the guilds' expectations. As earlier studies have shown, urban residents' survival strategies did not always coincide with the corporations' program of exclusivity and masculinity, which led the guilds to seek ordinances that would protect their limited membership.⁵⁹ However, the reasons given by Mechelen and Antwerp authorities for these ordinances were diverse. While women might often have been the targeted group, town councils rarely used gender as an explicit argument.

In 1436 (and again in 1550), the town council of Antwerp promulgated an ordinance for the old clothes sellers, including the decision that female craft members could not act as estimators (*schatter*).⁶⁰ Estimators had to calculate the value of goods that citizens or other town residents wanted to sell. Per estimation, they received slightly more than one per cent of the estimated price.⁶¹ Although women could be members of the old clothes sellers guild, the town government made a clear gendered demarcation. Women could not be estimators, without exception. The question of why women could not be estimators can be answered in different ways.

⁵⁸ Susan Broomhall, "Women, Work, and Power in the Female Guilds of Rouen," in *Practices of Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Megan Cassidy-Welch and Peter Sherlock (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2008), 212–13; De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic*, 185.

⁵⁹ Carol Gold, "On the Streets and in the Markets: Independent Copenhagen Saleswomen," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 37; Honeyman and Goodman, "Women's Work, Gender Conflict, and Labour Markets," 611; Howell, "The Problem of Women's Agency"; Montenach and Simonton, "Introduction," 4–5.

⁶⁰ Geudens, *Dit raect het oude cleercoopers ambacht*, 6.; SAA, GA#4273, fol. 7v-13v, 19 January 1550

⁶¹ Geudens, 18–21.

A first reason for excluding women from certain tasks is skill. Historians have argued that craft guilds forced women into unskilled jobs by denying them access to the work organised by the corporations. The lack of skill, or denial of women's possible skill, justified low wages or exclusion for women. As Wiesner-Hanks has argued, the guilds established a barrier between 'skilled' and 'unskilled' work, visible in this decision about estimators in Antwerp.⁶² There is no doubt that the guild regarded the position of estimator as a task requiring a certain skillset. Only guild members who had been enrolled for more than a year could take up the position.⁶³ In Mechelen, new members had to wait three years before they could become estimators. Apparently, guild membership alone was not sufficient to be entrusted with the role of estimator. As Daryl Hafter has stated, 'the skill was in the worker, not in the job'.⁶⁴ The council seems to be implying women workers did not have this skill. They could be official guild members but could not undertake aspects of the trade that required more than good saleswomanship.

Men's perception of women's skills for certain crafts might not have been that negative, however. The widow's right to take over her husband's position, common all over premodern Europe, shows craftsmen's high estimation of their wives' skills, as does the allowance that wives could work in the household workshop.⁶⁵ Therefore, skill is not the only possible way to explain the old clothes sellers' prohibition on female estimators. The ordinance also stated that the estimators, chosen from the craft members, had to work in pairs to estimate the value of goods.⁶⁶ This stipulation probably did not arise because there were doubts about the estimators' ability but because the corporation had to guarantee that the estimators would not overestimate prices to increase their income. A good reputation

⁶² Bennett, "History That Stands Still," 272; Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," 215.

⁶³ Geudens, *Dit raect het oude cleercoopers ambacht*, 6.

⁶⁴ Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*, 291.

⁶⁵ Anna C. Fridrich, "Women Working in Guild Crafts. Female Strategies in Early Modern Urban Economies," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 138; Jacobsen, "Women's Work and Women's Role," 9.

⁶⁶ Geudens, *Dit raect het oude cleercoopers ambacht*, 6.

and trustworthiness were essential qualities of estimators. Scholars have emphasised that women's work was considered problematic in certain contexts because of the importance of reputation in premodern town economies. Within these patriarchal societies, town councils considered women's economic activities risky due to potential (sexual) misconduct and fear of fraud.⁶⁷ Within the craft guilds, whose key values included respectability and unblemished reputations, this view of women had a great impact.⁶⁸ The old clothes sellers might have distrusted in women, therefore denying them the position of estimator. A similar view could explain the decision of the town council of Mechelen in an ordinance for the gardeners, fruit sellers, and basket makers that 'the women from the foresaid guild cannot use ugly and slandering words against each other'.⁶⁹ The town government felt the need to address female guild members, possibly because of recurring incidents. Suspicion of female traders might have sometimes stimulated guild regulation. Even though women could become members in a few guilds, the female members clearly stood out as exceptions in the masculine guild life. For certain questions, such as that of reputation and trustworthiness, gender might have limited possibilities for women.

Regulations prohibiting women in general from certain tasks or access to the guilds were rare. Ordinances regulating women's work were only directed at certain groups of women. Guild and city leaders promulgated such ordinances for one reason: to limit competition from outsiders for the benefit of guild artisans. Although craft guilds rarely possessed a monopoly over occupations, they claimed the prestige that came with those occupations. Sometimes this prestige was threatened by female workers,

⁶⁷ Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," 212–14; Broomhall, "Women, Work, and Power," 204–5; Montenach, "Trades in Lyon," 23; Marta Vicente, "Images and Realities of Work: Women and Guilds in Early Modern Barcelona," in *Spanish Women in the Golden Age: Images and Realities*, ed. Alain Saint-Saëns and Magdalena Sánchez (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996), 129–30.

⁶⁸ Peter Stabel, "Workplace Cultures," in *A Cultural History of Work in the Medieval Age*, ed. Valerie L. Garver (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 98.

⁶⁹ 'Item, dat de vrouwen van den voerscreven ambachte die deen tegen dander zelen kynen ende malcanderen lelijke ende schofftelijke woerden van hoeren ende andere geven [...].' SAM, Hoveniers-, fruiteniers- en mandenmakersambacht 7, 12 December 1491.

both inside and outside the craft guild. Regulation of women's work to limit competition appears in two contexts: the wish to create equal opportunities for guild members and the guild's fight against 'unfair' competition from the informal market.

Restricting women's work was not always intended to stop competition from women themselves. In 1497, an ordinance of the gardeners, fruit sellers, and basket makers guild of Mechelen prohibited craft masters from hiring other masters' female employees.⁷⁰ Masters were employing women workers in hopes of gaining an advantage over other craft members because women's wages were lower than those of male journeymen.⁷¹ In 1474 a similar dispute arose within the Antwerp purse and glove makers guild about the number of apprentices and female wageworkers that a master was allowed to employ. The advantage gained by some masters who had several female wageworkers caused the town council to take action. The town councils of Antwerp and Mechelen responded to the guilds' pleas for a solution to this internal competition.

Sometimes competition came from female groups within the guilds, such as this 1492 regulation about the Antwerp gardeners guild. A group of male guild members appeared before the town government complaining that many single women had joined the guild. The result was competition for the younger journeymen of the gardeners guild. Moreover, according to the guild members, admission of these women violated an earlier privilege stating that no single woman could join the guild. The aldermen must have agreed with the guild members, as they renewed the regulation but added an exception for gardeners' daughters whose parents were deceased.⁷² With

⁷⁰ 'Item, dat van nu voirtaen nyemande van den voorscreven ambachte wye die zi georlooft wesen en sal zijne mede ambachtsman wecelix weder die maken oft vrouwen zijn die hij te wercken gestelt heeft te ontsmeken oft te onderhueren sonder sinnen onsen [...].' SAM, Hoveniers-, fruiteniers- en mandenmakersambacht 7, 12 December 1491.

⁷¹ Merry E. Wiesner, "Having Her Own Smoke. Employment and Independence for Singlewomen in Germany, 1400-1750," in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 206; Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," 224-25.

⁷² SAA, GA#4001, fol. 64v, 30 July 1492.

this exception, the town government (probably with the guild's assent) perpetuated the importance of lineages in the guild. Daughters could enter because they would continue an existing household workshop that carried the name of a guild family.⁷³ Other potential female competitors could not count on the same compassion.

The example of the Antwerp gardeners also proves that even when they were admitted to a guild women might not have had all the opportunities given to men, despite what earlier studies have found.⁷⁴ The single women who joined the Antwerp gardeners guild were serious competitors for younger male craft members. If these women had worked informally as gardeners before entering the guild, they would have had previous experience. Maybe the guild allowed the single women to enter the guild to avoid losing the fees from their income, just as many guilds included informal traders.⁷⁵ As Hafter has found for early modern Lyon, economic pressure or necessity might have superseded the importance of earlier regulations.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, once the guild saw the consequence of their policy for young male members, the leadership's reaction was to redouble the exclusive, masculine character of the guild.⁷⁷ Although women belonging to a guild household were allowed to work in the guild, women as guild members threatened that masculine character. They also directly competed with other guild members and were clearly considered significant economic opponents.

Nevertheless, most competition to the guilds did not come from within the corporations. Premodern towns had flourishing informal markets that paralleled institutionalised trade. Denying women guild membership did not solve the problem that women 'were key players in the networks that

⁷³ Burm and De Munck, "Het broodje gebakken?," 153; Martha C. Howell, "Achieving the Guild Effect without Guilds: Crafts and Craftsmen in Late Medieval Douai," in *Les métiers au Moyen Âge*, ed. Pascale Lambrechts and Jean-Pierre Sosson (Louvain-la-Neuve: Fédération internationale des instituts d'études médiévales, 1994), 126–27.

⁷⁴ Stabel, "Women at the Market," 270.

⁷⁵ Crowston, "Women, Gender, and Guilds," 30.

⁷⁶ Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*, 291–92.

⁷⁷ Howell, "The Problem of Women's Agency," 30–31.

competed directly with the guilds,' as Anne Montenach found in early modern Lyon.⁷⁸ In the area of trade, most of it small-scale, there are ordinances restricting women's opportunities, instituted by guilds and town governments who recognised the saleswomen's skill by regulating their activities.⁷⁹ Earlier studies have shown large numbers of women engaging in informal trade, especially compared to the small percentage of women on guild membership lists.⁸⁰ It is therefore logical that regulations about informal competition to guilds often addressed women. A much larger group of women – and men and other minority groups – could not find a way into the guilds.⁸¹ Nevertheless, in an economy of scarcity, all town residents needed to generate income. If they could not earn a living through formal institutions, or if they saw a chance to increase their formal income, they turned to the informal market.⁸²

When regulating informal trade, town councils did explicitly refer to women. For some occupations, such as the *uitdraagsters* or the poultry sellers, regulations always addressed women as well as men. The guilds and town councils tried to limit competition from the informal market and limit the number of women selling in it. This becomes especially clear in sources

⁷⁸ Montenach, "Trades in Lyon," 28.

⁷⁹ It is interesting that skill, exactly the thing which guilds could also use as a reason to exclude women from guild membership, caused a need for regulation of women working on the informal market. Sheilagh Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living: Women, Markets, and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: University Press, 2006), 326; Montenach, "Trades in Lyon," 28.

⁸⁰ Bart Lambert, "Merchants on the Margins: Fifteenth-Century Bruges and the Informal Market," *Journal of Medieval History* 42, no. 2 (2016): 238–39; Martha C. Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 84; Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*, 192; Coomans, "Policing Female Food Vendors," 102–3.

⁸¹ De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic*, 185; van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women," 120–21.

⁸² Jane Humphries and Carmen Sarasúa, "Off the Record: Reconstructing Women's Labor Force Participation in the European Past," *Feminist Economics* 18, no. 4 (2012): 41; Angelique Janssens, ed., *The Rise and Decline of the Male Breadwinner Family? Studies in Gendered Patterns of Labour Division and Household Organisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5; Howell, "The Problem of Women's Agency," 23–24.

about the fish trade in Mechelen. The fish trade in Mechelen was subdivided into branches, each with a different market area. The fishmongers guild tried to monopolise the more lucrative wholesale market and sales of sea fish imported by merchants. Fresh or river fish was sold by both guild members and informal traders. Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous section, a group of women, the *haringvrouwen*, were itinerant traders selling herring. They were not the only ones selling herring. As can be seen in the ordinances for the *pakkers*, members of this craft were also involved in the herring trade, probably on a larger scale. Whereas the ordinances for the *haringvrouwen* use the verb *penneweerden*, which refers to small-scale retail sales, other ordinances about the herring trade mention guild members buying whole crates of fish.⁸³ Harmsen and Hubers found a similar situation in seventeenth-century Antwerp. Only members of the fishmongers guild could trade in the *zeevismarkt* of Antwerp. On the membership list, there were few women guild members. However, women were active in the guild in the context of the household production unit.⁸⁴

There is no doubt that women were active in the fish trade of premodern Mechelen. We are aware of this because the town council and guild authorities scrutinised the involvement of women, along with other informal traders. On the one hand, urban regulation reveals the lenient treatment of these itinerant female traders. In 1508, the council of Mechelen ordered that 'no one could sell *stokvis* or dried fish [...] except for fishmongers' wives'. In addition, the council made an exception for 'the women that are in the habit of doing so'.⁸⁵ Although the guild seems to have been reluctant to allow non-guild members to sell these varieties of fish, they could not eliminate all (female) competitors.⁸⁶ On the other hand, the scope of these informal competitors was clearly demarcated. When they stepped out of line, the

⁸³ SAM, Visverkopers 14, 26 July 1454.

⁸⁴ Harmsen and Hubers, "'En zij verkocht de vis ...,'" 33; van den Heuvel, "The Multiple Identities of Early Modern Dutch Fishwives," 588.

⁸⁵ SAM, Visverkopers 23, 16 October 1508.

⁸⁶ A conflict between the fishmongers' guild and a group of citizens from Mechelen from 1545 also shows that the lenience for women was traditional. The guild fought diligently against competition from other outsiders. SAM, Visverkopers 670, 14 October 1545.

guild had the jurisdiction to sanction them, as can be seen in the guild's sentence books. For example, several women were sanctioned for selling herring in 1534 and 1537.⁸⁷

As discussed, most guild regulations excluding or controlling the work of women (and others) were motivated by economics. Corporations tried to limit the competition that their members would have to deal with both within the guild and from outsiders. The economic activities of certain groups of women resulted in competition which sparked further regulation and scrutiny from town councils. Despite their motives, the guilds' masculine values directly translated into strict control and/or limitation of women's work opportunities. A few cases even illuminate the corporations' deployment of their masculine character to limit competition. Nevertheless, caution is required; only a few guild regulations concerned these women. As most craft guilds were recognised highly masculine institutions, the focus of guild regulations was primarily on men.

2. Craft guilds and women's membership

The guilds' bylaws show their efforts to keep their ranks as closed and exclusive as they deemed necessary. While the ordinances reflect the guilds' wish for exclusivity, their account books show how successful they were. Not all guilds explicitly forbade women's membership. In this section, I analyse the available membership lists and entrance registers of guilds from fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Mechelen and Antwerp. Initially, I look at the absence and presence of women on the available guild membership lists, followed by a discussion of evidence from the records concerning factors that influenced the position of women in the guild. The final part of this section analyses the changes in women's admissions into the mercers guild of Antwerp.

⁸⁷ 'Item Beijken van der Capellen es gheset eenen wech tot Valesijn ende iiii pont was op te legghen omdat sij herinck ongheloeft heeft vercocht [...].'; 'Alle degghenen van vrouwen die corfharinc vercocht hebben opt straet, tzij tonherinck oft bocxherinck [...].' See: SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 133v, 1534; SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 138v, 1537.

The membership lists and entrance registers available for fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Antwerp and Mechelen confirm the masculine character of guilds seen in the normative ordinances. Even though the Antwerp old clothes sellers' bylaws included women in the stipulations about guild entrance, it seems that women other than widows rarely made the cut. The infrequent use of dyads in guild ordinances, suggesting that the guild was accessible to women, can thus be misleading. Whereas studies have shown women's involvement or even predominance in areas where this trade was not organised in guilds, it seems that women's membership was rare in the Mechelen and Antwerp guilds.⁸⁸ Only widows managed to overcome the gendered barriers to guild membership.⁸⁹

For fifteenth and early-sixteenth century Antwerp and Mechelen, only a few membership lists and account books noting the registration of new members survive. Table 8 shows an overview of the available lists for the two cities. The lack of identification for most names on the lists presents a major challenge. Besides confirmation of guild membership and identification of possible family ties to other guild members, in some cases, it is impossible to make claims about members' social or marital status. Furthermore, there are no details of age or membership period. It is only with great caution that we can make general claims about guild membership based on these lists, as only a few of them are extensive enough to paint a general picture of women's access to formal membership in the guilds. The account books of the Mechelen gardeners and mercers do contain enough information to make such claims.⁹⁰ The most useful source, however, is the

⁸⁸ Montenach, "Trades in Lyon," 17–18; Wiesner, "Paltry Peddlers or Essential Merchants?," 4; Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*, 13; Pilorget, "Circulations Féminines et Encadrement de l'espace Urbain," 16–24.

⁸⁹ Widows' membership in the guild might have been temporary, but they appeared at the moment of registration on the guilds' membership lists.

⁹⁰ Although the middle Dutch *kramers* (shopkeepers) refers to a specific branch of the mercers guild (*meerseniers*), mixing the two names was common in the Southern Low Countries. Whereas many occupations were added to or disappeared from the guild throughout the centuries, the shopkeepers were often the core of the guild. Gerda De Smet, "Bijdrage tot de sociale geschiedenis van het Mechelse ambachtelijke milieu. Het ambacht van de kramers (1712-1749)" (Unpublished Master Thesis, Leuven, KU Leuven, 1982), 70–71; Laura Van Aert, "Tot 'leven of overleven?"

entrance list of the Antwerp mercers guild, which has been the subject of earlier studies. The list is extensive because of the complex organisation of this corporation. More than two hundred occupations fell into the mercer' nation' in Antwerp. Occupations focused on both trade and production were grouped together in the mercers guild. Most guild members were actually engaged in retail sales, the small-scale trade in daily commodities. Almost half of the new members between 1516 and 1555 were shopkeepers (*kramers*) or grease sellers (*vettewarriers*). Other common occupations of the mercers guild were the grocers (*kruideniers*), cheese sellers, and tinsmiths.

Table 8. Overview of the available entrance lists and membership lists for Antwerp and Mechelen ca. 1400 – 1600.

Town	Guild	List type	Period
Antwerp	Old clothes sellers	Membership list	ca. 1550
Antwerp	Mercers	Entrance list	1516-1555
Mechelen	Old clothes sellers	Entrance list	1566-1602
Mechelen	Shopkeepers	Entrance list	1404-1510 and 1554-1560
Mechelen	Gardeners	Entrance list	1478-1503 and 1521-1548
Mechelen	Glove makers	Membership list and entrance list	ca. 1550 – ca. 1580

Source: SAA, GA#4277; SAA, FA#22; SAA, 860#7761; SAM, Oudkleerkopersambacht 21; SAM, Kramersambacht 47; SAM, Hoveniers-, fruiteniers- en mandenmakersambacht 16; SAM, Hoveniers-, fruiteniers- en mandenmakersambacht 17; SAM, Handschoenmakers-, tesmakers-, riem(be)slagers-, witledermakers- en schedemakersambacht 554bis.

The small number of women appearing on guild entrance lists were not the only women doing work in the guilds. Ariadne Schmidt and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk have estimated that approximately forty per cent of the men entering the guild were married. Their spouses would probably have assisted and collaborated with them in a household workshop.⁹¹ This collaboration will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4. Furthermore, the

Winkelhouden in crisistijd: de Antwerpse meerseniers, ca. 1648-1748" (Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Antwerpen, Universiteit Antwerpen, 2007), 65–72.

⁹¹ 'If we assume that at least 75 percent of all self-employed men were married and that at least half of them were assisted by a wife.' Schmidt and van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Reconsidering the 'Firstmale-Breadwinner Economy,'" 75.

Antwerp and Mechelen guilds had to compete with informal traders, both men and women.⁹² This retail competition was not always illicit because retail sales of some products were organised outside the guild. Ordinances about poultry and dairy products, for example, refer to *voercoperen* of *voercoperessen* (female and male sellers).⁹³ Informal competition came from both within and outside the guild, as we have seen above. Unlike female guild members, women participating informally do not appear on the guilds' membership lists.

The average percentage of women entering the guilds never exceeded ten per cent (see Table 9). The low number of women formally entering the guild is highlighted in other studies for the Low Countries in this period as well.⁹⁴ It also seems that membership for women other than craftsmen's widows was limited to trading guilds. Guilds usually only mandated apprenticeships for production occupations, which required a specific set of manual skills.⁹⁵ The concise apprenticeship list for the Antwerp mercers from 1516 and 1517 confirms that the apprentices were all in production occupations, and all were men (see Appendix 3).⁹⁶ Almost all women

⁹² Montenach, "Trades in Lyon," 28.

⁹³ SAA, GA#4253, 25 August 1481.

⁹⁴ Laura Van Aert, "The Legal Possibilities of Antwerp Widows in the Late Sixteenth Century," *The History of the Family* 12, no. 4 (2007): 290; van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women," 128; Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy*.

⁹⁵ Bert De Munck, Raoul De Kerf, and Annelies De Bie, "Apprenticeship in the Southern Netherlands, c. 1400–c. 1800," in *Apprenticeship in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Maarten Prak and Patrick Wallis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 234.

⁹⁶ This should not be surprising. Most guilds did not allow women apprentices. At the same time, as Bert De Munck has stated, apprenticeship taught not only the occupation but also the corporative culture – which was usually highly masculine. Bert De Munck and Hugo Soly, "'Learning on the Shop Floor' in Historical Perspective," in *Learning on the Shop Floor. Historical Perspectives on Apprenticeship*, ed. Bert De Munck, Steven L. Kaplan, and Hugo Soly (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), 23–25; Bert De Munck, "From Brotherhood Community to Civil Society? Apprentices between Guild, Household and the Freedom of Contract in Early Modern Antwerp," *Social History* 35, no. 1 (2010): 2.

entering the mercers guild were traders, whereas many men entered the guild in production occupations (see Table 11).⁹⁷

Table 9 shows that almost all guilds admitted a small number of women. Even in the glove makers guild, which held their patriarchal values high, there was a small percentage of women. As might be expected, the mercers guilds of Mechelen and Antwerp had the highest percentage of women. The clerks recorded the occupational titles of almost half of the women on the Antwerp mercers' entrance list in female form, which shows that they were recognised by guild authorities.⁹⁸

Table 9. Number and percentage of men and women in seven membership lists from guilds in Mechelen and Antwerp.

	Shopkeepers Mechelen 1404-1510		Shopkeepers Mechelen 1554-1560		Gardeners Mechelen 1478-1503		Gardeners Mechelen 1521-1549	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Men	288	90	63	97	190	96	210	93
Women	32	10	2	3	7	4	16	7
Total	320	100	65	100	197	100	226	100

Table 9 (continued).

	Glove makers Mechelen		Old clothes sellers Mechelen		Old clothes sellers Antwerp		Mercers Antwerp 1516-1555	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Men	91	97	79	100	63	94	3598	94
Women	3	3	0	0	4	6	236	6
Total	94	100	79	100	67	100	3836	100

Source: See Table 8.

Women's membership in a guild was influenced by two major elements: marital status and family relations. The impact of marital status, especially for widows, is clearly shown by comparing the Brabantine guild entrance

⁹⁷ As can be seen in Table 11, of the female mercers whose occupations are specified, the majority worked as shop keepers, grease sellers, or grocers.

⁹⁸ The female occupational titles present in the mercers' entrance list are: *cremeresse*, *kaaskoperesse*, *kamverkoopster*, *koekverkoopster*, *kruidenierster*, *lijmverkoperesse*, *olijfverkoopster*, *pluimverkoopster*, *stijfstelverkoopster*, *vettewarierster*, and *zeepziederster*.

lists to the membership lists. No woman is registered as a new member on the entrance list of the Mechelen glove makers.⁹⁹ However, women identified as the Widow Vrijers and the Widow Conincks are listed among those members who were already registered.¹⁰⁰ The membership and entrance lists of the old clothes sellers guilds of Antwerp and Mechelen have similar patterns. There are no women on the Mechelen entrance list of the old clothes sellers guild. On the contrary, on the Antwerp list of registered members, four women were registered, of whom three were widows.¹⁰¹ Their absence from the entrance list and presence on the membership list suggest that the widows were spouses of deceased craft members. Because they assumed the position of their late husbands, these women were not seen as 'new' members. Widows were considered place-holders of the occupational inheritance left by their husbands.¹⁰² Although they were considered capable of taking over the trade, they were only supposed to hold on to it until a son or journeyman, a candidate more suitable to the guild, could take over.

While widows had the advantage in the exclusive craft guilds, not all widows became guild members by marriage. In the retail guilds, women could enter under their own names. The mercers of Antwerp and shopkeepers of Mechelen did permit women members. Although their numbers were still small in comparison to male members or those accepted in later centuries (see Table 9), it seems that marital status was not the primary reason these women were admitted. In contrast to the predominance of widows on the guild membership lists of the glove makers

⁹⁹ The year in which this document was written is unclear, but might be close to 1550, as the entrance list written in the same document was from this period. SAM, Handschoenmakers-, tesmakers-, riem(be)slagers-, witledermakers- en schedemakersambacht 554bis; SAM, Handschoenmakers-, tesmakers-, riem(be)slagers-, witledermakers- en schedemakersambacht 557.

¹⁰⁰ Only one other woman appears on this list. Lijne van Loven is registered only by her own name with no marital status.

¹⁰¹ SAM, Oudkleerkopersambacht 21; SAA, GA#4277.

¹⁰² Among others, Anne Montenach states this. See: Montenach, "Trades in Lyon," 21–22; Montenach, "Creating a Space for Themselves on the Urban Market.," 53.

and old clothes sellers, most of the women on the surviving entrance lists were not widows.

Only two of the women on the Antwerp mercers' entrance list were definitely married. The wives of Jan Beuckelaers and Jan Simpas were registered only by their husbands' names. Both single and married women required a legal guardian for all legal transactions.¹⁰³ If a married woman wanted to enter the guild in her own name, she assumed the status of *koopvrouw* (femme sole).¹⁰⁴ The flexibility of retail made it a convenient occupation for married women that did not work (full time) in a household workshop. Although the clerks only identified two women as married, it is possible that more women on the mercers' entrance list were married without the clerks giving them that identifier. Nevertheless, evidence of married women working in the guilds without their husbands is rare, perhaps because of the prevalence of the household economy in the Brabantine towns. Married women who were active in retail sales and collaborating with their husbands did not work in their own names. In 1422 the town government of Antwerp ordered that a husband and wife had to share a single market booth.¹⁰⁵ There are similar decisions for other craft guilds in the Brabantine cities.¹⁰⁶ The registration of their husbands would have been enough to justify the wives' guild work.¹⁰⁷

In addition to marital status, parentage influenced women's opportunities to formally enter or participate in guild work. Some Brabantine guilds, such as the butchers and fishmongers, only allowed masters' children (often a synonym for sons) to obtain master status.¹⁰⁸ As the Mechelen regulation

¹⁰³ Philippe Godding, *Le Droit Privé Dans Les Pays-Bas Méridionaux Du 12e Au 18e Siècle* (Bruxelles: Académie royale de Belgique, 1987), 77–81.

¹⁰⁴ Van Aert, "Tot 'leven of overleven'? Winkelhouden in crisistijd," 73.

¹⁰⁵ SAA, GA#4211, 18 April 1422.

¹⁰⁶ For several other craft guilds, there are identical decisions and similar, but stricter, interpretations to this decision of the retailers. SAM, Visverkopers 14, 26 July 1454; SAL, 1527, 1593; SAA, PK#1394, 25 August 1481; SAA, GA#4363, 17 November 1452.

¹⁰⁷ Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights*, 38; Fridrich, "Women Working in Guild Crafts," 138; Lambert, "Merchants on the Margins," 11; van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women," 130.

¹⁰⁸ De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic*, 194.

providing for the sons of fishmongers' daughters demonstrates, other guilds gave preference to all guild members' offspring. Many studies have explored the claim of masters' sons to the guild title and the role of widows in this transmission.¹⁰⁹ Although it is not new, the idea that daughters inherited the trade as well is less accepted.¹¹⁰ Ellen Burm and Bert De Munck have shown the contribution of masters' daughters to the continuity of the Antwerp bakers guild. Not only did daughters play a key role in attracting and marrying suitable successors, but they were also able to take over the family workshops.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, the rarity of father-daughter, or even mother-daughter, occupational inheritance in the sources has hindered extended research on this topic.¹¹² Ordinances and other normative sources rarely mention female apprentices or craft members' daughters. However, some of the guilds' entrance lists have enough detail to provide convincing support for the claim that family ties were significant for women entering guilds. These details emerge from records of the entrance fees new members had to pay.

According to De Munck, an average of twenty to thirty per cent of the new members of guilds in eighteenth-century Antwerp were sons of masters.¹¹³ The percentage is similar for the mercer women in the sixteenth century; approximately thirty per cent of the women entering the guild came from guild families. A higher percentage of women than men entered the Antwerp mercers guild for half of the usual entrance fee, implying that they were guild masters' daughters (see Table 10). Access to the mercers guild was not based on the inheritance of a father's title and workshop. Citizenship

¹⁰⁹ Deborah Simonton, "Widows and Wenches. Single Women in Eighteenth-Century Urban Economies," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 98; Montenach, "Trades in Lyon," 21–22.

¹¹⁰ Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*, 24; Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets," 428.

¹¹¹ Janine M. Lanza, *From Wives to Widows in Early Modern Paris: Gender, Economy, and Law* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 93–94; Sandra Cavallo, *Artisans of the Body in Early Modern Italy. Identities, Families and Masculinities* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 160–61.

¹¹² Broomhall, "Women, Work, and Power," 204.

¹¹³ De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic*, 190.

Table 10. Percentage of entrance fee categories per sex for the entrance list of the Antwerp mercers' guild.

New members	#	%
Men	3600	94
Full entrance fee	2448	68
Half entrance fee	700	19
Unknown	452	13
Women	236	6
Full entrance fee	145	61.5
Half entrance fee	64	27
Unknown	27	11.5
Total	3836	100

Source: SAA, FA#22; SAA, 860#7761.

and the payment of guild fees were the only requirements for women who wanted to enter the guild.¹¹⁴ In theory, they also needed the status of *koopvrouw* before they were able to enter a guild in their own names. However, as Van Aert has argued, daily practice worked in the opposite direction; women entered the guild first and therefore obtained *koopvrouw* status.¹¹⁵

Even though it might have been more difficult for women to enter the Antwerp mercers guild than it was for men, the corporation favoured both sexes of masters' children only to a small extend. A minority of new guild members benefited from the reduced entrance fee given to artisans' children, but this does not explain the slightly higher percentage of women who entered by family connection to a member in comparison to that of men. As Table 10 demonstrates, only 19 per cent of men entered the Antwerp mercers guild for half the entrance fee, compared to 27 per cent of women. Danielle van den Heuvel has shown that the high cost of entrance fees and citizenship registration in the retail sector was an invisible barrier for many women in the Northern Low Countries. Although the guilds allowed women to enter, the financial burden of membership often kept them from conducting the

¹¹⁴ Van Aert, "Tot 'leven of overleven'? Winkelhouden in crisistijd," 64–65.

¹¹⁵ Van Aert, 73.

trade formally.¹¹⁶ Moreover, for younger women in search of an income, service might have been a more suitable solution as it did not require any initial capital.¹¹⁷ Women might have needed the support of their (guild) parents to enter the guild more than men did.

The importance of a guild background for women entering the Antwerp mercers guild differed depending on the occupation they would join within the guild (see Table 11). In some fields of the mercers guild, women from guild families seem to have had an advantage. Only eighteen per cent of the men among the shopkeepers came from a guild family, while thirty-five per cent of the female shopkeepers entered by family connection. The grocers show a similar difference; forty per cent of women entered for half the entrance fee compared to twenty-three per cent of men. The capital necessary to set up a business might have been higher for these market fields than for itinerant trades, such as the grease sellers. As scholars have stated earlier, (single) women might have had more trouble than their male counterparts accumulating the capital needed to set up a shop.¹¹⁸ Shopkeepers' and grocers' daughters would not struggle with as large a financial burden since they only had to pay half of the entrance fee. Moreover, they would likely have access to their families' networks which allowed them to count on a certain clientele. The data in Table 11 indicate that daughters of shopkeepers and grocers had more advantage over women who had to establish the business from scratch in these occupations. By contrast, in occupations that required less starting capital, such an advantage might not have made a difference. Nevertheless, more data about the transactions and identities of new mercers would be necessary to confirm this hypothesis.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women," 127–30.

¹¹⁷ Jeremy P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c.1300-1520* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 334.

¹¹⁸ Honeyman and Goodman, "Women's Work, Gender Conflict, and Labour Markets," 610; Montenach, "Trades in Lyon," 20; Vicente, "Images and Realities of Work," 127.

¹¹⁹ Laura van Aert has argued that the shopkeepers' trade was one of the most accessible to women. The small investment necessary for the trade in comparison to

Table 11. Total and percentage of men and women entering the Antwerp mercers guild per amount of entrance fee for the most current occupations. ¹²⁰

Women	#	%	Men (continued)	#	%
Shopkeeper	89	38	Confectioner	105	3
Half entrance fee	31	35	Half entrance fee	19	18
Full entrance fee	50	56	Full entrance fee	77	73
Unknown	8	9	Unknown	9	9
Grease seller	60	25	Cheese seller	100	3
Half entrance fee	7	12	Half entrance fee	15	15
Full entrance fee	48	80	Full entrance fee	76	76
Unknown	5	8	Unknown	9	9
Unknown	32	14	Glove maker	61	2
Half entrance fee	7	22	Half entrance fee	15	25
Full entrance fee	16	50	Full entrance fee	39	64
Unknown	9	28	Unknown	7	11
Grocer	20	8	Blue dyer	59	2
Half entrance fee	8	40	Half entrance fee	15	25
Full entrance fee	11	55	Full entrance fee	43	73
Unknown	1	5	Unknown	1	2
Cheese seller	14	6	Oil maker	49	1
Half entrance fee	5	36	Half entrance fee	15	31
Full entrance fee	9	64	Full entrance fee	33	67
Pastry maker	3	1	Unknown	1	2
Full entrance fee	3	100	Game maker	41	1
Other	18	8	Half entrance fee	13	32
Total	236	100	Full entrance fee	24	58

others, as well as the absence of formal apprenticeships and requirement of a masterpiece, lowered the threshold for entry. Indeed, the majority of women entering in the mercers guild between 1515 and 1555 were shopkeepers. However, Van Aert claimed that between 1515 and 1584 the shopkeepers' trade was one of the mercers' branches with the lowest percentage of women entering for half the entrance fee. As a consequence, she has stated that 'the percentage of shopkeepers [*kraamsters*] that already had a family tie within the guild, was smaller than all other occupations in the mercers' guild.' However, a recalculation of her data, as well calculations from my own database, shows that this was not the case. Other market fields within the mercers guild also show between thirty to forty percent of women entering for half the entrance fee. In her conclusions, Van Aert only considered new female members. The comparison with men entering the guild, on the other hand, shows the striking difference for the two sexes, especially for the shopkeepers and grocers. Van Aert, "Tot 'leven of overleven'? Winkelhouden in crisistijd," 186.

¹²⁰ The category 'other' in the two tables contains all occupations performed by less than one percent of the men and women entering in the guild.

Men	#	%			
Shopkeeper	1018	28	Unknown	4	10
Half entrance fee	186	18	Silk sheet seller	40	1
Full entrance fee	738	73	Half entrance fee	5	12,5
Unknown	94	9	Full entrance fee	32	80
Grease seller	583	16	Unknown	3	7,5
Half entrance fee	87	15	Bonnet seller	38	1
Full entrance fee	461	79	Half entrance fee	8	21
Unknown	35	6	Full entrance fee	28	74
Unknown	503	14	Unknown	2	5
Half entrance fee	93	18	Purse maker	38	1
Full entrance fee	175	35	Half entrance fee	11	29
Unknown	235	47	Full entrance fee	25	66
Grocer	137	4	Unknown	2	5
Half entrance fee	32	23	Platter maker	36	1
Full entrance fee	100	73	Half entrance fee	10	28
Unknown	5	4	Full entrance fee	26	72
Tinsmith	114	3	Other	678	19
Half entrance fee	36	32	Total	3600	100%
Full entrance fee	72	63	Source: SAA, FA#22; SAA, 860#7761.		
Unknown	6	5			

Approximately two-thirds of the women entering the Antwerp mercers guild were not direct relatives of other craft members, living or deceased. On other lists, such as that of the Mechelen gardeners, almost all women on the list entered for half the entrance fee or less, pointing to a strong advantage for women from guild families.¹²¹ Given the Antwerp gardeners' rule that single women could not join the guild unless they were the daughters of guild members, this is not surprising. Guild regulations, although different for each city, shared similar characteristics and may even have been directly inspired by another city.¹²² It may be that unmarried women were not welcome in the Mechelen gardeners guild, as was the case with the Antwerp gardeners.

¹²¹ SAM, Hoveniers-, fruiteniers- en mandenmakersambacht 16; SAM, Hoveniers-, fruiteniers- en mandenmakersambacht 17.

¹²² In 1429, the Antwerp butchers even send out letters to the butchers guilds of Leuven, Brussels, and Ghent, asking for their advice on a conflict between the guild and a son-in-law of a master. L. Bisschops, "Oudt Register, Mette Berderen, 1336-1439 (Vervolg)," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 28 (1891): 104-5.

The entrance lists of the mercers and gardeners of Mechelen and the mercers of Antwerp provide important insight into these 'accessible' guilds. The percentage of women entering the guilds might have been small (see Table 9), but it was a diverse group. Although marital status might have influenced women's opportunities, the guild did not prohibit female membership based on marital status. Moreover, half of the new Antwerp female mercers and almost all of the Mechelen female gardeners are identified with diminutive first names ('Lynken', 'Mariken', 'Claarken', etc.). This could indicate that they were never-married, younger women. Once again, this coincides with earlier findings. Between becoming an adult and getting married, retail might have been an ideal option for them because of the low entry costs and flexible time allocation.¹²³ Although young single women in Antwerp might still have had difficulties entering the guild because of the financial requirements, the corporation did not exclude them.¹²⁴

Just as the evolution of gendered language in guild ordinances reveals changes in town governments' views of women's participation in the craft guilds, guild membership and entrance lists offer evidence of changes in the actual entrance rates of women over time. I have calculated the moving average of entrance fees to the mercers guild from 1516 until 1555 by sex and at five-year intervals. In a second calculation, I did the same for the percentage of women entering the guild. The result, as shown in Figure 6, reports the change (or lack thereof) in the opportunities women had to enter the Antwerp mercers guild. The entrance lists should not be taken as the only indicator of change because official craft membership is not synonymous with women's labour participation and opportunities. Although guild entrance lists can be used to gauge women's opportunities, there is no information about changes in mentality or the other circumstances of women's entry. The entrance lists also do not illuminate the work of the

¹²³ Simonton, "Widows and Wenches," 110–11; van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women."

¹²⁴ van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women," 130; Simonton, "Widows and Wenches," 110–11.

many women involved in the guild in other ways, such as wives, family members, servants, widows, and informal traders.

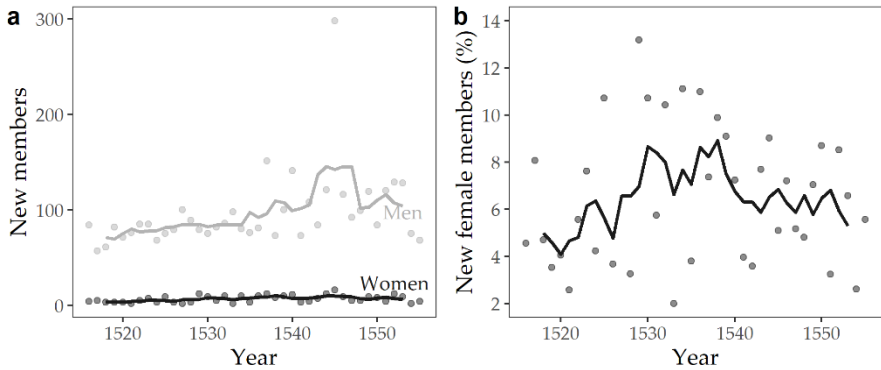


Figure 6. Five-years moving average of (a) all new members and (b) the percentage of new women members in the mercers guild of Antwerp (1516-1555).¹²⁵

Source: SAA, FA#22; SAA, 860#7761.

Another concern about the interpretation of changes in the number of women on the mercers' entrance list is the extent to which the guild is representative. An increase in the number of women entering the retailers' guilds might not reflect women's opportunities in the guilds in general. In 1614, an attempt of shopkeepers to make membership in the mercers guild more exclusive failed. Mercer authorities argued that the open membership was important because 'many orphans and widows who could not do anything else could gain an income with shopkeeping.' They preferred having female members over creating more town residents who would have to rely on the town's poor relief institutions.¹²⁶ Van Aert argues that this attitude lowered the status of the shopkeepers, making it one of the low-status occupations in which many women were involved.¹²⁷ If current

¹²⁵ The lines on both figures represent the five-year moving average for the entering members. The dots are the separate values for men and women entering in each year on which the calculation is based.

¹²⁶ Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," 223.

¹²⁷ Van Aert, "Tot 'leven of overleven'? Winkelhouden in crisistijd," 187; Gold, "On the Streets and in the Markets," 36; Danielle van den Heuvel, "Selling in the Shadows:

thought held that women's participation lowered the status of a guild, a study of the more prestigious guilds might indeed show a decline in women's participation.¹²⁸ Although the mercers guild was one of the largest guilds of Antwerp, if this is the case, its status would fall into the lower category and become low-status work that women were increasingly forced to do.¹²⁹ The decline of the shopkeepers' social status might not have been completed (or even begun) in the first half of the sixteenth century. In this period, women could still enter the mercers, glove makers, and gardeners guilds in Antwerp and Mechelen under certain circumstances. However, the women who entered should be considered more the privileged exception than the rule.

The percentage of women entering the Antwerp mercers guild remained low throughout the whole period (see Figure 6). It did not have the extreme outliers that can be seen in the numbers of new craftsmen but fluctuated slightly around the same low number.¹³⁰ Although they never constituted the majority, it seems that women were not steadily pushed out of the mercers guild during the first half of the sixteenth century. What is more, both the lists of the Antwerp mercers (1515-1555) and Mechelen shopkeepers (1504-1510) show modest increases in the percentage of new female members.¹³¹ According to earlier studies, the number of women in the Antwerp and Mechelen mercers guilds rose to approximately twenty per

Peddlers and Hawkers in Early Modern Europe',” in *Working on Labor. Essays in Honor of Jan Lucassen*, ed. Marcel van der Linden and Leo Lucassen (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 144.

¹²⁸ Coomans, “Policing Female Food Vendors,” 102–3; Stabel, “Workplace Cultures,” 97; Honeyman and Goodman, “Women’s Work, Gender Conflict, and Labour Markets,” 613.

¹²⁹ Stabel, “Workplace Cultures,” 97.

¹³⁰ See also in: Ariadne Schmidt, “Women and Guilds: Corporations and Female Labour Market Participation in Early Modern Holland,” *Gender & History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 178–180.

¹³¹ Appendix 4 shows a similar figure for the surviving entrance lists of the Mechelen gardeners and mercers. Since the lists for these guilds are smaller in size, it is harder to make claims about the number of women entering in these guilds.

cent by the eighteenth century.¹³² Additional case studies have a similar increase in the percentage of women in the guilds throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹³³

Although the number of women entering the Antwerp mercers guild did not decrease between 1515 and 1555, the percentage of women entering the guild each year fluctuated widely. As Figure 6 (b) shows, in some years, the percentage of women entering the guild increased to twelve per cent and once fifteen per cent. In other years the number decreased sharply, sometimes nearing zero per cent. On other lists, such as that of the Mechelen gardeners and mercers, the percentage of women entering reached twenty-five per cent in some years (see Appendix 4). Rather than confirming the 'decline thesis', the curve of Figure 6 (b) reflects the more recent argument that women's labour opportunities followed an 'accordion-movement' pattern. Whereas the general trend remained steady, different local factors of influence caused women's economic participation to expand and contract each year.¹³⁴ Analysis of the sentence books of the Mechelen fishmongers guild, the subject of a later chapter, shows a similar pattern. A precise explanation for the many fluctuations in women's entrance percentages is elusive. Nevertheless, short-term changes seem to have had little impact on the long-term trend that women always constituted a minority of the guild members.

Guild regulations in Antwerp and Mechelen were highly gendered, as the predominance of masculine language used by the town council to address their subjects shows. Few women appeared on the guilds' membership lists. The guilds were classic examples of patriarchal institutions. Women were not completely excluded, but their positions in guild life were shaped by continuous negotiation from which many

¹³² De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic*, 206; De Smet, "Bijdrage tot de sociale geschiedenis van het Mechelse ambachtelijke milieu," 242–44.

¹³³ Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights*, 49.

¹³⁴ Bellavitis, 43–56; Schmidt, "Women and Guilds."

categories of women were excluded.¹³⁵ Women's opportunities in the Brabantine guilds depended on several factors. Guild regulations rarely addressed all women, instead distinguishing between craftsmen's family members, often considered as 'guild insiders', and other women of the city. Furthermore, women's opportunities were highly dependent on their parentage in some guilds. Women's descent and social status – closely related to the amount of capital they had and network they would be able to count on – were decisive factors in their opportunities for work. An analysis of guild membership lists leads to the same conclusions as do the ordinances: although guilds were masculine and highly gendered institutions, they did not (and also did not want to) exclude women completely from their ranks. The percentage of women in the guilds is not high, because most of these masculine institutions likely did discourage women from seeking membership and did erect barriers that made it harder for them to enter.¹³⁶ Even in the retailers guilds, which permitted access to all female citizens, women were never more than seven percent. Moreover, membership and entrance lists confirm earlier findings; in most guilds, women's labour opportunities were related to their civil status and to their parentage.

¹³⁵ Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 55–60.

¹³⁶ Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*, 36 and 60; Howell, "The Problem of Women's Agency," 30–31; Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living*, 343; Jacobsen, "Women's Work and Women's Role."

CHAPTER 3. BILBAO'S TOWN COUNCIL AND ITS REGULATION OF WOMEN'S WORK

Scholars have often emphasised the importance of analysing systems of work organisation in assessing women's labour opportunities. Whereas in early modern France, women could acquire peddlers' licenses that 'gave them a monopoly on sales', in Brabant, workers needed to belong to the guild to formally participate in the same trade.¹ Different work organisations resulted in distinct frameworks for women's work. In Bilbao, the major commercial hub of the county of Biscay, the town council was the primary institution that regulated and controlled work and trade in the town, a frequent practice when there were no other economic institutions to organise work.² The few existing guilds had no jurisdictional rights. This chapter will examine the way the town council regulated work in Bilbao. Specifically, I will focus on the questions of how the town council regulated women's work and whether it did so more strictly for women than for men.

Urban regulations of the last part of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century have been well preserved in Bilbao. The council members promulgated hundreds of (written) ordinances as they attempted to steer urban life. I analyse 196 ordinances dated between 1477 and 1520, published by Javier Enríquez Fernández et. al..³ These ordinances

¹ Daryl M. Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 13; Merry E. Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," in *Germany: A New Social and Economic History, Vol. 1: 1450-1630*, ed. Bob Scribner, vol. 1 (London: Arnold, 1995), 226; Clare Crowston, "Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe: An Overview of Recent Research," *International Review of Social History* 53, no. 16 (2008): 37; Peter Stabel, "From the Market to the Shop: Retail and Urban Space in Late Medieval Bruges," in *Buyers and Sellers. Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruno Blondé et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 102.

² Ellen E. Kittell and Kurt Queller, "'Whether Man or Woman': Gender Inclusivity in the Town Ordinances of Medieval Douai," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 1 (2000): 65.

³ Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévales Del País Vasco 70 (Donostia, 1995).

represent a larger body of town ordinances from this period. The studied ordinances all regulated occupations and trade in Bilbao. The town council was the only institution in the town with the jurisdiction to promulgate new ordinances. They often did so, as they claimed, because 'the town [had] received great damage'.⁴ Since Bilbao had only approximately 6,000 inhabitants, the councillors might have witnessed the damage directly.⁵ However, the clerks stated in several ordinances that they were promulgated after 'many citizens [...] had complained, saying that many frauds had happened'.⁶ Other complaints might have reached the council via less formal avenues. Nevertheless, in the end, only the council had the jurisdiction to impose urban regulation. The female saleswomen of Bilbao were subordinate to the ordinances and control of the town council.

In the same manner as the ordinances of the Mechelen fishmongers and the Antwerp old clothes sellers, all ordinances and decisions within each were given a language tag and a topic category. Following the model used with the Brabant ordinances, the Bilbao ordinances received a 'masculine', 'feminine', 'mixed', or 'neutral' language tag to identify the actors addressed by the town council. In this way, the 196 ordinances were divided into 327 decisions, each with an individual topic category and language tag. Although the analysis included all ordinances about work in the Biscayan commercial hub, a few market sectors that were most frequently addressed yield the most evidence about the operation of gender in the ordinances as a whole.

The first part of this chapter will demonstrate how gender was deployed in the ordinances of Bilbao. Several occupations were partially or completely in the hands of women. I discuss these occupations first, as this provides a framework for analysing the results from Bilbao. Then, I argue that the language used in Bilbao's ordinances reflects the participants they

⁴ Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 17r-17v, 11 January 1482.

⁵ Elena Catalán Martínez and Ramón Lanza García, "Crecimiento demográfico en tiempos de crisis: Bilbao en los siglos XVI y XVII," *Revista de Demografía Histórica* 35, no. 1 (2017): 44.

⁶ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 281r-282r, 20 March 1510.

addressed. The town council regulated actors in different occupations rather than sexes. The second part of this chapter focuses on the regulation of women's work in Bilbao and the council's reasons for this regulation. An extensive number of ordinances regulate the work of saleswomen in the Biscayan town. Nevertheless, gender is rarely given as the reason for the regulation. Rather, economic malpractice, fraud, and loss of income from excise taxes moved the council to restrict the labour practices of women. While patriarchal structures did play a role in defining women's labour opportunities in the Bilbao food and retail trades, patriarchal concerns were rarely used to legitimise the council's regulations. These limitations notwithstanding, Bilbao's saleswomen were active traders in daily commodities and food supplies throughout the entire period under study.

1. Town ordinances and gendered language in Bilbao

1.1 *Bilbao and its female occupations*

Bilbao's economy was directed towards the sea. Its commerce, both from overseas and in connection with supplying northern Castile, made it a crucial node in the kingdom's commercial network. Artisan culture and production were not as important. The town did have artisans, such as shoemakers and blacksmiths, but they produced on a small scale, providing town residents with necessary commodities.⁷ The importance of commerce and maritime activities is reflected in the town council's ordinances. There were few regulations on the artisan occupations, whereas the council often scrutinised commerce and daily trade. Women were often addressed in these ordinances, in my view, as a consequence of the way work was organised in Bilbao. Because women were important actors in Bilbao's daily trade, the council addressed them regularly in the course of regulating work in the town. No other institution had the jurisdiction to do this, and regulating the town's businesses was solely in the hands of the council. The extensive regulations show which market sectors were dominated by women.

⁷ Ernesto García Fernández, "Las cofradías de oficios en el País Vasco durante la edad media (1350-1550)," *Studia Historica. Historia Medieval* 15 (1997): 11-40.

Furthermore, the council had incorporated the female character of these trades into local norms, which normalised women's participation.

The organisation of Bilbao's 'female' occupations needs some clarification. We will start with the Biscay bread trade, as it was quite different from its Brabantine counterpart. In the Southern Low Countries, bread production and sales were commonly organised by a craft guild: the bakers guild. All members had to register by paying a yearly fee to the guild, which was led by a (male) dean elected from the privileged masters. A guild master often ran his shop together with his wife, children, servants, and apprentices. Together they would produce bread in this shop and sell it at the market and on the streets of the town. They were a household production unit, but only the male master was visible and recognised in the sources.⁸ Women's work stayed under the radar. The bakers' guild was subject to (informal) competition from inhabitants of the towns and surrounding territory. On 'free market' days, everyone except for guild members was allowed to sell bread.⁹ In periods of scarcity, the council allowed all citizens to sell bread.¹⁰ The bakers guild did not have a monopoly over bread production and trade. There were always illicit and informal sales that were difficult for the town council and the craft guild to control.¹¹ The council of Bilbao did not have to manage this type of parallel economy. In Bilbao, the bread trade was organised into two occupations: the bread sellers (*panaderas*) and the bread bakers (*horneras*). The bread sellers prepared the dough and sold the finished bread in the streets of the town. Not all citizens would need their products, as Bilbao's inhabitants could also prepare their own dough. This was done by women, generally housewives and servant girls as part of their domestic work.¹² However, the town council of Bilbao did not allow

⁸ Ellen Burm and Bert De Munck, "Het broodje gebakken? Huwelijksstrategieën en partnerkeuze van de bakkers(kinderen) te Brussel in de overgang van het Ancien Régime naar de negentiende eeuw," *Stadsgeschiedenis* 2, no. 5 (2010): 163.

⁹ SAA, PK#913, fol. 68r-68v, 17 November 1481.

¹⁰ SAA, PK#915, fol. 68v-96r, 16 August 1546.

¹¹ Brecht Dewilde and Johan Poukens, "Bread Provisioning and Retail Dynamics in the Southern Low Countries: The Bakers of Leuven, 1600–1800," *Continuity and Change* 26, no. 3 (2011): 408.

¹² Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 75v.

citizens to have ovens in private houses.¹³ Dough had to be brought to public ovens, where the *horneras* baked it for a fixed price. At night the *horneras* and their female servants prepared the work for the next day. Beginning early in the morning, *panaderas* and other women could enter the area around the ovens to have their bread baked.¹⁴ The *horneras* could employ up to five other women to assist in managing the ovens.¹⁵ These two occupations, *panaderas* and *horneras*, were completely staffed by women, but neither group had any jurisdiction over their trade. The town council was responsible for the regulation of the Bilbao bread trade and the women who were involved in it. Almost all the subjects of the regulations were written in female form (*mugeres, amas, moças, horneras, panaderas, ...*).¹⁶ The council only addressed men in bread trade ordinances when it was regulating the supply of grain.

Women in Bilbao were also active in the grain trade, a decided contrast to several towns in the Southern Low Countries. In fourteenth-century Ghent, the wheat trade was entirely dominated by men. Women could not buy or sell in the Corn Market.¹⁷ In Mechelen, the town government prohibited the wives of wheat sellers from participating in sales or purchases of the commodity.¹⁸ With no such restrictions, women in Bilbao filled specifically 'female' positions in the wheat trade. Nevertheless, control of the grain trade, as well as wholesale trading, was mainly a masculine pursuit. The grain trade was of crucial importance, as it impacted the town's supply. As a consequence, the town council maintained tighter control over women's

¹³ María Isabel del Val Valdivieso, "El trabajo de las mujeres en el Bilbao tardomedieval," in *Las Mujeres Vascas en la Historia* (Bilbao: IPES, 1997), 70.

¹⁴ Ana María Rivera Medina, "Cuerpos de mujer en el mundo laboral bilbaíno bajomedieval y moderno (s. XIV - XVI).," in *Familia y organización social en Europa y América siglos XV-XX* (Murcia-Albacete, 2007), 2014.

¹⁵ Cristina Ayuso Sánchez, "El mundo laboral femenino en el País Vasco medieval," *Sancho El Sabio: Revista de Cultura e Investigación Vasca* 30 (2009): 124.

¹⁶ 'Women, housekeepers, servant girls, bread bakers, bread sellers'.

¹⁷ Shennan Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets: The Gendering of Market Space in Late Medieval Ghent," in *Urban Space in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 409–32; Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 17r-17v.

¹⁸ SAM, Magistraat (Ordonnantiën) - Serie III, nr.2, fol. 144r-147r; SAM, Magistraat (Ordonnantiën) - Serie III, nr.2, fol. 243r-244v, 27 November 1520.

activities in the grain trade than in less crucial trade. In a later section, I will discuss this control and women's involvement in Bilbao's grain trade in more depth.

Candles, fruits and vegetables, fish, grease, and other small-scale commodities were sold by retailers, or *regateras*. In late medieval Biscay, most retailers were women operating their own businesses.¹⁹ They were not organised in a formal institution and answered directly to the town council. In addition, some occupations, such as *candeleras* and *aceiteras*, women selling candles and grease, needed a license to set up a shop. In this way, the council could control the selection and number of people engaged in these trades. For other retail branches, such as the sales of fish, an official appointed by the council had to inspect the commodities before they could be sold.²⁰ Since retail women were critical distributors of important goods for the town, the council tried to supervise these saleswomen closely to avoid malpractice and assure supplies of these key items of consumption. Nevertheless, documents show that the council found it difficult to implement their regulations and had to repeat ordinances. Between 1488 and 1509, for example, the council had to repeat the ordinance that specified the hour when women could begin to buy their stock four times.²¹

Fish was sold in small quantities by the *pescaderas* (fishmongers) and *sardineras* (sardine sellers), as it was in most Iberian coastal towns.²² Men

¹⁹ Ana María Rivera Medina, "Superando fronteras. Mujer y cultura laboral en los puertos del norte peninsular, Siglos XIV-XVI." In *Fronteras de agua. Las ciudades portuarias y su universo cultural (Siglos XIV-XXI)*, ed. Manuel García Hurtado and Ofelia Rey Castelao (Santiago de Compostela: Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, 2016), 24; del Val Valdivieso, "El trabajo de las mujeres," 73.

²⁰ Ayuso Sánchez, "El mundo laboral femenino," 128.

²¹ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 35r-35v, 24 September 1488; Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 52r-52v, 5 June 1495; Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 109v-110r, 11 January 1503; Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 56 (Donostia, 1995), fol. 42r, 18 May 1509.

²² Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, "Fishmongers and Shipowners: Women in Maritime Communities of Early Modern Portugal," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 1 (2000): 7-23; Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, "Neighbors and Traders in a Seventeenth-Century Port Town," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37, no. 3 (2012): 581-87; Marta Vicente, "Images and Realities of Work: Women and Guilds in Early Modern

controlled the more lucrative fish wholesale trade, although some women, mostly widows, sold at this level. One was Isabel de Sabugal, a citizen of Portugalete, a town near Bilbao. She got into a dispute with a Galician trader over five *millares* and twelve barrels of sardines that she wanted to buy from him. Isabel was clearly a well-established merchant.²³ Most women involved in Bilbao's fish trade did not handle goods in bulk. The women fishmongers of Bilbao bought small quantities of fish from the public nets, where officials weighed, inspected, guarded, and distributed fish. Fish was not always brought in from overseas by fishermen. The inhabitants of neighbouring (coastal) towns – *mugeres, moços e moças e omes* – would also bring fish 'with mules or on their heads' to Bilbao, where the council would inspect it. The women fishmongers were not the only sellers of fish in Bilbao.²⁴ The *pescadoras* and *sardineras* sold fish in the streets or at tables on the market square in the Calle Barrencalle. The *pescadoras* sold fresh fish. The *sardineras* were a specialised subgroup of the town's *regateras* (retail women). They were allowed to sell sardines and certain other types of salted fish.²⁵ Nevertheless, as we will see in a later chapter, they cooperated closely with the *pescaderas* and were addressed together in the towns' bylaws. In the published ordinances of Bilbao, the town council dedicated fifty-six ordinances to the sale of fish.²⁶ Not all regulations were directed towards female fishmongers (see Table 12). Most regulations that were addressed to women dealt with the quality, price, and weight of fish the women fishmongers could sell. The council also passed repeated regulations on trade locations, informal trade, and issues of organisation in the fish trade.

Barcelona," in *Spanish Women in the Golden Age: Images and Realities*, ed. Alain Saint-Saëns and Magdalena Sánchez (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996), 129–30.

²³ Ayuso Sánchez, "El mundo laboral femenino," 123–26; Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300–1600* (New York: Oxford university press, 1999), 145–47; Sheilagh Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living: Women, Markets, and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: University Press, 2006), 8.

²⁴ del Val Valdivieso, "El trabajo de las mujeres," 74; Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477–1520)*, fol. 36v–37r, 17 December 1488.

²⁵ del Val Valdivieso, "El trabajo de las mujeres," 74.

²⁶ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477–1520)*.

More often than not, the ordinances were issued after fish sellers had violated existing regulations, or had caused disorder, disputes, or problems in the course of their activities. Fish was too important a commodity for the town council not to intervene in cases of fraud and other violations.²⁷ Consequentially, the council tried to maintain strict control over the fishmongers' market activities.

Bilbao's women food vendors might have operated in the same manner as did hucksters and vendors in other regions in premodern Europe. Earlier studies have often pointed out widespread participation of women in informal food distribution.²⁸ However, in Bilbao, these women did not have to compete with formally organised small-scale traders. As a result, their trade activities were more central to the town's food trades. This contrasts with towns in other regions, such as early modern Lyons, where informal saleswomen needed permission to sell in front of the shops of guild shopkeepers.²⁹ In Copenhagen, women were only allowed to sell bread, as wholesale baking was limited to guild members.³⁰

²⁷ José Ángel García de Cortázar et al., *Vizcaya en la edad media: evolución demográfica, económica, social y política de la comunidad vizcaína medieval*, vol. 1 (San Sebastian: Haranburu, 1985), 330–31.

²⁸ See, among others Abreu-Ferreira, "Neighbors and Traders"; Julie Pilorget, "Circulations féminines et encadrement de l'espace urbain à la fin du Moyen Âge : l'exemple d'Amiens." In *Mobilités et déplacements des femmes dans le nord de la France du Moyen Âge à nos jours*, ed. Youri Carbonnier, Stéphane Curveiller, and Laurent Warloutzet (Arras Cedex: Artois Presses Université, 2019), 15–31; Danielle van den Heuvel, "Partners in Marriage and Business? Guilds and the Family Economy in Urban Food Markets in the Dutch Republic," *Continuity and Change* 23, no. 2 (2008): 217–36; Janna Coomans, "Policing Female Food Vendors in the Late Medieval Netherlands," *Yearbook of Women's History* 36 (2017): 97–113.

²⁹ Anne Montenach, "Legal Trade and Black Markets: Food Trades in Lyon in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy. Gender in European Towns, 1640–1830*, ed. Deborah Simonton and Anne Montenach (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 28–29.

³⁰ In her study of late medieval Exeter, Maryanne Kowaleski found that bread production was often in the hands of guild members, even if retail sales of bread were done both by guild members and informal vendors. Marjorie McIntosh describes a different situation. In other English towns, bread baking for sale was not controlled by a guild, but the capital necessary to build an oven was large enough that most bakers were male. These examples contrast sharply with the situation in Bilbao,

Besides the distribution of foodstuffs and other daily consumption products, Bilbao women were also active in cloth production and trade. Most of the fabric produced in Bilbao was lower in quality than that imported from overseas. Most locally-made fabric was distributed within the region, although exports to the rest of the kingdom were increasing. According to García de Cortázar et. al. an organised group of craftsmen produced woollen cloth in the Biscayan towns. However, there is no evidence of this in the sources of Bilbao. Linen production took place in rural areas. In Bilbao, there was a group of women engaged in sales – and possibly production – of linen cloth.³¹ The *lenceras* were women selling linen cloth in shops in Bilbao. It is not clear whether they produced and then sold the cloth, or whether the Bilbao *lenceras* were intermediaries who bought the finished fabric from other (women) producers in the county. Whatever the source, the Bilbao linen merchants seem to have operated on different levels, as a 1509 ordinance for the *lenceras* shows. Two of them were selling linen under a scaffold outside the town walls. The council – probably afraid of potential fraud and tax evasion – required the linen sellers to move their businesses to one of the shops in the town centre within the next six days.³² One week later, on 12 February 1509, Joana de Carryaso and Milia (whose last name is unknown), the two *lenceras* in question, appeared before the council, asking

where both bread production and bread sales were in the hands of women. See Carol Gold, "On the Streets and in the Markets: Independent Copenhagen Saleswomen," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 36; Maryanne Kowaleski, "Women's Work in a Market Town: Exeter in the Late Fourteenth Century," in *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 148; Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 183.

³¹ García de Cortázar et al., *Vizcaya en la edad media*, 1:136–37.

³² '[...] mando notyficar a las dos lençeras que estan en la plaça vaxo de los andamios de Sancho Martines de Viluoao que de oy dia en adelante ellas nin otras lençeras ningunas non tengan en el dicho lugar e baxo de andamios nin en otro lugar en la dicha plaça de la dicha villa de Viluoao [...] e que se entren a la villa e ende tengan e pongan sus tyendas porque la villa sea mejor poblada e por cavsá que estan dentro en la villa asas tyendas basias [...]'. Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 16v, 5 February 1509.

for a postponement on their order to move. After they used their poverty as an argument, the council gave them until Easter to move to the centre.³³ Joana and Milia clearly did not enjoy thriving businesses. While they probably engaged in the linen trade on a small scale, this was not the case for all women linen traders in Bilbao. There are several debt declarations, contracts, and conflict settlements that reveal *lenceras* operating on a large scale, even between regions.³⁴

Because not all cloth merchants were locals, other occupations existed in Bilbao that supported merchants. Women were also involved in these as *plumeras*, *corredoras*, and *huespedas*. The *huespedas*, translated as 'female hosts', kept hostels for (women) merchants and people who came to Bilbao to buy commodities. Although the council tried to limit their involvement in fabric commerce, the council found that difficult.³⁵ In 1521 and again in 1534 and 1549, the council restricted the hostellers who were trying to increase their income by brokerage, acting as intermediaries between the *plumeras* and Bilbao's cloth merchants.³⁶ The *plumeras* were women who lived in the county of Biscay and came to Bilbao to buy linen cloth. They may have used the linen to make padded products such as mattresses and pillows for

³³ Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 19r, 12 February 1509.

³⁴ This will be discussed in a later chapter. See, for example: ARChV, Pleitos Civiles, Pérez Alonso (F), Caja 991,3, 1538; ARChV, Registro de ejecutorias, Caja 810,31, 1554; Javier Enríquez Fernández, Concepción Hidalgo de Cisneros Amestoy, and Adela Martínez Lahidalga, *Colección documental del archivo histórico de Bilbao (1514-1520)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 108 (Donostia, 2001), 1553–54, 10 July 1517.

³⁵ '[...] que ninguna vespada que acoje a ningunas mercaderas e mercaderos en su casa, en especial a las plumeras, que non sean hosadas de llevar a sus casas telas de lienço de ningund vezino nin vezina desta villa para faser compra, nin sean hosados de llevar a los duepnos de los tales lienços vendedores de corretaje nin ostalaje mas de vn cornado por cada vna bara [...].' Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 33r–33v, 11 July 1488; Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 130v–131r, 5 March 1509.

³⁶ I will elaborate on these conflicts in a later chapter. See: ARChV, Registro de ejecutorias, Caja 359,65, 1521; ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 4368,4, 1534; AFB, Municipal, 0031/002/0010, 27 May 1549.

resale.³⁷ In the ordinances, the council referred to them as a type of merchant or *mercadera*, as they came from out of town to obtain and export products from Bilbao.³⁸ Whereas brokerage was prohibited to hostellers, the *corredoras* were allowed to do just that. *Corredoras* were women who accompanied foreign merchants to the cloth sellers' houses. They would negotiate deals for a fee. While they facilitated the town's trade, they were not indispensable. Therefore, the town council strictly limited the fees they could charge. Nevertheless, the frequent repetition of this regulation indicates that the council of Bilbao could not keep the *corredoras* to the mandated fees.³⁹

There is no clear reason for women's claim on certain market sectors in Bilbao. It is not surprising that women were active in retail and the cloth trade, as these sectors were accessible to women in other regions. The same can be said for the fish trade.⁴⁰ However, in addition to these traditionally female occupations, the council of Bilbao addressed women almost

³⁷ Janire Castrillo Casado, *Las mujeres vascas durante la baja edad media: vida familiar, capacidades jurídicas, roles sociales y trabajo* (Madrid: Sílex, 2020), 292.

³⁸ In the ordinance of 28 June 1499, the council would first address the *plumeras*, but later identify them more generally as *mercaderas* (merchants). See, for example: 'Yten, que aya el huesped que las tales plumeras e mercaderas tuvieren en su casa, para en ayuda del jantar que les es acostunbrado dar a las dichas mercaderas, vna blanca vieja, que son tres cornados, de cada vna bara de quantas en su casa se vendiere, e non sea osado de llevar mas nin allende, so pena de quinientos maravedís por cada vez.' Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 98r-100v, 28 June 1499.

³⁹ Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 33r-33v, 11 July 1488; Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 59v-60r, 25 May 1492; Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 98r-100v, 28 June 1499; Enríquez Fernández, Hidalgo de Cisneros Amestoy, and Martínez Lahidalga, *Colección documental del archivo histórico de Bilbao (1514-1520)*, 1553-54, 10 July 1517.

⁴⁰ Anne Montenach, "Working at the Margins: Women and Illicit Economic Practices in Lyon in the Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Women and Work in Premodern Europe*, ed. Merridee L. Bailey, Tania M. Colwell, and Julie Hotchin (New York: Routledge, 2018), 192; Coomans, "Policing Female Food Vendors"; Danielle van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women in Early Modern Dutch Towns," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy*, ed. Deborah Simonton and A. Montenach (New York: Routledge, 2013), 116-33; Danielle van den Heuvel, "The Multiple Identities of Early Modern Dutch Fishwives," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37, no. 3 (2012): 587-94; Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets."

exclusively in the regulations on the bread trade. In the regulations on small-scale sales of food supplies and other commodities, women played a dominant role (see Table 12 for an overview). Most of the market areas dominated by women in Bilbao were traditionally 'feminine' activities. Women sold products 'that they had traditionally made for domestic use'.⁴¹ Retail and food sales also emerged from women's domestic responsibilities elsewhere in premodern Europe.⁴² Moreover, as citizens of Biscay, these women had the right to trade freely in these specific goods.⁴³ As was the case in Brabant, small-scale trading coincided well with the needs of (single and widowed) women for an income without heavy initial investment in the business.⁴⁴

The protagonist roles of women in the council's regulation of these trades in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is in sharp contrast with what we saw for the Southern Low Countries in the same period. In the Brabantine towns, as well as in other regions that have been studied, women's formal participation in these trades was minimal. From the evidence in some guild ordinances, there does not appear to have been any women's activities. Although informal participation was a possibility, Brabantine women were formally excluded from several of the occupations that in Bilbao were entirely dominated by women. By the sixteenth century, there were almost no women still working in the drapery sector in Ghent, and, as stated, the grain trade was almost exclusively male as well.⁴⁵ Possibly, in an earlier century, the women Brabantine peddlers had been pushed out of the market

⁴¹ Martha C. Howell, "The Gender of Europe's Commercial Economy, 1200-1700," *Gender & History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 521.

⁴² van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women," 118-19; Ayuso Sánchez, "El mundo laboral femenino," 123.

⁴³ Teófilo Guiard y Larrauri, *Historia del Consulado y Casa de Contratación de Bilbao y del comercio de la villa*, vol. 1 (Bilbao: Imprenta y Librería de José de Astuy, 1913), 72.

⁴⁴ Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman, "Women's Work, Gender Conflict, and Labour Markets in Europe, 1500-1900," *The Economic History Review* 44, no. 4 (1991): 610; Anne Montenach, "Trades in Lyon in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 20.

⁴⁵ Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets," 412.

gradually, as Howell and Bennett have argued had happened elsewhere.⁴⁶ In Bilbao, this had not happened, as no male institution had taken over the organisation of small-scale trades.⁴⁷ Women in Bilbao could not compete with institutionalised male traders, but throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, women continued to dominate the retail and food trades of the town. Nevertheless, as I will discuss in this chapter, they were subordinate to the control of the (male) town authorities.

1.2 Gendered language as a reflection of Bilbao's economic organisation

The town ordinances of Bilbao reveal an organisation of work quite distinct from that of the Brabantine towns discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas women's work was rarely discussed in the Brabantine ordinances, there were many regulations about women's work opportunities in the Biscayan commercial hub. Table 12 shows an overview of all decisions concerning work and trade in the ordinances published by Enríquez Fernández et. al.⁴⁸ Although in most of the retail and food trades, the council regulated both men's and women's work, in a few, such as the bread trade, they addressed women more frequently. As these trades were dominated by women, the gendered language in the ordinances is not surprising.

Table 13 surveys the gendered language used in the decisions promulgated by the town council in ordinances. Given the female character of certain occupations, as discussed in the previous section, the frequent use

⁴⁶ Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England*, 145; Howell, "The Gender of Europe's Commercial Economy, 1200-1700," 522-24.

⁴⁷ Jacobsen has argued that women were active in retail, food trades, and drapery in late medieval and early modern Denmark. However, this changed for the trades that would later be organized in male-headed guilds. See: Grethe Jacobsen, "Women's Work and Women's Role: Ideology and Reality in Danish Urban Society, 1300-1550," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 31, no. 1 (1983): 3-20; Susanne Schöts, "Female Traders and Practices of Illicit Exchange. Observations on Leipzig's Retail Trade between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Century," in *Shadow Economies and Irregular Work in Urban Europe. 16th to Early 20th Centuries*, ed. Thomas Buchner and Philip R. Hoffmann-Rehnitz (Münster: LIT, 2011), 130-31; Merry E. Wiesner, "Having Her Own Smoke. Employment and Independence for Singlewomen in Germany, 1400-1750," in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 207.

⁴⁸ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*.

of feminine language should not be surprising. The council addressed women or mixed groups most often in regulations on the fish trade, retailing, masculine and feminine language was commonly used for several trades. The use of mixed language shows that the local government in Bilbao – and

Table 12. *Gendered discourse per occupation in the decisions of the town ordinances of Bilbao (1477-1520).*

			(continued)		
Ordinance decision	#	%	Ordinance decision	#	%
Fish trade	56	17	Carpenters	22	7
Feminine	20	36	Masculine	22	100
Masculine	19	34	Wine/Cider trade	21	7
Mixed	15	27	Masculine	19	90.5
Neutral	2	3	Neutral	2	9.5
Retail	37	11	Hostellers/innkeepers	13	4
Feminine	15	40.5	Masculine	10	77
Masculine	3	8	Mixed	2	15
Mixed	15	40.5	Neutral	1	8
Neutral	4	11	Drapery	11	3.5
General trade	37	11	Feminine	1	9
Feminine	2	5.5	Mixed	10	91
Masculine	17	46	Maritime trade	11	3.5
Mixed	15	40.5	Masculine	8	73
Neutral	3	8	Mixed	2	18
Grain trade	36	11	Neutral	1	9
Feminine	7	19.5	Iron trade	7	2
Masculine	9	25	Masculine	4	57
Mixed	16	44.5	Mixed	2	29
Neutral	4	11	Neutral	1	14
Meat trade	32	10	Other	14	4
Feminine	1	3	Masculine	12	86
Masculine	31	97	Neutral	2	14
Bread trade	30	9	Total	327	100
Feminine	17	57			
Mixed	12	40			
Neutral	1	3			

Source: Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 70 (Donostia, 1995).

with it, urban society in general – at least thought it appropriate for both men and women to engage in certain market areas.⁴⁹ In contrast to the effect of organising women's work by the household production unit, that women's work was usually not recorded in written sources, the council of Bilbao normalised the participation of women in the town economy by regulating their work. Nevertheless, not all trades were 'female' or suitable for women.

Table 13. Percentage of gendered language per decision in the town ordinances of Bilbao (1477-1520).

	#	%
Feminine	63	19
Masculine	154	47
Mixed	89	27
Neutral	21	7
Grand Total	327	100

Source: Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 70 (Donostia, 1995).

The recognition of women's work in certain occupations does not mean that women were not active in other trades, even if they were not acknowledged for that in town regulations.⁵⁰ As in the Brabantine towns, some Bilbao married women may have worked in household workshops, but their work remained hidden in ordinances that addressed male household heads. Other source types, such as the conflict settlements before the Royal Chancellery in Valladolid, testify to women's involvement in other market sectors. For example, the ordinances for innkeepers and hostellers were almost exclusively addressed to men. However, conflict settlements between the hostellers and Bilbao's council show that female hostellers were especially active in and around the drapery sector. As was the case for other regions, women undoubtedly worked in more occupations than Bilbao's

⁴⁹ Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton, "Introduction. Gender, Agency and Economy: Shaping the Eighteenth-Century European Town," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

⁵⁰ Kittell and Queller, "Whether Man or Woman," 73; Anna Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights in Early Modern Urban Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 53; Abreu-Ferreira, "Neighbors and Traders," 585–86.

bylaws reflect. Women's work only appeared in a written ordinance when the council was reacting to issues, fraud, and misbehaviour.

Not all of the trades were regulated using feminine language. As can be expected from a patriarchal society, it seems that some occupations were almost entirely in men's hands. Half of the ordinances promulgated between 1477 and 1520 addressed only men (see Table 13). Although the town council paid much attention to the provisioning trades, which employed many women, men were still involved in a more diverse (and probably also more lucrative) range of occupations. The town council considered some market sectors of provisioning almost entirely masculine. In these trades, such as butchering and selling meat, the council only addressed men and used only male language. The one ordinance that included feminine language regulated the poultry trade, which was not in the scope of the butchers' occupation.⁵¹ The masculine character of the meat trade is logical because throughout early modern Europe, women were excluded from the butchers' craft.⁵² Furthermore, all the relatively sparse regulations aimed at artisan labour in Bilbao addressed men exclusively.⁵³ Official participation in these trades indeed seems to have been reserved for men, although Ana Iziz, Rosa Iziz, and Janire Castrillo Casado found evidence of women working with their husbands or fathers in other Basque towns. There is also evidence of a

⁵¹ 'Acordaron e mandaron los sobredichos sennores, conformandose con las ordenanças que antes de agora estan puestas, que de oy dia en adelante ningunas regateras desta villa nin de sus rebales non sean ozadas de comprar capones nin gallinas nin perdizes nin pollos en esta dicha villa nin en sus revalas [...].' Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 98r, 15 May 1499.

⁵² Nena Vandeweerd, "'Van Den Vleeschouweren Oft Pensvrouwen.' De Economische Mogelijkheden Voor Vrouwen in Het Leuvense Vleeshouwersambacht in de Vijftiende En Zestiende Eeuw," *TSEG/ Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 15, no. 1 (2018): 5–30; Anne Montenach, "Creating a Space for Themselves on the Urban Market. Survival Strategies and Economic Opportunities for Single Women in French Provincial Towns (Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries)," in *Single Life and the City 1200-1900*, ed. Julie De Groot, Ariadne Schmidt, and Isabelle Devos (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 50–68; Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets," 422.

⁵³ Because of the low numbers, most fall under the category 'other' in Table 12.

widow's right to continue her late husband's trade in nearby towns.⁵⁴ For Bilbao, however, there is no evidence that there were women working in artisan occupations.

2. Saleswomen and their 'great damage for the whole town': the town council's 'defence of the customer'

In 1488, the town council of Bilbao promulgated an ordinance on the fish trade. The reason was that 'many people – women, menservants, servant girls, and men –' transported fish into town and sold individual fish ('per eye') instead of being approved first by the town's official fish weighers, as required.⁵⁵ As I have argued, the council included and addressed all parties involved in illegal trade practices, not only women. Instead of using gender as an argument, the council legitimised the ordinance as a measure to prevent loss of the town's excise income. Bilbao's bylaws rarely used either gender or patriarchal values as an argument. The council addressed women in ordinances about the sectors which employed women workers and rarely excluded women from these sectors. They cited few reasons other than economic concerns about the work of women in the trades that were considered female. Nevertheless, underneath these economic motives, ideas about gender influenced the council's decisions. A few ordinances reveal that awareness of gender was a factor affecting their judgment.

Although very few of the town's female residents were actually involved in most of these occupations, ordinances regulating women's work were commonplace in premodern Bilbao. In 1510, the women fishmongers of the town applied for a new ordinance; there were nineteen of them.⁵⁶ The record of a conflict between the town council and the *cojedoras*, a group of women involved in the town's grain trade, discussed later in this section,

⁵⁴ Rosa Iziz and Ana Iziz, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria. 1. Prehistoria, romanización y reino de Navarra* (Tafalla: Txalaparta, 2016), 258; Castrillo Casado, *Las mujeres vascas durante la baja edad media*, 261–71.

⁵⁵ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 36v-37r, 17 December 1488.

⁵⁶ Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 276r-279r, 2 October 1510.

notes that there were 'eight or nine women *cogedoras*'.⁵⁷ Although it is impossible to state an exact number of female retailers and traders, the amount of regulation made for these traders might not have been in balance with the number of women actually working in Bilbao.

Earlier studies have argued that the scrutiny of the female occupations in Bilbao originated in the council's suspicion of these women.⁵⁸ The *narratios* of several ordinances do cite fraud and offences. In an ordinance of 1509, the council stated that no one 'nor that no woman' could put up stalls obstructing passage through the streets.⁵⁹ This explicit reference to women might reflect suspicion of female traders. But is also possible that the council addressed women because they were crucial actors in sectors that required more supervision: food trades and retail sales. Moreover, since no other Bilbao institution organised the food trades, the council was left as the only body with the responsibility and capability to regulate them. The reason for the large number of ordinances for these saleswomen might not be suspicion of women but the importance of the trades for the town's food supply.⁶⁰ Women's participation in these occupations had been normalised. As such, the council's objective was simply 'situating and regulating their [women's] activities, rather than preventing them from operating businesses.'⁶¹

The Bilbao town council's ordinances concerned the organisation of wage work and commerce in the town. They did not regulate cultural and religious practices. Limitations on who could participate in work were also not common. Elsewhere, these limitations often accompanied organisation

⁵⁷ ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, 3467,5, 27 June 1536.

⁵⁸ Rivera Medina, "Cuerpos de mujer en el mundo laboral bilbaíno bajomedieval y moderno (s. XIV - XVI).," 4; Iziz and Iziz, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria*, 242.

⁵⁹ 'Otrosy, manda que se goarde la hordenança que ninguno nin ningunas personas non sean hosados de thener en las cales, fuera de los tableros, ningund enbaraço nin enpacho alguno, nin se asyenten ningunas mugeres nin otras personas en syllas fuera de los tableros, so pena de çient maravedis a cada vno por cada bez.' Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 26v-27r.

⁶⁰ Castrillo Casado, *Las mujeres vascas durante la baja edad media*, 283.

⁶¹ Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton, "Afterword," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 224.

of work in guilds.⁶² As *Zunftdwang* was not a concept applicable to Bilbao, there were few regulations concerning who could participate in certain trades. Informal organisation of work characterised the commercial hub of Biscay and possibly other neighbouring Atlantic seaports as well.⁶³ In the workforce of these types of towns, especially in retail sales, women were rarely explicitly excluded. In theory, any citizen had the chance to set up a retail business.

The two most common topics in Bilbao's ordinances – work arrangements and price and quality control – were addressed to both sexes (Table 14). Even more, the language used on these topics was distributed in the same manner on all 196 ordinances (Table 13). Language use in the town's ordinances indicates that the town council was concerned that trade proceeded correctly, but not about who was conducting trade. As a consequence, men and women often worked under the same legal framework.⁶⁴ The regulations of the grain trade, which utilised particularly diverse language, reflects these findings. Although men and women did not occupy identical positions in the trade, the council made ordinances for both men's and women's work. Moreover, the council was more apt to use mixed language in decisions than singular masculine or feminine language (Table 12).

When the council regulated Bilbao's grain trade, they often addressed the women involved in it. However, the council created regulations for the women in the trade that were similar to those they created for the men. One of the great concerns of the town council was to ensure the fair distribution of the grain supply inside the city while preventing too much of it from being diverted to other areas. The council made sure to address all parties involved

⁶² Martha C. Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 106.

⁶³ Abreu-Ferreira, "Neighbors and Traders"; María Jesús Cruchaga Calvin, "La mujer en las villas portuarias del Cantábrico: el ejemplo de Santander en la Baja Edad Media" (Santander, Universidad de Cantabria, 2012).

⁶⁴ María del Pilar Rábade Obradó, "La mujer trabajadora en los ordenamientos de Cortes, 1258-1505." In *El trabajo de las mujeres en la edad media hispana*, ed. Cristina Segura Graiño and Ángela Muñoz Fernández (Madrid: Asociación Cultural Al-Mudayna, 1988), 139.

in the grain trade. In 1482 (and again in 1501), they specifically addressed baker women who could not buy more than one *fanega* of grain.⁶⁵ In 1495 the council addressed the *mesoneros* (innkeepers) on the same topic, prohibiting them from hosting merchants who were only buying to take goods out of the town.⁶⁶ In that same year, they addressed all citizens and foreigners in masculine language.⁶⁷ In a similar decision from 1500, the council specified servant girls and women who worked for citizens.⁶⁸ Through the decades, the council had to renew the ordinances and add more actors who might be involved in the prohibited practices. Because women with diverse occupations were interwoven into the town's grain trade, the council included them in their decisions but did not treat them differently or separate them from men in their ordinances. The council's main objective seems to have been to prevent grain from leaving the town.

The most common topics of the town ordinances of Bilbao – work arrangements and price and quality control – were not confined to only one of the sexes. On the other hand, the council addressed most regulations of market space to women, perhaps because women dominated the town's retail and food trades. Local governments found it essential to control market space as a way to manage trade practices.⁶⁹ It might have been harder for the council to control the women who sold commodities on a small scale. Even though food sales in Bilbao did not take place in enclosed halls, the fair distribution of food, and thus also sales in specified places, were just as

⁶⁵ One 'fanega' of grain contained 33.5 litres. Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 17r-17v; Earl J. Hamilton, *American Treasure and the Price Revolution in Spain, 1501-1650* (New York: Octagon books, 1970), 152-85.

⁶⁶ This ordinance was repeated in 1513. Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 45r-45v, 23 January 1495; Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 146v, 7 February 1513.

⁶⁷ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 47r-47v, 28 January 1495.

⁶⁸ Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 47r-47v, 28 January 1495; Javier Enríquez Fernández, Concepción Hidalgo de Cisneros Amestoy, and Adela Martínez Lahidalga, *Colección documental del archivo histórico de Bilbao (1473-1500)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 95 (Donostia, 1999), fol. 5r-5v, 18 March 1500.

⁶⁹ Stabel, "From the Market to the Shop."

Table 14. Gendered discourse per decision category in the town ordinances of Bilbao (1477-1520).

			(continued)		
Ordinance decision	#	%	Ordinance decision	#	%
Work arrangements	145	44	Trade control	13	4
Feminine	27	18.5	Feminine	1	8
Masculine	72	49.5	Masculine	9	69
Mixed	36	25	Mixed	3	23
Neutral	10	7	Buying outside of the city	12	4
Price and quality control	45	14	Masculine	7	58
Feminine	9	20	Mixed	4	33
Masculine	17	38	Neutral	1	9
Mixed	15	33	Trade license	6	2
Neutral	4	9	Feminine	2	33
Market space	35	11	Masculine	2	33
Feminine	16	46	Mixed	1	17
Masculine	9	25.5	Neutral	1	17
Mixed	9	25.5	Host control	5	1.5
Neutral	1	3	Masculine	3	60
Town officials	18	5.5	Mixed	2	40
Masculine	10	55.5	Other	14	4
Mixed	8	44.5	Feminine	1	7
Market days	17	5	Masculine	9	64
Feminine	7	41	Neutral	4	29
Masculine	5	29.5	Total	327	100
Mixed	5	29.5			
Taking supplies out of the city	17	5			
Masculine	11	65			
Mixed	6	35			

Source: Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 70 (Donostia, 1995).

crucial in the Biscayan harbour town as in other premodern European towns.⁷⁰ For this reason, the town council promulgated more regulations concerning the market spaces used by this group of traders.

⁷⁰ Stabel, 90; Montenach, "Legal Trade and Black Markets: Food Trades in Lyon in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," 26; Dorothy Davis, *A History of*

The council's efforts to regulate market space are especially visible for the fishmongers. Studies have already indicated that urban governments assigned great importance to structure the activities of women fishmongers and that they found that task difficult.⁷¹ Market space was also one of the most prominent topics in the ordinances of the fish trade in Bilbao. As Table 15 shows, almost seventy per cent of the regulations on fishmongers' market space used feminine language. As stated in the previous section, the small-scale selling of fish was mostly in the hands of women. The council may have thought it would be easier to manage fishmongers by limiting the physical space of the women's operations. In 1497, for example, the council decided that 'no retail women nor other persons' from within or outside Bilbao could sell fish in shops or houses. Instead, they had to do so 'at the square and the Portal de Çamudio';⁷² the two places where Bilbao's fish trade was supposed to take place.⁷³ Meticulous rules about the fishmongers' market space were promulgated regularly to give the council improved control over the traders. In 1510, the council even constructed a shelter to cover the spot where the fishmongers were to have their stalls and instituted a system for allocating stalls.⁷⁴ In the same ordinance, the council ordered the women fishmongers to clean the square each week and limited the places where they could operate to guarantee fewer spoiled fish and less nuisance.⁷⁵ The council's goals may have included limiting disorder and garbage in town, as well as

Shopping (London and Toronto: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, and University of Toronto Press, 1966), 74.

⁷¹ Schöts, "Female Traders and Practices of Illicit Exchange," 136; Davis, *A History of Shopping*, 188–90.

⁷² Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 85v, 13 February 1497.

⁷³ As stated, the square that the council referred to was located in the Calle Barrencalle. García de Cortázar et al., *Vizcaya en la edad media*, 1:346–47.

⁷⁴ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 276r-279r, 2 October 1510.

⁷⁵ '[...] que a cavsá quel dicho cay es estrecho para la carga e descarga e porque aquel non se inpidá, mas antes este libre e esento para la carga e descarga, que las dichas sardineras e pescaderas non sean osados de oy día en adelante en ningund tienpo de poner pipas ningunas de sardinas nin pescados nin tinacos nin sesta nin bancos nin sillas fuera de los limites e sennales que le seran puestos faza el dicho cay e Plaça della. [...]' Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 276r-279r, 2 October 1510.

controlling the fishmongers' market space.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the council's desire to establish an area for fish sales that was more clearly demarcated did not change the gendering of this space. In contrast to Brabantine and Flemish meat halls, where the enclosed spaces specifically emphasised the traders' masculinity, the new restricted area for fish trade in Bilbao remained female.⁷⁷

I have argued that Bilbao's council rarely used gender as an argument when regulating work. However, the council did keep an eye on the women and their trading. The motivation for most of these ordinances is what José Ángel García de Cortázar et. al. have called 'the defence of the customer'. Bilbao's council wanted to guarantee equal access to food supplies for all citizens.⁷⁸ By setting rules and organising town economies, the council claimed that they were contributing to the common good of the town, in the same way that guild regulations did elsewhere in Europe.⁷⁹ The difference is that in Bilbao this happened without excluding women from certain trades. One of the sectors in which the council's 'defence of the customer' can be seen is the trade of candles and grease. As stated in the previous section, the

⁷⁶ Research has shown the importance that late medieval urban governments gave to keeping the towns clean. Although local governments did not always succeed, it is not surprising that the town council of Bilbao was concerned with the garbage and smell caused by the fish trade caused. Dolly Jørgensen, "Modernity and Medieval Muck," *Nature and Culture* 9, no. 3 (2014): 230.

⁷⁷ Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets"; Vandeweerd, "'Van Den Vleeschouweren Oft Pensvrouwen.'"

⁷⁸ García de Cortázar et al., *Vizcaya en la edad media*, 1:329.

⁷⁹ Jelle Haemers, "Governing and Gathering about the Common Welfare of the Town. The Petitions of the Carft Guilds of Leuven, 1378," in *La comunidad medieval como esfera pública*, ed. Hipólito Rafael Oliva Herrer et al. (Sevilla: Sevilla University Press, 2014), 153–72; Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea, "Ideologies and Political Participation of the Commons in Urban Life of Northern Atlantic Spain during the Late Middle Ages," in *Words and Deeds. Shaping Urban Politics from below in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Ben Eersels and Jelle Haemers (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 181–94; Elodie Lecuppre-Desjardin and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, "Introduction. Du Bien Commun à l'idée de Bien Commun," in *De Bono Communi. The Discourse and Practice of the Common Good in the European City (13th-16th c.)*, by Elodie Lecuppre-Desjardin and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010), 1–9.

Table 15. Topic division per gender of the decisions in the twenty-six ordinances regulating the fish trade in Bilbao (1477-1520).

Ordinance decision	#	%
Work arrangements	20	35
Feminine	7	35
Masculine	7	35
Mixed	5	25
Neutral	1	5
Market space	16	29
Feminine	11	69
Masculine	2	13
Mixed	2	13
Neutral	1	6
Price and quality control	6	11
Masculine	2	33
Mixed	4	67
Trade control	4	7
Feminine	1	25
Masculine	2	50
Mixed	1	25
Buying outside of the city	4	7
Masculine	1	25
Mixed	3	75
Town officials	3	5
Masculine	3	100
Taking supplies out of the city	2	4
Masculine	2	100
Market days	1	2
Feminine	1	100
Total	56	100

Source: Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 70 (Donostia, 1995).

'regateras que benden aseyte e candela' were saleswomen who worked under a license from the local authorities. The weights of the commodities and the prices the saleswomen could ask for their products were fixed in advance.⁸⁰ Moreover, the council required that 'each of them at all times have their shops stocked with candles and grease, [...] and to have both grease

⁸⁰ See, for example: Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 25r-26v, 19 September 1487.

and candles and not one without the other.'⁸¹ Although the council emphasised the women's obligation to use the right weight and prices, they did not prevent the women from operating their businesses. On the contrary, the council guaranteed the *regateras* they would be the only ones allowed to sell grease and candles as long as they followed the requirements.⁸²

Even if regulations of women's work in Bilbao were perhaps written from an economic perspective, the result could still be limitation of women's work opportunities. This happened to the town's *cojedoras*. The *cojedoras* were (mainly) women who guarded supplies from grain merchants that entered the city from their accommodations to the official grain weights. They also handled the payments of taxes on grain from buyers. In return, *cojedoras* received a small wage. In its fifteenth-century regulations, the town council was already addressing their trade activities on a regular basis.⁸³ Throughout the first two decades of the sixteenth century, regulation of their work increased, as the council claimed that the *cojedoras* were the cause of fraud and malpractice. In 1508, the council claimed that the city suffered because the *cojedoras*, 'who were kin of the *mulateros*', increased grain prices by buying grain from the merchants without there being any need for their services.⁸⁴ By 1524, according to the council of Bilbao, the situation was out of control. They prohibited the *cogeduría* altogether for the 'eight or nine

⁸¹ 'Otrosy, se obligaron de tener cada vna todos tienpos su tyenda abasteçida de candelas e aseYTE, e de dar de la suerte e en los preçios susodichos e de tener todas aseYTE e candela e non el vno syn el otro [...].' Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 98r-99r, 28 November 1509.

⁸² '[...] ninguno sea osado en la dicha villa nin en sus rebales durante el sobredicho anno e tienpo de dar por menudo candelas nin aseYTE por menudo nin a libras, saluo las sobredichas regateras de suso nonbradas, so pena de dosientos maravedis a cada vno por cada bes; eçeto sy non fuere obligandose de basteçer commo las sobredichas regateras.' Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 98r-99r, 28 November 1509.

⁸³ Castrillo Casado, *Las mujeres vascas durante la baja edad media*, 281.

⁸⁴ '[...] en el trigo pasa(roto) burleria en el comprar del que hera que las amas(roto) de la dicha villa que heran parientes de los mula(roto), por faser abançar en el preçio, avnque non tenia nesçesidad de comprar, por alçar en el preçio e por ayudarles, ponian en los preçios mui altos, porque las otras mugeres e moças al mesmo preçio lo conprasen, lo qual hera en grand dapno de la dicha villa [...].' Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 127r, 8 November 1508.

women *cogedoras* who receive money from the grain [...].⁸⁵ As I will discuss in a later chapter, the ordinance was the beginning of a long-standing conflict as women in Bilbao continued to take up this occupation. It is clear that the council was specifying women in its account of the damage and fraud the *cogedoras* caused. The women's gender was not used as an argument, though. Guild ordinances in Brabant sometimes used gendered arguments because female informal traders were competing with a guild or for another reason. However, gendered arguments are not found in most ordinances in Bilbao, making it a remarkable case study.

Limitations of women's economic opportunities are especially visible in Bilbao's grain trade. The council excluded most women from grain weighing and setting grain prices. Cristina Ayuso Sánchez has argued that the grain trade in the city was a masculine business. Although women participated in certain parts of the grain trade – they even predominated certain informal branches such as the *cogeduría* – control over the trade was mainly in masculine hands. An ordinance from 1509 describes grain weighing as a masculine task. The council argued that the position of weigher required skill. Therefore 'no menservants nor servant girls who do not know how to weigh, nor hostellers, nor tax collectors, nor other persons' could be involved in grain weighing.⁸⁶ Not only were women and young people excluded, but (male) tax collectors were explicitly prohibited from weighing grain as well because the interests of the two positions conflicted. In addition to the 'defence of the customer', the town council of Bilbao also wanted to safeguard the town's income from excise taxes. Nine years earlier, they had prohibited the *roderas*, who transported grain to the mills, from touching the weights, claiming that if the *roderas* touched the weights, they could commit

⁸⁵ ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, 3467,5, 27 June 1536.

⁸⁶ '[...] para este mandamos que tenga los que tienen tomados los pesos personas de sus casas que sepan pesar e saber lo que pesan, dar rason de lo que pesaren e an de pesar e non moços nin moças que non sepan pesar nin huéspedes nin cobladores nin otras personas saluo ellos, los mismos que tienen los dichos pesos e las personas de sus casas [...].’ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 27v-28r, 5 March 1509.

fraud.⁸⁷ It is possible that the council regarded the kind of person who could responsibly weigh grain with the same image they held of a trustworthy 'household head'. Just as in the Southern Low Countries, where journeymen, servants, apprentices, and women were all excluded from certain craft privileges, only male household heads in Bilbao could carry out the responsibility of weighing grain.⁸⁸ Women, together with other categories of urban residents, were excluded from these tasks, which were only fitted for men in the patriarchal urban society. Even though the organisation of work in Bilbao left leeway for women, certain tasks were preserved for men.⁸⁹

As I argued in the previous chapter, women's exclusion from guild membership in Brabant did not mean that all women were seen as incapable of engaging in the crafts. Craftsmen's family members were often exempted from regulation excluding other outsiders.⁹⁰ Similarly, in Bilbao, the prohibition against certain groups of women engaging in specified tasks in the grain trade did not apply to all women. In 1508, the council ordered 'that from this day on, no householders (f), servants (f.) nor servants (m.), nor *cojedoras* will be allowed to put a price on the grain, except for honourable married women'.⁹¹ This ordinance was one of the rare instances when the council of Bilbao legitimised different opportunities for women based on

⁸⁷ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 281r-282r, 20 March 1500.

⁸⁸ Bert De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic: Fabricating Community in the Southern Netherlands, 1300-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 53.

⁸⁹ Janire Castrillo Casado, "Participación de las mujeres en la economía urbana del País Vasco durante la Baja Edad Media," in *Las mujeres en la Edad Media*, ed. María Isabel del Val Valdivieso and Juan Francisco Jiménez Alcázar (Murcia-Lorca: Sociedad Española de Estudios Medievales, 2013), 216–18; García de Cortázar et al., *Vizcaya en la edad media*, 1:242.

⁹⁰ See: Laurence Fontaine, "Makeshift, Women and Capability in Preindustrial European Towns," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 60; van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women," 130.

⁹¹ '[...] que de oy dia en adelante ningunas nin algunas amas, moças nin moços nin cojedoras aparejadas non sean o(roto) de poner preçio ninguno en los trigos, saluo onb(roto) mugeres casadas [...]' Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 127r.

their marital status. It is unclear why only married women could set the grain price and, more importantly, which married women could do so, although the 1508 ordinance from Bilbao might have intended to allow only married women working alongside their husbands. In 1515 Yñigo de Olabarria was appointed as the town's grain weigher. Both Yñigo and his wife had to swear an oath for this position.⁹² Yñigo's wife probably actively participated in her husband's new position. She might have been one of the 'honourable married women' who could be involved in price setting. Similarly, the council allowed grain weighers' wives to practice their husbands' occupation. The council specified that only the person appointed grain weigher 'and the people from their household' could be involved in the task.⁹³

Although women were excluded from certain tasks, there is little evidence that their skill was questioned. Instead, trustworthiness and masculinity account for women's exclusion. Nevertheless, maintenance of these values sometimes conflicted with practices of the men appointed to these masculine positions by the council. In 1500 the town council fined the official grain weigher Juan Saes de Çurbaran because he had allowed his female servant to perform his job. The council claimed they had received complaints from the citizens of Bilbao that servants caused fraud and problems by doing so.⁹⁴ Apparently, the prohibition against letting servants work as grain weighers did not resonate with everyone. The grain weighers themselves let their servants participate. They might have seen their servants' irregular work as an easy way to increase their profits. However, the complaints of other citizens forced the council to promulgate ordinances excluding the women.

As the above examples have shown, most ordinances excluding women did so for economic reasons. However, there is one exception. On 15 June

⁹² Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 38v and 43v.

⁹³ '[...] saluo ellos, los mismos que tienen los dichos pesos e las personas de sus casas [...]'. Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 27v-28r, 5 March 1509.

⁹⁴ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 181r-182r.

1509, the town council stated that poor town residents and beggar monks (both men and women) could not enter the space around the public ovens where bread bakers, bread sellers, and other women were at work. According to the council, their presence caused disorder and damaged the integrity of the city. Both the beggars and the women who allowed them to enter would have to pay a fine of 200 *maravedís* if they ignored the new regulation. The council argued that monks and beggars caused disorder and damage by asking the women at the public ovens for handouts. Moreover, by giving in to the beggars, 'the women, and *amas* [householders, f.] and servant girls who go to the ovens to prepare dough hurt their husbands and employers and act without their permission [...]'.⁹⁵ According to the council, the women working at the ovens had to answer to their husbands or employers, reinforcing once more the pre-eminence of the man as the head of the household.⁹⁶ The ordinance did not address the town's female bread sellers in the same way, as they had invested their own assets and in the area the ovens with dough paid for by a male household head.

Most ordinances about work in Bilbao focus on actual practices of the town's economic actors. The sex of the worker is rarely an argument in town regulations and seems to have had little impact on the regulation's content. The town council's language use probably reflected the organisation of some of Bilbao's market sectors accurately. Since some market sectors in Bilbao were dominated by women, the council used feminine language to regulate those sectors, which shows that women's economic activities were an accepted part of the urban economy. Nevertheless, on few occasions, there are traces of the town councillors' patriarchal values, especially concerning the assignment of more weighty positions. The council looked at men while

⁹⁵ 'Este sobredicho dia mesmo hordenó e mando conçejo que por quanto son ynformados de la mucha deshorden que en los hornos anda cada dia con las demandas que a ellos acuden, asy de freyras commo de frayres e probes, asy de la masa commo de la haryna que dan en los dichos hornos las mugeres e amas e moças e criadas que a los dichos hornos ban a amasar, en dapno de sus maridos e amos e syn su liçençia dellos [...]' Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 50r.

⁹⁶ De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic*, 181–96.

excluding women and others. Moreover, many (more lucrative) sectors of the Bilbao economy were not as easily accessible for women. Most production, certain (food) trades, and wholesale were dominated by men in Bilbao, as it was elsewhere. However, most ordinances about women's work in those occupations that were accessible to women do not contain gendered arguments. Economic prosperity was, in the end, the most common deciding factor.

CHAPTER 4. WOMEN'S MARKET-ORIENTED WORK AND SPOUSAL COOPERATION: THE HOUSEHOLD ECONOMY IN BRABANT AND BISCAY

1. The household as an economic unit

The previous two chapters discussed the ways that the town councils of Mechelen, Antwerp, and Bilbao regulated work, specifically women's work. In Bilbao, extensive regulation of women's labour activities emerged from the presence of many women workers in certain trades and the council's attempts to avoid fraud and tax evasion. In Brabant, the masculine craft guilds were concerned with competition from outsiders, many of whom were women. In contrast, women's work in guild household workshops was often exempt from prohibitions against work by people who were not members of the guild. However, while the councils tried to lay out a structure, work in premodern towns was not only organised on the level of the urban authorities. The same urban residents who had to obey the councils' regulations for organising work were also bound to another institution: the household.¹ In this chapter, I will analyse women's market-oriented work in the context of the household and its economy in Antwerp, Mechelen, and Bilbao. In the Brabantine towns, town governments, craft guilds, and customary law all encouraged, or at least tolerated, women's work in the context of the household unit, as I have argued in previous chapters. In Bilbao, there is little evidence of this encouragement of the household in the sources. In addition, marital status did not influence the labour position of many saleswomen in the Biscayan commercial hub.

The concept of the 'household' used in this dissertation is based on the definition of Myriam Carlier, Tine De Moor, and Jan Luiten van Zanden, among others. They define a household as a group of people living under the same roof or in the same establishment. As Carlier has stated: 'This living

¹ Bert De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic: Fabricating Community in the Southern Netherlands, 1300-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 196–97.

together may or may not involve members of one family.² In fact, most households included more than one (nuclear) family, and its members did not have to be related by blood. Servants, journeymen, and apprentices might live with their employers and be part of the household, at least temporarily.³ Furthermore, newly formed families were common in the premodern urban societies because many people married twice, and some married even more often.⁴ Moreover, several families often lived together under the same roof, making the composition of the household even more complex. In premodern Europe, many households were multi-nuclear.⁵ In Bilbao, for example, just over half the hearths registered in the count of 1492 were comprised of a single citizen (with possibly other inhabitants, such as children, who were not citizens).⁶ All the remaining hearths contained

² Myriam Carlier, "The Household: An Introduction," in *The Household in Late Medieval Cities, Italy and Northwestern Europe Compared*, ed. Myriam Carlier and Tim Soens (Leuven and Apeldoorn: Garant, 2001), 3.

³ De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic*, 196; Daryl M. Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 24; Jane Whittle, "A Critique of Approaches to 'Domestic Work': Women, Work and the Pre-Industrial Economy," *Past & Present* 243, no. 1 (2019): 39.

⁴ Martha C. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 105-7. There is an example of the complications of such newly formed household might face in the conflict between Jan van der Zanden and the heirs of his late wife, Liesbeth van den Oever. The couple had agreed that the longest living spouse would have usufruct over the tools needed for the occupation of wool clothmaker, after which they would go to the heir of the owner, Jan's daughter. Once Liesbeth had passed away, her heirs tried to argue before the aldermen of Antwerp that they had a right to this inheritance as well. The aldermen upheld the couple's original agreement. The marriage of Jan and Liesbeth was clearly not their first marital union. Upon their marriage, the couple took into account the importance of property, for themselves as well as their heirs. See: L. Bisschops, "Het 2e oudt register, in 't perkament gebonden 1438-1459 (Vervolg)," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 30 (1893): 85-86.

⁵ Jord Hanus, *Affluence and Inequality in the Low Countries: The City of 's-Hertogenbosch in the Long Sixteenth Century, 1500-1650* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2014), 72; Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600*, 97.

⁶ This calculation is based on the published hearth count of 1492, with a total of 575 hearths and 1039 citizens. 599 of those 1039 citizens lived in a dwelling where there was one hearth for each citizen. Wives were not counted as citizens in the hearth count. 440 citizens lived in houses with multiple citizens per hearth. Javier Enríquez

multiple taxpaying citizens. Finally, households were institutions that changed frequently. Women's labour opportunities in a single household could shift as their life cycles progressed and household members came and went.⁷

In Brabant and Biscay, there is a second factor that must be considered in the assessment of women's work in the household. This is to compare the operation of households in the two regions as cooperative economic units. As Arnaldo Sousa-Melo modelled, I will evaluate women's market-oriented work for the household unit in relation to the occupations of other household members.⁸ Market-oriented work was only a part of women's work in premodern towns. For both men and women, housework and caregiving were inherent components of their daily tasks.⁹ Moreover, subsistence production – the 'work for direct household use' – was often the responsibility of women. In Brabant and Biscay, women undoubtedly worked as caretakers, housewives, and general household managers.¹⁰ This work meant that they were indispensable to the functioning of the household as a cooperative economic unit. However, women's work for this purpose is rarely mentioned in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sources of either region, which places it beyond the scope of this research. Married women's spousal cooperation went further than supporting tasks.¹¹ In the

Fernández et al., *Repartimientos y foguera-vecindario de Bilbao (1464-1492)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 71 (Donostia, 1996).

⁷ Alannah Tomkins and Steven King, "Conclusion," in *The Poor in England 1700-1850: An Economy of Makeshifts*, ed. Alannah Tomkins and Steven King (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 265.

⁸ Arnaldo Sousa Melo, "Women and Work in the Household Economy: The Social and Linguistic Evidence from Porto, c. 1340-1450," in *The Medieval Household in Christian Europe c. 850 - c. 1550. Managing Power, Wealth, and the Body*, ed. Cordelia Beattie, Anna Maslakovic, and Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2004), 249–50.

⁹ Whittle, "A Critique of Approaches to 'Domestic Work.'"

¹⁰ Whittle, 39; Heath Dillard, *Daughters of the Reconquest: Women in Castilian Town Society, 1100-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1984), 94.

¹¹ In her study of women's labour opportunities in printing houses in the early modern Low Countries, Heleen Wyffels has pointed out the diverse range of activities women performed in the household and its workshop. In addition to tasks related to printing, women were active in other trades as well as all their reproductive

premodern European urban middling and lower classes, both spouses in (nuclear) households engaged in market-oriented work inside and outside the household.¹² While this arrangement existed in both premodern Brabant and Biscay, it seems there were different forms of spousal cooperation in market-oriented work in each region.

Although this chapter focuses mainly on market-oriented spousal cooperation, it is important to note that women's labour opportunities were changed and determined by their civil status before and after their marriages and at all stages of their lives as well. The household was a shifting entity. Changes in civil status and the coming and going of members impacted its economic activities.¹³ The death of a spouse was an especially crucial moment for a woman's household. When her husband died, a widow became the (temporary) head of the household in many premodern European towns. This custom meant that widows held an exceptional status.

labour in the household. Heleen Wyffels, "Women and Work in Early Modern Printing Houses. Family Firms in Antwerp, Douai, and Leuven, 1500-1700" (Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Leuven, KU Leuven, 2021), 99-119.

¹² Anna C. Fridrich, "Women Working in Guild Crafts. Female Strategies in Early Modern Urban Economies," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 134-50; Martha C. Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Sofia Ling et al., "Marriage and Work: Intertwined Sources of Agency and Authority," in *Making a Living, Making a Difference. Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society*, ed. Maria Ågren (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 80-102; Peter Stabel, "A European Household Economy?," in *The Household in Late Medieval Cities, Italy and Northwestern Europe Compared*, ed. Myriam Carlier and Tim Soens (Leuven and Apeldoorn: Garant, 2001), 121-26; Danielle van den Heuvel, "Partners in Marriage and Business? Guilds and the Family Economy in Urban Food Markets in the Dutch Republic," *Continuity and Change* 23, no. 2 (2008): 217-36; Beatrice Zucca Micheletto, "Reconsidering the Southern Europe Model: Dowry, Women's Work and Marriage Patterns in Pre-Industrial Urban Italy (Turin, Second Half of the 18th Century)," *The History of the Family* 16, no. 4 (2011): 354-70.

¹³ Hardwick Julie, *The Practice of Patriarchy: Gender and the Politics of Household Authority in Early Modern France* (Pennsylvania: State University Press, 1998), 84-100.

As they took over their husbands' positions, widows had access to positions not generally open to women.¹⁴

Widows of guild masters took over their husbands' economic functions in the guild after he passed away. This way, widows could become guild mistresses until they remarried or an adult son took over.¹⁵ There is evidence of the temporary position of widows in the guilds in Brabantine regulations about guilds' poor boxes. The Mechelen glove makers decided that only guild masters, not their wives, had the right to financial aid from the guild's poor box (see Chapter 2). However, they also decided that 'a widow that is lying sick will receive the poor box money'.¹⁶ In a similar fashion, the Antwerp tanners and shoemakers required widows to pay the same amount as other guild masters to the guild's poor box.¹⁷

As Ellen Kittell and Kurt Queller have argued, the death of one spouse did not cause a complete dissolution of the household unit. 'The unit continued', although the surviving spouse had to change his or her position in the household.¹⁸ In Bilbao, this is visible in the many debt conflicts widows had with their husbands' creditors. In 1550, for example, Marina Sáenz de

¹⁴ Ariadne Schmidt, "Contested Authority. Working Women in Leading Positions in the Early Modern Dutch Urban Economy," in *Women and Work in Premodern Europe. Experiences, Relationships and Cultural Representation, c. 1100-1800*, ed. Merridee L. Bailey, Tania M. Colwell, and Julie Hotchin (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 231; Janire Castrillo Casado, "Las mujeres del común y la sociedad política en al País Vasco bajomedieval." In *Los grupos populares en la ciudad medieval europea*, ed. Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea, Beatriz Arízaga Bolumburu, and Jelle Haemers (Logroño, 2014), 516; Merry E. Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," in *Germany: A New Social and Economic History, Vol. 1: 1450-1630*, ed. Bob Scribner, vol. 1 (London: Arnold, 1995), 222.

¹⁵ Schmidt, "Contested Authority. Working Women in Leading Positions," 219; Merry E. Wiesner, "Guilds, Male Bonding and Women's Work in Early Modern Germany," *Gender & History* 1, no. 2 (1989): 126-27; Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*, 68.

¹⁶ 'Item, een weduwe die sieck leghet van natuerlijcker siekten die sal de busse hebben.' SAM, Handschoenmakers-, tesmakers-, riem(be)slagers-, witledermakers- en schedemakersambacht 554bis, fol. 6v-7r.

¹⁷ SAA, GA#4001, fol. 183v-185v, 28 July 1557.

¹⁸ Ellen E. Kittell and Kurt Queller, "Wives and Widows in Medieval Flanders," *Social History* 41, no. 4 (2016): 451.

Marquina, a widow, and Pedro de Bermeo appeared before the judges of the *Sala de Vizcaya* in the Real Chancellery of Valladolid. Marina's husband had owed Pedro a debt of 333 *ducados* for grain he had purchased on credit. During his lifetime, Marina's husband had not repaid Pedro. Two years after her husband's death, the judges ordered Marina to pay Pedro, as she had inherited both her husband's property and his debts.¹⁹ Examples of a widow dealing with conflict because of her responsibility to stand in for her husband are not only found in the Biscayan town. In 1539, the widow of Jan Wouters, a member of the Antwerp mercers guild, was ordered by the guild deans and jurors to pay off her husband's apprentice. Since neither she nor her son was willing to take over his training after her husband's death, the contract was terminated.²⁰ Widows in both regions assumed the position of household head from their husbands after they died. As the examples show, these widows took on responsibilities beyond carrying out their husbands' occupations. The administration of property and other tasks previously performed by the husband now become the concern of the widow.

The importance of the widow in the administration of the household economy is especially visible in Brabant. In 1566, the yearly accounts of the glove makers guild of Mechelen were not delivered by the dean but by his spouse. Daneel de Coninck had been dean at the start of the administrative year, but due to his untimely death, the guild had appointed another dean, Hendrick de Leeuw. At the end of the administrative year, when the guild collected the records of the corporations' income and expenses, Hendrick de Leeuw needed to coordinate with the deceased dean's widow. As the new administrator of the 'De Coninck household', the widow had access to the former dean's files. She was considered capable of assessing her husband's administration. Although the widow did not operate on the same level that

¹⁹ ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 2939, 11, 1550.

²⁰ 'Den 14en meey anno 1539 is gheappointeert bij deekens ende oudermans van der mersen hoedat de weduwe wijlen Jan Wouters, onsen ouderman was, dat sij Heynen, huerren leercnape, soude betaellen naer advenant den tijt dat hij henlieden ghedient hadde ende laten hem ghaen. Ende dat overmits dat deselve Heyne, haer cnape, met harren soene, Jacoppen, niet volleere en woude ende hij gheen ghebreck oft achterdeel van delseve Jacop Wouters en wiste.' SAA, GA#4212, fol. 224r, 14 May 1539.

her husband had, she was responsible for settling his outstanding business after his death.²¹

2. Spousal cooperation and the household economic unit in Antwerp and Mechelen

In Antwerp and Mechelen, guild ordinances reflect the organisation of guild work in domestic workshops. Ordinances were rarely addressed to all female urban residents. Instead, ordinances targeted certain groups of women, often designated by marital status. As I argued in Chapter 2, town councils recognised and even encouraged the organisation of work in household workshops. The cooperation between the spouses is visible in the normative sources – ordinances promulgated by the town councils. But these ordinances were often reactions to daily practice, aldermen's sentences, court cases, and craft guild settlements, which confirm the prevalence of this economic unit in the Brabantine towns. Married couples worked together in the same or similar market-oriented occupations. They also faced conflicts that arose out of these shared occupations together. A more multifaceted view appears from the analysis of these records of daily practice. First, although many married couples worked together, the participation of wives in guild work was not always accepted. When wives performed tasks that the guild did not consider part of spousal cooperation, the corporations moved to restrict guild members' spouses just as they did non-guild members. Finally, not all women in the two towns were able to work in a domestic workshop. Many women had to find their income elsewhere, outside of the protected household economic unit.

2.1 *Spousal cooperation and work division in Brabant*

There is little doubt about the importance of the household economy in the Brabantine towns.²² Wives and other women living with guild masters were

²¹ SAM, Handschoenmakers-, tesmakers-, riem(be)slagers-, witledermakers- en schedemakersambacht 557, fol. 50v.

²² Ellen Burm and Bert De Munck, "Het broodje gebakken? Huwelijksstrategieën en partnerkeuze van de bakkers(kinderen) te Brussel in de overgang van het Ancien Régime naar de negentiende eeuw," *Stadsgeschiedenis* 2, no. 5 (2010): 148–68; De

often exempt from certain prohibitions directed towards non-guild members. In the masculine corporations, while men were expected to assume the role of household head, also expected was the support they would receive from other household members. This support could take different forms.

In her study of the household economy in early modern Dutch food trades, Danielle van den Heuvel distinguished several forms of spousal cooperation.²³ First, two spouses could complement each other's work. Artisans would supply their wives with goods to sell or products to finish. In the Leiden meat trade, craftsmen's wives could sell by-products left over from their husbands' production. Butchers' wives in the Dutch town sold tripe and other meat by-products.²⁴ Similarly, in Antwerp, fishmongers' wives were allowed to sit 'outside of the fish market's gate' and sell fish, whereas others ('woman or man') could only do so if they had caught the fish themselves or had brought it from outside the town's territory.²⁵ Ordinances allowing craftsmen's wives to do certain tasks of her husband's craft often refer to this type of cooperation, exempting craft members' wives (and children) from prohibitions against other outsiders. One example discussed above is the 1474 ordinance of the Antwerp glove and purse makers, in which wives and other female members of the artisans'

Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic*, 179–228; Jan Van Gerven, "Vrouwen, arbeid en sociale positie. Een voorlopig onderzoek naar de economische rol en maatschappelijke positie van vrouwen in de Brabantse steden in de late middeleeuwen," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'histoire* 73, no. 4 (1995): 947–66; Nena Vandeweerd, "'Van den vleeschouweren oft pensvrouwen.' De economische mogelijkheden voor vrouwen in het Leuvense vleeshouwersambacht in de vijftiende en zestiende eeuw," *TSEG/ Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 15, no. 1 (2018): 5–30.

²³ van den Heuvel, "Partners in Marriage and Business?"

²⁴ van den Heuvel, 222–23.

²⁵ 'Dat van nu voerdane gheenrehande persone, wijf noch man, buyten der vischmerct porten sitten en zelen met vische te coepe noch daer visch vercoopen, uuytgenomen deghene die selve visch vangen oft van buyten der vrijheyt van der stad bringen, dat die haeren visch aldair zullen mogen vercoopen ende venten, gelijc van outs gewoonlic is, ende uutgenomen der vischcoepers wive, opdatter eenige sitten willen, dat zij dat zelen mogen doen ende visch vercoopen.' SAA, GA#4369, fol. 2r, 17 July 1422.

households were exempt from the prohibition against women working.²⁶ The work of household women relieved the craftsmen of tasks, thereby creating the opportunity to produce more. In this way, all members would contribute to the household's income.

Although several ordinances describe complementary spousal cooperation in the Brabantine guilds, it is harder to find evidence of it in sources of daily practice. Most artisans' wives worked without recognition or formalisation and left behind little evidence of their work. There are a few exceptions, such as the conflict between Liesbeth Maes and the old cloth sellers guild brought before the Antwerp town council in 1435. The guild members complained that Liesbeth 'should not work in the guild anymore since she had married a man from another guild.'²⁷ Jan Godens, Liesbeth's husband, was a skin greaser. There are no surviving written regulations from the Antwerp old cloth sellers dictating that women had to leave the guild after marriage. However, other guilds in neighbouring Brabantine towns prohibited women from remaining in a guild upon (re)marriage.²⁸ Possibly this was also the custom of the Antwerp old cloth sellers guild. Nevertheless, Liesbeth Maes did not agree. She argued that she had paid the old cloth sellers' entrance fee and should therefore be able to work under guild privileges. The aldermen of Antwerp agreed with her but wanted to ensure that her husband would not be too involved in his wife's occupation. Therefore, they decided that 'Jan, her husband, could not buy nor sell, but that he could only help her transporting and guarding her trade commodities and clothing, without buying and selling them himself'.²⁹ The guild and the aldermen were clearly aware there was a good chance that

²⁶ Pierre Génard, "Register van den dachvaerden," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 20 (1883): 400–401.

²⁷ '[...] dat zy haere ambacht niet meer hanteren en soude mids dat zy eenen man van eenen anderen ambachte genomen hadde [...].' L. Bisschops, "Oudt register, mette berderen, 1336-1439 (Vervolg)," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 29 (1892): 3–4.

²⁸ Van Gerven, "Vrouwen, arbeid en sociale positie," 952–56.

²⁹ '[...] Behoudelic dien, dat de voirs. Jan, hoer man, coepen noch vereoeppen en soude, maer dat hy haer soude moegen helpen, haer goet ende cleederen af ende aen dragen ende dat helpen verwaeren, sonder selve yet te coepene of te vercoepene.' Bisschops, "Oudt register, mette berderen, 1336-1439 (Vervolg)," 3–4.

Liesbeth's marriage would result in the two spouses' close cooperation. Jan Godens would not enter the guild but perform complementary tasks for Liesbeth's occupation while pursuing his own. Liesbeth might do the same for his occupation in return. As long as members' spouses did only certain tasks of the guild, this posed no problem to the town government, however.

Assistance by women to their husbands was accepted and encouraged by both local governments and guilds. In some regions, being married was even a requirement for guild mastership.³⁰ The patriarchal guilds did not allow the opposite as easily, as the conflict of the old cloth sellers and Liesbeth Maes shows. Although a wife could help her husband without paying a guild membership fee, a husband could not do the same for his wife, as it was not in accordance with the patriarchal hierarchy. On the other hand, Liesbeth and Jan themselves did not problematise their separate occupational affiliations and even defended their cooperation before the Antwerp aldermen.³¹ Possibly, as Anna C. Fridrich has argued, the couple 'saw no reason to disguise workshop or any other work of their wives because it was perceived as a matter of course and perfectly legitimate due to her role in the household economy.'³² The guilds, town governments, and citizens might thus struggle over the conflict between their economic and patriarchal values.

In a second type of spousal cooperation described by van den Heuvel, 'husband and wives appeared to have performed identical roles: they both worked as salespersons in a market booth'.³³ In guilds whose focus was trade rather than production, the traditional cooperation did indeed take a different form. In the Brabantine ordinances involving several guilds,

³⁰ Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," 222; Muriel González Athenas, "Legal Regulation in Eighteenth-Century Cologne. The Agency of Female Artisans," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 154.

³¹ Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 24.

³² Fridrich, "Women Working in Guild Crafts," 138–39.

³³ van den Heuvel, "Partners in Marriage and Business?," 225.

husband and wife were allowed to run one market stall together.³⁴ Evidence for this shared business can be found in the normative sources but is also confirmed in decisions made by urban and guild governments. This was, for example, the case with Willem de Bruyne and his wife Kateline Dierix, who sold fish grease in the *Cradewijck* (possibly the current 'Kraaiwijk') in the centre of Antwerp. The council declared that because 'the place where they conduct their occupation would be left with a heavy air and unusual smell', Willem and Kateline must move their shop to the *Slijkpoort*, the northernmost gate of Antwerp. The couple clearly ran the shop together. What is more, the council of Antwerp clarified that the sentence was valid for the couple and all their descendants.³⁵ They assumed that the couple's business would be continued by their offspring.

Although Willem and Kateline were not members of a craft guild, they still cooperated to make a living. The household unit was common in the Brabantine towns for citizens with and without affiliation to the guilds. Moreover, because of their involvement in household cooperation, both spouses could also be deeply engaged in conflicts arising from their market-oriented work, as were the mercer Joos Suermont and his wife in 1502. After the confiscation of a barrel of green ginger, Joos Suermont was summoned before the guild's deans and jurors. He refused to show up. His wife appeared before the guild authorities instead, pleading for pardon for her husband's offences and asking to get the barrel back.³⁶ Two weeks after the

³⁴ This was the case for the Antwerp retailers. In other guilds, such as that of the Leuven butchers, wives were allowed to take over their husband's stall if he was ill or out of town. Further examples of these regulations can be found for the fishmongers of Mechelen, the Antwerp bakers, and the Antwerp fishmongers. SAA, GA#4211, 18 April 1422; SAM, Visverkopers 14, 26 July 1454; SAL, 1527, 1593; SAA, PK#1394, 25 August 1481; SAA, GA#4363, 17 November 1452.

³⁵ L. Bisschops, "Het 2e oudt register, in 't perkament gebonden 1438-1459 (Vervolg)," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 29 (1892): 41-42.

³⁶ '[...] ende dieselve zijn huysvrouwe begeerde gracie van des deselve hair man Joos gebruyct oft verbuert mocht hebben. Soe hebben de dekenen ende gezwoirene den vroukene, Joosens huysvrouwe, hair tonneke weder gegeven, gebetert ende gevult met clauwen ende als van den misbrueken hebben de dekenen oochluyskinge gedaen totter tijt dat zij Joosen wederomme bevinden souden bruekelick oft levellich jegens dambacht oft den dekenen.' SAA, GA#4212, fol. 122r-122v, 1502.

conflict, the wife of Joos Suermont verbally assaulted one of the dean's jurors after he tried to regulate barrels sold by the couple.³⁷ In the final sentence, Joos Suermont was sent on a pilgrimage for both his offences and those of his wife.³⁸ Both spouses had been involved in the (faulty) business for which the guild persecuted them, just as both spouses had acted together in the court case defending themselves against prosecution.

The craft guilds allowed the cooperation between spouses but also tried to mitigate any advantage that a couple would have. The ordinances stating that spouses must share a market stall prevented one household unit from benefiting at the expense of other (single) craft members. Other ordinances, such as one from 1487 prohibiting family members of the Antwerp sockmakers from selling goods on the free market days, had the same motive.³⁹ On days that craft masters were not allowed to sell, other members of their households were not allowed to sell either. Yet, spousal cooperation still gave married craft members an advantage since 'two spouses could support themselves and those close to them in a way that sole providers could not.'⁴⁰ While the guilds and town governments tried to balance these advantages, they also wanted to safeguard the spouses' labour opportunities by providing regulations exempting spouses, for example. This may have been another instance of the fragile balance between patriarchal values and economic needs.

The married spouses were not the only members of a household. Servants, apprentices, children, and other family members were common members of the work force in a craftsman's household production unit.⁴¹ A 1403 ordinance from the purse makers of Leuven, which excluded women

³⁷ Joos Suermont's wife shouted at the juror: 'you traitor, are you here again to betray me like you once did at the market'. SAA, GA#4212, fol. 122v-123r, 1502.

³⁸ SAA, GA#4212, fol. 123v, 1 September 1502.

³⁹ SAA, GA#4017, fol. 268r-277v, 17 September 1487.

⁴⁰ Ling et al., "Marriage and Work," 80.

⁴¹ Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*, 24; Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy*, 9–26; Rosa Iziz and Ana Iziz, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria. 1. Prehistoria, romanización y reino de Navarra* (Tafalla: Txalaparta, 2016), 258; Carlier, "The Household," 7; González Athenas, "Legal Regulation in Eighteenth-Century Cologne," 165.

from practising the occupation, made exceptions for not only purse makers' wives but also other women living with guild masters.⁴² Different members of a household economic unit cooperating in the household workshop also appear in the Mechelen fishmongers' sentence books. Guild masters were prosecuted for letting their servants, daughters, apprentices, wives, mothers, and nieces sell fish. Still, as I will argue in the next section, prosecutions for household cooperation only happened in specific situations. There were also five sentences punishing women for this offense. For example, the widow Vennen – probably a fishmonger's widow – was sent on a pilgrimage for letting her servant sell fish in 1518.⁴³ Ten years earlier, the wife of Rombout Vennen (possibly the same woman) had been condemned for the same offense.⁴⁴ Both spouses could be held responsible for the informal participation of other household members.

Although several craft guilds allowed a great deal of initiative to craft members' wives and married women in general, not all guilds were as lenient towards wives' independent work in a guild occupation. By excluding married women, the guilds wanted to prevent men from performing guild work without paying a corporation's fees. As cooperation between the two spouses was expected, the guilds assumed that when a man paid those fees, his wife automatically became a member also. It was common for guilds to expel women from the guild if they (re)married a man from another guild. For example, in 1445, the town council of Leuven decided that a woman had to leave the tailors guild if she (re)married. Their fear was that her husband might take over her position. That same year, Katelijne Brunets left the guild because her husband, Hendrik Persoons, had joined it.⁴⁵ It was expected that wives would assist their husbands in their work. They did not have to pay a guild membership fee to do so. Husbands, in contrast, could not assist their wives without being members of the same guild.

⁴² SAL, 1523, fol. 207r-210v, 22 August 1403.

⁴³ SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 87v, 1518.

⁴⁴ SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 53v, 1508.

⁴⁵ SAL, 4648, fol. 444r-444v, 5 February 1445; SAL, 4648, fol. 459r, 5 February 1445.

The guilds' resistance to married women's membership was motivated not only by their resistance to husbands' informal guild work. Women's membership in general could be problematic in the masculine institutions and not always compatible with some obligations of guild membership. A significant example of this can be found in a conflict between Liesbeth Coolputs and the mercers of Mechelen. In 1489, the retailers argued that Liesbeth had to repay the entrance fee after her marriage to Roemond Roobosch. Moreover, the mercers' deans and jurors demanded that Roemond fulfil the guard duties of a guild member in his wife's name. The guild cited its privileges, which stated that a woman in the craft guild had to renew her membership when she married by paying the entrance fee again. Moreover, a widow enjoying the widow's right would also have to pay the fee again if she remarried and her husband wanted to practice the craft.⁴⁶ Although her husband argued that 'his wife, when she was still her own woman, had bought and received the craft', the aldermen of Mechelen decided that Liesbeth's husband would have to perform his wife's guard duties and pay the entrance fee once more.⁴⁷ Craft guilds were more than economic institutions. Their political and military functions were not compatible with female membership.⁴⁸ Liesbeth could never fully engage in

⁴⁶ '[...] dat trecht ende de oude onderhouden coistuyne van denselven haren ambachte alsulc ware ende van soo ouden tijden tselve hair ambacht dair questie af es cochte ende gecrege, so moesten nochtan hair man ende zij nairdat zij te huwelijcke getrocken ware, wilden zij de vrijheyt van den ambachte gebruyken, dat wederomme coopen ende gecregen ende insgelicx oic also verre die man alsdan oic sterve ende dwijf te live blivende noch eenen anderen man troude, zo moesten zij insgelicx oic also verre die man alsdan verijheyt van denselven ambachte gebruyken wilden tselve ambacht wederomme coopen.' SAM, Kramersambacht 90, 19 August 1489.

⁴⁷ '[...] dat deselve sijn wijf tanderen tijden hairssels wijf zijnde tselve hair ambacht gecocht ende gecregen hadde ende de pennignen dairaf betaelt [...]. [...] dat de voirscreven verweerdere in den name van der voirscreven zijnder huysvrouwen sculdich es de wake dair questie af es te houdene ende te doene gelijc den anderen van denselven ambacht. Ende dat hij dairtoe sculdich es den voirscreven aenleggeren op te leggene ende te betalene de helft van den penningen dair insgelicx questie af es.' SAM, Kramersambacht 90, 19 August 1489.

⁴⁸ Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*, 166; Shennan Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets: The Gendering of Market Space in Late Medieval Ghent," in *Urban*

guild life as she was not allowed to participate in the mercers' military functions.⁴⁹

Urban authorities rarely questioned women's skills, especially when they were born into a guild or married to a guild member. This is especially visible in trade guilds. As Jeremy Goldberg has argued, within the domestic production unit, gender was less important than seniority.⁵⁰ Married women were considered valid contributors to a household production unit. What is more, their occupational skills could even be considered superior to their husbands (at the early stage of their marriage). In 1454 the town council of Leuven, a town in southern Brabant, ruled that Andries de Meyer, the husband of the mercer Machteld van Wynge, could enter the town's mercers guild provided that his wife trained him. Machteld probably was not a newcomer to the mercers' trade since the surname "van Wynge" appeared in other documents of the mercers of Leuven. Her family's established position in the guild might have influenced the guild's decision.⁵¹

Although spousal cooperation was crucial to many households, not all married women in the Brabantine towns worked exclusively at the same occupation as their husbands did. As Chapter 2 details, the Brabantine mercers guilds accepted women regardless of their marital status. Under the status of *femme sole*, Brabantine women operated business separately from their husbands.⁵² However, even without this status, spousal cooperation was not the only way for women to participate in some trades. The women

Space in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 414.

⁴⁹ Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets," 414.

⁵⁰ Ariadne Schmidt, Isabelle Devos, and Bruno Blondé, "Introduction. Single and the City: Men and Women Alone in North-Western European Towns since the Late Middle Ages," in *Single Life and the City: 1200 - 1900*, ed. Julie De Groot, Isabelle Devos, and Ariadne Schmidt (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 7.

⁵¹ Machteld's uncle appears in the court case as well, testifying as fellow mercer. The 'Van Wynge' family might have been an established mercer family, which would also explain the use of Machteld's full name while being a married woman. SAL, 4648, fol. 397r-397v, 22 November 1454.

⁵² Laura Van Aert, "Tussen norm en praktijk. Een terreinverkenning over het juridische statuut van vrouwen in het zestiende-eeuwse Antwerpen," *TSEG/ Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 2, no. 3 (2005): 22-42.

herring sellers of Mechelen discussed in Chapter 2, for example, were not all fishmongers' spouses. In 1545, a small group of citizens of Mechelen had a dispute with the fishmongers' guild. The citizens were selling herring, which, according to the guild, was only permitted for guild members and the 'herring women' working in the town. Two of the witnesses testifying about herring sales claimed that they were 'aware that several women citizens – not members of the foresaid fishmongers guild, among them Johanne Vermoesen, the wife of a barrel maker, and Mrs Reynken, the wife of a shoemaker – have sold herring, dried and wet, per piece.'⁵³ Johanne Vermoesen and Mrs Reynken were married to members of other craft guilds. Even though they might also have worked in their husband's workshops, their herring sales would provide an extra income for their families. In a society of scarcity, it was not uncommon for urban residents to have more than one occupation.⁵⁴

2.2 *Guilds and spousal cooperation: a double relationship*

The household as a unit of work organisation was commonplace in the premodern Brabantine towns. Nevertheless, the cooperation between spouses was not always welcomed, especially by the craft guilds. In the sentence book of the Mechelen fishmongers, almost half of the judgments involving women were about the work of female members of fishmongers' households. Craft members were sent on a pilgrimage on a regular basis because their wives had sold fish. The precise circumstances that merited punishment are not completely clear. Fishmongers' wives in Mechelen were usually exempt from regulations excluding non-craft members. In 1454, they received permission to sell herring, and in 1508 they were exempted from a

⁵³ 'Verclaerende voorts hem oick wel kennelijck te zijne dat diverssche pointers vrouwen nyet wesende int ambacht van den visschers voorscreven als te weten Johanne Vermoesen een cuypers huysvrouwe, vrouw reynken, een schoenmakers huysvrouwe, vercocht hebben harinck drooghen ende natten metten stucke.' SAM, Visverkopers 670, 1545-1549.

⁵⁴ Shennan Hutton, *Women and Economic Activities in Late Medieval Ghent* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 113; Jeremy P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c.1300-1520* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 335.

prohibition on selling *stokvis* and dried fish.⁵⁵ Research on other towns of the Low Countries has pointed out the crucial position of fishmongers' wives in premodern fish markets.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the scope of their allowed activities was not limitless. In 1493, the wives of the fishmongers Claes Quaeyvoet, Rutten Ruts, and Anthonis Exele were all sent on a pilgrimage to Mons for selling fish at their husbands' market stalls.⁵⁷ They were not the only ones. Similar sentences were given often in the years that followed.

In 1497, the wives of Claes Quayvoet and Anthonis van Exele were again sent to Mons because they 'had sold *snijlinc* at the market and stands together with her husband next to his stall most of the time.'⁵⁸ They were accompanied by the wife of the fishmonger Wouter Ruts. In 1479, and again in 1512, Wouter was sent to Mons for letting his wife sell fish. In spite of these sentences, Wouter Ruts' wife was an active participant in the fishmongers guild. Between 1493 and 1518, she and her husband were frequently punished by the guild's jurors and aldermen. In 1508, she was sentenced to a pilgrimage to Mons and fined to pay one pound's worth of candles. The fishmonger Anthonis Venne had demanded the money which she owed him for herring she had sold. She had answered: 'I do not have to give you any money, because I say that you are a dishonest man'.⁵⁹ Clearly,

⁵⁵ SAM, Visverkopers 14, 26 July 1454; SAM, Visverkopers 23, 16 October 1508.

⁵⁶ Kristien Harmsen and Helene Hubers, "'En zij verkocht de vis ...'. Visverkoopsters in Utrecht en Antwerpen van de veertiende tot en met de zeventiende eeuw," *Dinamiek* 8, no. 2 (1991): 31–33; van den Heuvel, "Partners in Marriage and Business?," 225–27; Danielle van den Heuvel, "The Multiple Identities of Early Modern Dutch Fishwives," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37, no. 3 (2012): 590–91; Marie-Anne Verstreppe, "Het sociaal-economisch beleid van de stad Antwerpen op basis van de stadsgeboden (1439-1489)." (Unpublished Master Thesis, Gent, Universiteit Gent, 1982), 78.

⁵⁷ 'Claes Quaeyvoet wijf eenen wech te Berghen omdat sij aen huers mans banck visch vercochte. Betaelt 4 stuivers. Rutten Ruts wijf oick eenen wech te Berghen om tselve van Claes wijf. Betaelt 4 stuivers. Antheunis Exele wijf oick eenen wech te Berghen omdat sij aen huers mans banck ghestaen en visch vercocht. Betaelt 4 stuivers.' SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 4v-5r, 1493.

⁵⁸ Item, Claes Quayvoets wijf eenen wech te Berghen Henegouwe omdat sij de snijlinck loeft ende vercoopt op de merct ende bij hueren man steet meest den tijt neven de banck. SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 20v, 1497.

⁵⁹ SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 56r, 1508.

Wouter Ruts' wife, in an earlier sentence identified as 'Ghertruyt', was no stranger to the fish trade in Mechelen.⁶⁰ She was involved in a social network of fishmongers at least enough to receive credit from another fishmonger.⁶¹ The wife of Wouter Ruts might have been one of the 'haringvrouwen', which were allowed to sell herring without belonging to the guild. Nevertheless, she and her husband were prosecuted several times because of her trade activities. The sentence books do not clarify the circumstances that made the work of Wouter Ruts' wife problematic for the guild. Based on the historical records of the Mechelen fishmongers, I see two possible reasons for these restrictions on craftsmen's wives' work in the household economic unit.

Although fishmongers and their wives were often penalised by guild authorities for working together, there is no evidence that the town government prohibited fishmongers' wives from selling alongside their husbands. However, it is apparent that in some circumstances, the usual lenience towards guild members' spouses did not apply. The type of spousal cooperation practised by the Mechelen fishmongers suggests two possible reasons. First, while in the Dutch town of Leiden, spousal cooperation in the fish trade meant husband and wife doing identical tasks. Either this was not usually practised in sixteenth-century Mechelen, or the fishmongers guild did not want this type to be practised.⁶² Together with the butchers, the fishmongers guilds in the Southern Low Countries were among the most exclusive guilds which restricted membership to the sons of fishmongers (or,

⁶⁰ One cannot be sure, of course, that the Ghertruyt who was married to Wouter Ruts at the same time as the 1506 sentence is the same person as the wife of Wouter Ruts in the other judgment. As Martha Howell has pointed out, remarriage was frequent, even more for men than for women. Possibly, Wouter Ruts could have had several wives who would have all worked with him in the fish trade. There is even a possibility that the sentences do not refer to the same Wouter Ruts. However, other duplicate names in the sentence book of the fishmongers are distinguished by the use of 'the old', 'the young', etc.. The fact that Wouter Ruts is never identified as such might mean the sentences were all for the same person. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600*, 105; SAM, Visverkopers 321; SAM, Visverkopers 322.

⁶¹ Sheilagh Ogilvie, "How Does Social Capital Affect Women? Guilds and Communities in Early Modern Germany," *American Historical Review* 109, no. 2 (2004): 325-59.

⁶² van den Heuvel, "Partners in Marriage and Business?," 225.

in Mechelen, for the sons of fishmongers' daughters).⁶³ In 1518, the town council of Leuven ordered that in the meat hall, craft members' wives could only manage the market booth when their husbands were out of town or ill.⁶⁴ I argue that the Mechelen fishmongers guild endorsed a similar type of spousal cooperation. Throughout the sixteenth century, as the fish trade in Mechelen transformed, the used forms of spousal cooperation changed. As a reaction, married couples encountered more resistance from the guild authorities.

The fishmongers of Mechelen operated on different scales. Some of them merely sold fish brought to the town's fish auctions so that it could be resold by other guild members.⁶⁵ Others were involved in fishing and might have left their wives behind to run their stalls for long periods of time. Wouter Ruts, for example, was probably this second type of fishmonger. He was punished twice for fraudulent practices involving fish sold from his own boat.⁶⁶ It is not surprising that his wife was an active participant in the town's fish trade and managed to buy fish on credit. The leaders of the fishmongers guild in Mechelen might have guided their members to similar partnerships in which husband and wife complemented each other's work.⁶⁷

⁶³ SAM, Visverkopers 14, 26 July 1454; SAM, Visverkopers 23, 16 October 1508; De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic*, 194; Maarten Prak, "Corporatism and Social Models in the Low Countries," *TSEG/ The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 11, no. 2 (2014): 286.

⁶⁴ 'Item dat gheen vrouwe person vercoopen noch coop maecken oft iemenden anders van eens anders banck roepen noch in de banck staen en zullen moegen [...]. Maer in absentie van huere mans als die buyten ter merct zijn zelen in moegen stellen eenen vryen geselle int ambach wesende om huer vleesch te vercoopen ende alsdan sullen de vrouwe persoonen moegen voor de banck staen ende toesichte nemen [...].'
SAL, 4748, 20 October 1566.

⁶⁵ Members of the fishmongers' guild had a monopoly on the trade in salt-water fish. Joannes Schoeffer, *Historische aanteekeningen rakende de kerken, de kloosters, de ambachten en andere stichten der stad Mechelen* (Brussel: Algemeen Rijksarchief, 1996).

⁶⁶ SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 54r, 1508; SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 22r, 1497.

⁶⁷ This type of partnership in the fish trade can also existed in other premodern European towns. In early modern 's-Hertogenbosch, for example, there is evidence of complementary partnership. In early modern Antwerp, wives of river fish sellers were also accustomed to taking over the stalls when their husbands were out fishing. van den Heuvel, "Partners in Marriage and Business?," 226–27; Harmsen and

The fishmongers guild did not prohibit spousal cooperation. Wives were exempt from prohibitions and were clearly active in certain sectors of the fish trade, such as herring sales. Nevertheless, the guild tried to obstruct husbands and wives from teaming up in the fish market doing identical tasks. The scale of the fish trade of Mechelen might have changed, changing with it the activities of the participants in the trade. Whereas production (in this case fishing) and sales had before been conducted by households, the increasing importance of auctions and external supply transformed the traditional gendered division of work. Wives could no longer sell commodities supplied only by their husbands. Van den Heuvel has described a similar process of change in the early modern Dutch food trade.⁶⁸ This had a great impact on the wives of the Brabantine guild members, whose work had traditionally been 'encapsulated in the patriarchal household that had become the dominant economic unit of production'.⁶⁹ If supplies and commodities came from outside the household economic unit, wives' involvement in trade might no longer have been obvious, making them little more than outsiders involved only informally in the guild.⁷⁰

The guilds were not lenient when it came to competition from outsiders. If the fish trade in Mechelen changed and became more commercialised, fishmongers' wives – whose work had fit within the older framework of spousal cooperation – were now taking on the same tasks as their husbands. In 1541, for example, the wife of the fishmonger Jerome van den Stocke was sent on a pilgrimage to Mons because 'she sold [fish] and was not in the craft guild'.⁷¹ It seems that the guild was actually trying to limit spousal

Hubers, "“En zij verkocht de vis ...,”” 31. See also: Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, "Fishmongers and Shipowners: Women in Maritime Communities of Early Modern Portugal," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 1 (2000): 7–23.

⁶⁸ van den Heuvel, "Partners in Marriage and Business?," 226.

⁶⁹ Schmidt, Devos, and Blondé, "Introduction. Single and the City," 6.

⁷⁰ Clare Crowston, "Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe: An Overview of Recent Research," *International Review of Social History* 53, no. 16 (2008): 23; Martha C. Howell, "The Problem of Women's Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe," in *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, ed. Amanda Pipkin and Sarah Joan Moran (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 30–31.

⁷¹ 'Item Jerome van den Stoc wijf omdat sij vercocht en niet int ambacht en es [...].' SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 155v, 1541.

cooperation when the two spouses worked too closely, thereby competing unfairly with unmarried and younger members. As argued above, there was a tension between lenience towards spousal cooperation and the guild's exclusivity. The jurors of the Mechelen fishmongers guild probably also cooperated with their spouses, a cooperation that reinforced the guild's ambivalent decision-making.

Although fishmongers' wives were acceptable performing certain activities, in other situations, they might have been seen as informal competitors. While the circumstances that produced each decision might have been rather arbitrary, collectively, they define the movement towards an increasingly masculine corporation. It appears that the discontent of the guild was gradually absorbed into official policy over the course of the sixteenth century. At the end of the fifteenth century, the only penalties were for fishmongers whose wives were too involved in their trade. Fifty years later, the new practice was not yet written down in guild regulations but was recognised by guild members. In 1555, Aert van Quayribbe was punished for breaking his oath in which he had sworn that 'my wife will not be selling at the market stall along with me'.⁷² Throughout the first half of the sixteenth century, it seems that guild members had recognised the guild's limitation on spousal cooperation. At the century's end, an ordinance prohibited fishmongers' wives from selling fish at the fish market.⁷³ The institutionalisation of limits on spouses suggests that by the end of the century, most fishmongers were no longer in charge of their supply. Consequentially, their wives were downgraded to little more than informal competitors in the resale of salt-water fish.

Throughout the sixteenth century, the fishmongers guild of Mechelen limited the possibilities of women working within the framework of the household economy. However, the sixteenth-century evidence also reveals a disingenuous attitude towards the participation of wives in the guild. Whereas spousal cooperation at the same stall at the fish market was discouraged and penalised in some cases, in others, fishmongers' wives still

⁷² '[...] zoude mijn wijf niet alzoewel in de banck vercoepen als ick [...].' SAM, Visverkopers 322, fol. 13r, 1555.

⁷³ SAM, Visverkopers 30, fol. 1r, 16 juni 1584.

had opportunities. Women like the wife of Wouter Ruts seem to have been active participants in the fish trade when their husbands were out of town or absent from the market. Craftsmen's wives were still allowed to sell certain fish types and operate as *haringvrouwen* on the margins of the guild.⁷⁴ The guild did not terminate the role of fishmongers' spouses in their quest for exclusivity. Nevertheless, the sentence books and subsequent ordinances show that even established household cooperation could be contested by the corporations.

Not all judgments on fishmongers' wives' market activities in the sentence book of the Mechelen fishmongers arose from structural problems with women's work. Guild regulations indicate a second reason for these judgments. In 1448, the Mechelen fishmongers specified that a fishmongers' wife could not take over the stall if her husband was being punished and temporarily banned from the guild.⁷⁵ The guild usually did not allow guild members to work until they had completed their punishments (usually by going on a pilgrimage or paying a fine). In 1497, Marten Papegaey was banned from practising his trade for committing an offense against another craftsman and his wife until Marten paid his fine and begged for forgiveness in public.⁷⁶ Other expulsions were more severe, such as that of Romment Merten, who in 1537 was prohibited from practising the trade for two years for selling rotten herring.⁷⁷ Additional sentences were given to craftsmen for selling fish while they were banned from the trade. Women occasionally received this type of sentence. Simon van den Stene and his wife were both prohibited from practising the fishmongers' trade after Simon was sent on a pilgrimage to Valenciennes in 1524.⁷⁸

Some of the condemnations of fishmongers for letting their wives sell fish might be the result of earlier punishments and temporary bans. Between 1493 and 1517, for example, either Wouter Ruts or his wife were condemned

⁷⁴ As argued, the wife of Wouter Ruts might have been this type of herring seller. The other women sentenced for selling herring or being involved in this part of the fish trade also commonly shared last names with male members of the fishmongers guild.

⁷⁵ SAM, Visverkopers 11, 27 January 1448.

⁷⁶ SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 21r, 1497.

⁷⁷ SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 139v, 1537.

⁷⁸ SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 103r, 1524.

to sixteen pilgrimages, four of them because his wife sold fish at Wouter's market stall. It is possible that some of these verdicts were related to earlier judgments. However, some of the verdicts for the wife's activity do not coincide with any earlier judgment. Moreover, the formulaic language of these verdicts differs from the language used to condemn craftsmen because they continued in the trade after an expulsion. Jan van Exele was ordered to go on pilgrimage to Mons because 'he practised his craft while this was prohibited', for example. In contrast, all the condemnations Wouter Ruts received for letting his wife sell use the formula 'she sold next to her husband at the market stall'.⁷⁹ Another verdict condemned Wouter's wife because 'she did not leave her craft'.⁸⁰ However, this verdict was written on the same folio as the judgment ordering her to undertake a pilgrimage to Mons because she had scolded Anthonis Venne. This suggests that Wouter Ruts' wife was not prohibited from her husband's trade because of his offences, but because of her own.

Willem de Bruyne and his wife Kateline Dierix, who sold fish grease in the Cradewijck in Antwerp, worked together in a household business, as did so many other city residents. However, married couples in the Brabantine towns often experienced a complex reality. Even within a single marriage, I argue that women had to deal with limitations and changing circumstances. Guild wives' labour activities could be contested if they strayed from the normal expectations for the member of a household workshop. In that case, they would be treated like any other guild outsider engaging in informal trade. Nevertheless, the household was a common unit for the organisation of work in the Brabantine towns. Guild and town councils recognised that wives of craftsmen worked as valuable partners and enterprising saleswomen at the same time.

⁷⁹ SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 20v, 1497.

⁸⁰ 'Wouter Ruts wijf eenen wech te Camerake van ongehoorsamheyden om dat sij haer ambacht niet en heeft gelaten ende onser liever vrouwen twee pont was.' SAM, Visverkoepers 321, fol. 56r, 1508.

3. Women's marital status and the absence of spousal cooperation in Bilbao's sources

In Bilbao, a married woman would also benefit from working to increase the household's communal property. When the marriage ended, she received half of the acquired movable goods from the conjugal property as well as usufruct on all immovable goods (see Chapter 1).⁸¹ Nevertheless, the historical records of Bilbao reveal a different approach to the 'household economy' from that in Brabant. In certain occupations, most sources provide evidence of married women working in occupations other than those of their husbands. What is more, there are only a few examples of a husband and wife working in the same trade. Although the household in Bilbao was still built on the spouses' shared property and income, there is little evidence of direct cooperation in the market-oriented work of household members, as we have seen in Brabant. Bilbao ordinances concerning market-oriented work do not make a great distinction between women of different marital statuses, and other types of sources from the Biscayan commercial hub that reveal the commercial activity of women indicate no concern for their marital status. I argue that in certain labour sectors, the different organisation of work and the maritime location of Bilbao resulted in less direct cooperation between husband and wife.

3.1 *How together was together? Women's businesses and marital status in Bilbao*

In the previous chapter, we saw that Yñigo de Olabarria and his wife both had to swear an oath upon Yñigo's appointment as official grain weigher of Bilbao in 1515.⁸² For certain positions, spouses clearly cooperated by doing either identical or complementary work in the same market sector. A conflict between a widow and another citizen of Bilbao also shows that married

⁸¹ Heath Dillard has also found this for other Castilian regions in the High Middle Ages. He has stated that 'it is plain that wives, like husbands, could look forward to benefits from a well-managed partnership to which both contributed resources and talents which were not infrequently complementary rather than equal.' Dillard, *Daughters of the Reconquest*, 70.

⁸² Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 56 (Donostia, 1995), fol. 38v and 43v.

couples did go into business together. In 1547, the widow Mari Sáenz de Libano complained that her tenant and co-resident Pedro de Loperi had opened up a shop (consisting of a table and chair, as was common in Bilbao) in the shared portal of their house.⁸³ She argued that since the shop had not been part of the rental agreement, Pedro and his wife should not be allowed to keep it. The judges of the Real Chancilleria in Valladolid decided that: '[...] the foresaid Pedro de Loperi and his wife and other persons whatsoever will take away the foresaid table and booth and that they will not put it up again, nor have in the foresaid seat the foresaid linen, nor other goods for sale [...].'⁸⁴ The conflicting parties in the source lived together but did not own a common business. In contrast, it is clear that Pedro and his wife established the shop together, providing an income for their households.

Pedro de Loperi and his wife were not the only couple to set up a store at their house. There are several rental contracts featuring married couples renting houses with shops. Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether one spouse would assume a larger role in running the business or if they planned to operate the shop together. The couple might have merely rented it together. For example, in 1554 Juan de Larrea and his wife María Ibáñez de Jauregui rented a house with a shop in the calle Artecalle in Bilbao. From later contracts, we know that María was a linen seller who engaged in transactions independently of her husband. The couple might have rented the house with a shop together, but María would be the one operating the store.⁸⁵ Another example of this dynamic comes from a conflict settlement between the council and a married couple; both presented as innkeepers. Andrés de Vilela and his wife María López de Novia ran a hostel for merchants. In 1541, they came into conflict with the town council of Bilbao because the couple organised informal trade for their guests and served as their sales intermediaries, which were prohibited activities. They were both

⁸³ As stated, it was common in Bilbao for houses to have multiple hearths, as did the house where Mari Sáenz de Libano and Pedro de Loperi and his wife lived.

⁸⁴ '[...] al dicho pedro de loperi e su muger otras qualesquier personas a que quitasen la dicha mesilla e banco e no las tornasen a poner no los pusiesen ni tuviesen en ellos ni en el dicho asiento commo los dichos lienços ni otras mercadurias [...].'⁸⁵ ARChV, Registro de ejecutorias, Caja 645, 42, 1547.

⁸⁵ AFB, Judicial, 2653/058, 12 November 1554.

called before the council and penalised, after which they appealed the case to the Real Chancilleria in Valladolid. Details clarify that María is the one held primarily responsible for the irregular economic activities in the hostel by the council. When the couple's lawyer ('procurador') advocated their case, he stated that the council had penalised María for an earlier conflict with 'the women innkeepers, [...] against whom the foresaid process had been [...].'⁸⁶ The lawyer left her husband out of his explanation for the couple's appeal. Even if they managed the hostel together, each spouse engaged in different activities. The informal activities that the couple was punished for were apparently mostly in the hands of María.

Occasionally, the archival documents of Bilbao refer to spousal cooperation. As the examples above show, wives could run businesses supported by their husbands. Although there are also examples of spousal cooperation involving the higher classes of Bilbao's society, there is little evidence about the form of the cooperation and the division of tasks. In the lower classes, there are more sources that feature women working outside a household economic unit than those suggesting cooperation between spouses.

3.2 *Married women and independent market-oriented work*

In 1510, nineteen women fishmongers from Bilbao appeared before the town council with a petition, asking the council to change an ordinance it had promulgated two weeks earlier.⁸⁷ The nineteen women were 'all the fishmongers and sardine sellers that at the moment have their businesses in the square of the foresaid town'.⁸⁸ The women were not the only fishmongers

⁸⁶ '[...] contra las mesoneras lo que toca a la dicha Mari Lopez mi parte syn incorporar ni poner en ello cosa alguna tocante a las otras personas contra quieren el dicho proceso se hizo [...].' ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 4368, 4, 1541.

⁸⁷ The nineteen women were: Catalina d'Otannes, Catalina de Bedia, Catalina Nafarra, donna Elvira de Gaxmuri, Joana de Gaxmuri, Joana de Larrea, Mayora de Iturribalçaga, Mari Fernandis de Salzedo, Mari Martines de Mendieta, Mari Peres de Çurvaran, Mari Saes de Maruri, Mari Saes de Susunaga, Mari Saes de Vasoçabala, Mari Saes de Aguero, Mari Peres de Vermeo, Sancha de Anunçibay, Teresa de Galdames, Teresa de Musquis, and Toda de Avando.

⁸⁸ '[...] a todas las pescaderas e sardineras que al presente residen en la Plaça de la dicha villa [...].' Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao*

in Bilbao. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the fish trade took place at the square on the Calle de Barrencalle and the Portal de Çamudio.⁸⁹ The next chapter will elaborate on the competition between the two groups of fishmongers. Despite the presence of competitors, the central location of the fish market at the square might have meant that these nineteen were the most prominent fishmongers in the city. None of the women appealing for a change in the ordinance were identified by their marital status. They appeared before the council as 'sardineras' and 'pescaderas', giving their occupational titles as their most important identification. The same pattern appears for the retail women selling grease and candle wax in Bilbao. In two 1509 ordinances regulating the work of these women, the council addressed them by their names.⁹⁰ Of the fifteen women, one was identified as married and one (probably) as a never-married woman. Women worked in these market sectors regardless of their marital status in the 'female' occupations of Bilbao.

Previous studies on women in the Biscay region and the Basque country in general have often claimed that the women active in the towns' female occupations were usually never-married women and widows, and in this way, made a scant living for themselves.⁹¹ This claim is not valid for all

(1477-1520), Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 70 (Donostia, 1995), fol. 276r-279r.

⁸⁹ Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 85v, 13 February 1497.

⁹⁰ Doña Sancha de Artaça, Marina de Ybarra, doña Maria Saes de Quexana, Maria Peres de Asteyça, Marina de Ayala, Marina d'Errola, Teresa de Arryquibar, doña Catelina de Dobaran, doña Maria Peres de Tellaeche, doña Maria Peres de Angostura, Antona de Novia, Maria Saes, doña Maria Peres de Marquina, Maria Peres de Yruixta, and Mançia de Ugarrío. Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, 21 February 1509, fol. 21r-21v; Enríquez Fernández et al., 28 November 1509, fol. 98r-99r.

⁹¹ Ana María Rivera Medina, "Superando fronteras. Mujer y cultura laboral en los puertos del norte peninsular, Siglos XIV-XVI." In *Fronteras de agua. Las ciudades portuarias y su universo cultural (Siglos XIV-XXI)*, ed. Manuel García Hurtado and Ofelia Rey Castelao (Santiago de Compostela: Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, 2016), 22; Iziz and Iziz, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria*, 258; Janire Castrillo Casado, "Participación de las mujeres en la economía urbana del País Vasco durante la Baja Edad Media," in *Las mujeres en la edad media*, ed. María Isabel del Val

occupations according to the records of the Bilbao town council's frequent collisions with female traders. The documents drawn up during these conflicts reveal women of all marital statuses involved in many of these occupations. This variety is especially visible in the court case beginning in 1525 brought by the town council against the *cojedoras*, intermediaries in the town's grain trade. Their responsibilities were guarding the grain brought into the city on mules by *mulateros* and finalising grain sales to customers. *Cojedoras* also collected money from the *mulateros* to pay town taxes and handed that money over to the official in charge of collecting it.⁹² In the ten years of dispute between the *cojedoras* and the town council, thirteen women appeared in the court to testify about their activities. Six of them were married, three of them widowed, and four of them not identified by marital status.

One of the *cojedoras* was Toda de Larrea, whose activities in the trade were first recorded in 1509, when the council of Bilbao gave permission to four women to collect the grain tax from merchants bringing grain into the town.⁹³ Toda de Larrea, then addressed without a title or marital status, was among the four. In 1525, when the *cojedoras* appealed a case against the Bilbao council before the higher courts in Valladolid for prohibiting them from continuing their occupation, she was identified as Lady Toda de Larrea, wife of Martin de Çamuçurga. Her marriage notwithstanding, she had continued her occupation. On 4 May 1531, Toda had to testify to her ongoing activities as *cojedora*, even though the prohibition still stood. She stated that after the first verdict, 'she and her husband rented the weights of the town', a responsibility that she had already been fulfilling since 1509. However, war had caused the couple to fall into debt. They were forced to sell their house, and Toda sought relief from the income she could gain as a

Valdivieso and Juan Francisco Jiménez Alcázar (Murcia-Lorca: Sociedad Española de Estudios Medievales, 2013), 214.

⁹² Janire Castrillo Casado, *Las mujeres vascas durante la baja edad media: vida familiar, capacidades jurídicas, roles sociales y trabajo* (Madrid, España: Sílex, 2020), 281; ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5, 27 June 1536.

⁹³ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 18r, 9 February 1509.

cojedora.⁹⁴ Toda and her husband had worked together when possible, but poverty had forced her to abandon direct spousal cooperation. The story of Toda de Larrea was not one of success. By the time of her testimony in 1531, Toda had been a widow for a little less than a year and claimed to possess less than 200 *maravedís*.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, she had worked as a *cojedora* through all phases of her adult life. Moreover, during her marriage to Martín de Çamuçurga, she had worked together with him as well as going back to working separately as a *cojedora* in response to the couple's need for income.

Toda de Larrea was not the only woman in Bilbao who worked independently of her husband and his business. Mayora de Iturribalçaga, one of the fishmongers involved in the 1510 petition, also continued in that trade after her marriage to one Fernando de Aguëro.⁹⁶ Just as Darlene Abreu-Ferreira found in her study of women's work in northern Portuguese coastal towns, the work of Bilbao's female street vendors did not change when their marital status shifted.⁹⁷ This might be initially surprising, as scholars have recognised marriage as a transition point for women's labour opportunities.⁹⁸ However, the saleswomen and peddlers in Bilbao might have had no other choice. As discussed in Chapter 1, retailers and women with occupational titles appear at the bottom of Bilbao's 1470 taxation list. The informal work of *cojedoras* is unlikely to have had a higher status than that of retailers. Most of the women involved in the 1525 court case between the town council of Bilbao and the *cojedoras*, such as Toda de Larrea, could probably claim that they practised the occupation out of economic need. The

⁹⁴ [...] que ella e su marido después tomaron en renta los pezos della villa e con las guerras pasadas ovieron grand perdida e asy el concejo los vendio por la renta la caseria qua tenían e una huerta esta no dexar les ninguna cosa de que se pudiese mantener e asy se gue al regimiento a pedir les licencia pues beyan como ella no tenia de que mantenerse [...]. ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5, 27 June 1536.

⁹⁵ 'Segund, que he seido e soy viuda que en todo mi caudal no ay bienes que balgan dozientos maravedís [...]. ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5, 27 June 1536.

⁹⁶ AFB, Municipal, 0304/001/011, 1532.

⁹⁷ Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, "Neighbors and Traders in a Seventeenth-Century Port Town," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37, no. 3 (2012): 581–87.

⁹⁸ González Athenas, "Legal Regulation in Eighteenth-Century Cologne," 154; Anna Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights in Early Modern Urban Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 38.

type of occupations in which we encounter married women working outside of the household often had low status, although there were exceptions. Women of all marital statuses practised these occupations as an easily accessible way to make a living.

Even though most women visible in the sources about work in premodern Bilbao might have belonged to the town's lower classes, this was not true of all women. Debts and transaction contracts left by the linen saleswomen of Bilbao from 1560 through 1570 indicate that they operated on a larger scale and dealt with larger amounts of money than the poorer *cojedoras*. One of these women was María Ibáñez de Jáuregui, who appeared in 1561 as the creditor in a debt contract for the sale of 953.5 *varas* of linen cloth.⁹⁹ While most of the linen traders in these contracts were widows, there are examples of married and (younger) never-married women involved in large deals. María Pérez de Esnarizaga, one *lencera* of Bilbao, figured in several contracts involving linen sales dated between 1547 and 1569. The 1547 contracts were made by her and her husband, Juan de Olabe, together. From 1560, however, María appeared alone in the contracts as a widow, indicating that she continued the business after her husband's death. It may always have been hers.¹⁰⁰ The quantities the linen traders handled indicate that not all of the saleswomen in Bilbao were poor or from lower status. In a conflict between the town council and the hosts of the *plumeras*, women who bought linen fabric, the defendants claimed that the councillors of Bilbao were the owners of the linen stores, but *las vendedoras*, the saleswomen, sold

⁹⁹ One *vara* was on average 0.836 metres. Escritura de obligación otorgada por Martín Jiménez, vecino de la Mata de Yanguas, en favor de María Ibáñez de Jáuregui, lencera, vecina de Bilbao, de pagar diecinueve mil seiscientos sesenta y un maravedís procedentes de resto de cuarenta mil sesenta y un maravedís importe de novecientas cincuenta y tres varas y media de lienzo de diversas suertes. AFB, Judicial, 1062/029, 2 July 1561; Leticia Arroya-Abad, 'Spain 1351-1800', *Global Prices and Income database*, last revised on 4 May 2005.

<https://gpih.ucdavis.edu/Datafilelist.htm>.

¹⁰⁰ The contracts of María and her husband, as well as her contracts alone from a later date, survive in the *Archivo Histórico de la Diputación Foral de Bizkaia*. There are forty-two contracts made for the *Corregidor* of Bilbao, as well as eight notarial records.

the cloth in these shops. Some of the linen traders might have been married to the town's governing elite.¹⁰¹

Biscayan customary law did not recognise any status like *femme sole*, a common legal category elsewhere in premodern Europe. However, the *lenceras tratantes* might have operated under similar agreements. While in Castile, as elsewhere, married women could not enter into transactions without their husbands' permission or presence, the Biscayan *Fueros* were less definite. The *Fueros* prescribed that a husband needed his wife's permission to sell her property and did explicitly forbid the wife to enter into transactions with this property.¹⁰² In a 1559 notarial contract, the linen trader Sanches de Lexaraçu promised two *fardels* of linen cloth to Juan de Villanueva. Her husband was not present, and Sanches seems to have concluded the contract herself.¹⁰³ Whether linen traders made contracts independently from their husbands, as Sanches did, or together with him, as María Pérez de Esnarrizaga did, might have depended on the origin of the property involved. If the money and deposits came from the husband's side of the couple's shared assets, it might have been necessary for him to validate his wife's transactions. If the wife engaged her own assets, she could do this without her husband's involvement.

In Bilbao, women could be held responsible for debts they contracted, in contrast to Brabantine laws in which only *femmes soles* were liable. In 1511, the council of Bilbao complained that:

'many tradeswomen, both in linen and in other commodities and goods, [...] take the foresaid commodities and buy them with credit to

¹⁰¹ '[...] e porque a los mismos regidores e otras personas del dicho regimiento las yba ynteresses en ello porque sus mugeres tenian tiendas de lienços e otras mercaderías [...]. [...] los mismos regidores que fieron en hazer la dicha hordenança heran los mismos que tenian tiendas de lienços y los vendian al por rebender sus mercaderias [...] e porque las dichas sus partes los conocen muy bien a no llevaban las dichas blancas de las vendedoras salvo de las compradores [...].' AFB, Municipal, 0031/002/010, 9v-11r, 27 May 1549.

¹⁰² Gregorio Monreal Zia, *The Old Law of Bizkaia (1452). Introductory Study and Critical Edition* (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, 2005), 123; Janire Castrillo Casado, "Mujeres y matrimonio en las tres provincias vascas durante la baja edad media," *Vasconia* 28 (2012): 3.

¹⁰³ AFB, Notarial, 0483/0188, 1559.

pay over time, and some of them take them without paying and if they want to imprison them, the laws of my kingdoms – especially the law made by me in the Courts of Toro that states that women cannot be imprisoned for debts – do not allow me to imprison them [...].'¹⁰⁴

As a consequence of the town council's complaint, the royal court of Castile ruled that women could be imprisoned for debts they had incurred in commercial transactions. With this, Bilbao got an exception to a right that was valid in the whole kingdom of Castile. Apparently, there were more women involved in commerce in Biscay than in other Castilian regions, where the *Fuero de Toro* was still in place. In the Low Countries the status of *femme sole* existed to guarantee that saleswomen could be held responsible for their own businesses because there were so many of them.¹⁰⁵ In Biscay, there was a similar system, a pattern that shows both the ubiquity of saleswomen and the problems customary law could cause for women's transactions.

3.3 *Explanations for Bilbao's lack of a household economy*

Whether women were poor retailers with small 'low investment, low income' businesses, or they were involved in commerce on a larger scale, the impact of marital status on women's labour opportunities is less visible in Bilbao than in Antwerp and Mechelen. In Bilbao's normative sources, there is almost no trace of a household economy. In the Brabantine towns, not every woman worked together with her spouse and household either. It was particularly likely for women working in informal trade sectors to operate their own businesses. Yet, in Bilbao, women working outside of a household

¹⁰⁴ '[...] muchas mugeres tratantes, asi en lienços como en otras mercaderias e mantenimientos [...] que toman las dichas mercaderias en confiança e las conpran fiadas a pagar a plazos, e que algunas dellas se alçan con lo que deven e non lo pagan; e que si las quieren prender dis que conforme a las leys de mis reynos, especialmente a la ley por mi fecha en las Cortes de Toro que dispone que las mugeres no puedan ser presas por debdas que devan, non las podeis prender [...].' Javier Enríquez Fernández, Concepción Hidalgo de Cisneros Amestoy, and Adela Martínez Lahidalga, *Colección documental del archivo histórico de Bilbao (1501 - 1514)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 98 (Donostia, 2000), 1066–67, 30 May 1511.

¹⁰⁵ Van Aert, "Tussen norm en praktijk."

unit were more the rule than the exception. In his study of women's work in the household economy of late medieval Porto, a Portuguese port, Arnaldo Sousa Melo found a similar dearth of evidence about spousal cooperation and women working in household workshops. He attributed this to the claim that women's work would only appear in written documents if it took place outside the household.¹⁰⁶ However, in Mechelen and Antwerp, the importance of the household economy is reflected in most source types, including normative ordinances. Other factors might have generated the absence of a household economy in Bilbao. I have explored two factors that may have influenced women's work and the degree of spousal cooperation: Bilbao's system of work organisation and the town's maritime orientation.

Studies have already shown that urban household economic units were closely related to guild systems. Where guilds established the context for work, women's labour opportunities were confined to the household economy.¹⁰⁷ Daryl Hafter stated that 'guilds developed naturally from the domestic production of urban families.'¹⁰⁸ I argued above that one of the ways women were active in the Brabantine urban markets was selling products produced by or derived from their husbands' workshops. In Bilbao, this type of women's work in connection with their husbands' workshops is harder to find. As most work – especially retail and food trades – was not organised in (masculine) guilds, women's work did not shift to organisation within a household. Women in Bilbao were involved in certain – often traditionally female – trades and did not depend on a husband or father for access to these occupations.

In Bilbao, women had access to certain occupations in their own names. In most cases, these were occupations related to trade rather than production. There is little evidence of women participating in productive occupations (such as shoemaking and blacksmithing) either in their own names or as part of a household workshop. There is one exception in Bilbao.

¹⁰⁶ Sousa Melo, "Women and Work in the Household Economy."

¹⁰⁷ Schmidt, Devos, and Blondé, "Introduction. Single and the City," 6; Peter Stabel, "Workplace Cultures," in *A Cultural History of Work in the Medieval Age*, ed. Valerie L. Garver (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 97.

¹⁰⁸ Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*, 24.

In 1546-1547, Francisco de Melgar and Juan Ochoa de Larrea, two overseers of the Bilbao candlemakers, examined four new candidate candlemakers.¹⁰⁹ One of them was a widowed woman, two of them were married women, and one was a man. All were citizens of Bilbao and were accepted as candle makers after successfully completing their tests.¹¹⁰ If candlemaking had been organised in a guild, women might not have had independent access to the occupation.

In the few guilds that existed in Bilbao, there are no traces of female participation in the context of the household or outside of it. In other Biscayan towns, such as Plencia and Bermeo, regulations for the fishmongers and butchers guilds make note of wives and widows participating in the trades. In Plencia, wives of butchers were forbidden to cut meat, while in Bermeo wives and children of fishmongers were given permission to sell certain fish types.¹¹¹ As has been suggested by Rosa and Ana Iziz, in the Basque towns, widows of guild members were allowed to practice their late husbands' occupations in the year after their deaths.¹¹² These Biscayan guilds

¹⁰⁹ Probably, as Marjorie Keniston McIntosh found for premodern England, the *candeleras* that we encountered in Chapter 3 made and sold candles of animal fat, which were cheaper and of less quality. The *cereros* approved by Francisco de Melgar and Juan Ochoa de Larrea might have been responsible for the production and sale of beeswax candles, which lasted longer and were more expensive (and, according to McIntosh, mostly made by men in premodern England). Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 192.

¹¹⁰ AFB, Notarial, 0486/0020, 10 December 1547; AFB, Notarial, 0486/0019, 22 June 1547; AFB, Notarial, 0486/0005, 22 October 1547; AFB, Notarial, 0486/0006, 20 October 1546.

¹¹¹ Castrillo Casado, "Participación de las mujeres en la economía urbana," 214; Elena Largacha Rubio et al., *Colección documental del archivo de la cofradía de pescadores de la villa de Lequeitio (1325-1520)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 30 (Donostia, 1991), 86r-88v, 2 December 1496.

¹¹² Iziz and Iziz, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria*, 258. In the neighbouring region Navarra, widows of craft members could also apply for the right to continue their husbands' trade in the first year after his death. As Amaia Nausia Pimoulier has shown in her research, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, more than threehundred cases of such applications can be found. See: Amaia Nausia Pimoulier, "El usufructo de viudedad Navarro como recurso de supervivencia para las viudas

did not always have smooth relations with women active in the towns. In Plencia, for example, the fishmongers guild complained about the women selling fish at the town gates and requested a general ban on women who were not guild members selling fish.¹¹³ In other words, the Biscay guilds tried to restrict women's involvement, as guilds did in many other towns. At the same time, guilds opened opportunities for women to participate in guild labour through the domestic workshop.¹¹⁴ In Biscay guilds created a context for 'traditional' household cooperation. On the one hand, more women might have worked more often within a household economic unit if Bilbao's occupations had been organised in guilds. On the other hand, many fishmongers and retail women selling on the streets of Bilbao might have seen a decrease in their opportunities to work.

Bilbao's maritime location and economic focus provide a second explanation for the overwhelming absence of spousal cooperation in the historical records. The relative insignificance of guilds in Bilbao might have given women access to trades controlled by those corporations in other towns. However, in the 1470 taxation register, the women identified with one of these 'female' occupations were listed in the lower part (see Chapter 1, Table 3). This chapter has demonstrated that married, as well as never-married women, appear in the historical records practising the possibly poor-paid 'female' occupations. Both groups of women worked – outside of the domestic economic unit – out of necessity.

In addition, many of the married women working in these occupations might not have been able to count on spousal cooperation in a crisis. Bilbao's

(Siglos XVI y XVII)," *Iura Vasconiae: Revista de Derecho Histórico y Autnómico de Vasconia* 10 (2013): 573–96.

¹¹³ Rivera Medina, "Superando fronteras. Mujer y cultura laboral," 25.

¹¹⁴ Stabel, "Workplace Cultures," 97; Grethe Jacobsen, "Women's Work and Women's Role: Ideology and Reality in Danish Urban Society, 1300–1550," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 31, no. 1 (1983): 3–20; van den Heuvel, "Partners in Marriage and Business?"; Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (New York: Oxford university press, 1999).

reliance on the sea drew many men out of town.¹¹⁵ Their wives would have to fend for themselves during their husbands' extended absences. This is visible in the 1525 testimonies the *cojedoras* gave during their conflict with the town council of Bilbao. Although some were married, their testimonies demonstrate that they could not depend on their husbands' income or domestic workshops. When asked why she worked as a *cojedora* when the occupation was illegal, Ibañez de Regoita explained 'because I have five little children that are younger than seven years old and this way I don't have to go around and beg from the rich people in the town; and because her husband did not leave here anything to spend'.¹¹⁶ One of the other *cojedoras*, Ochanda de Camudio, claimed that she had asked the town authorities for permission to practice the trade because her husband was absent.¹¹⁷ The absence of guilds left space for women to work in small-scale trade. The absence of their husbands might have pushed married women to engage in these trades because they could not depend on a, possibly more stable, domestic workshop.

¹¹⁵ Janire Castrillo Casado, "Mujeres, negocio y mercadería a finales de la Edad Media: algunos apuntes sobre el País Vasco," *Edad Media. Revista de Historia*, no. 22 (2021): 307.

¹¹⁶ '[...] dixo por causa de la grand necesidad que tenia por quanto tenia cinco criaturas chiquitas que la maior no llegaba a mas de syete anos e por no andar a pedir e mantenerse entre buenos en el pueblo porque su marido no le abia dexado que gastar ni le avia ynbrado nada e a esta causa usaba del dicho oficio [...]'. ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5, 27 June 1536.

¹¹⁷ ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5, 27 June 1536.

CONCLUSION

Local contexts influenced and sometimes caused differences in the limitations authorities in Brabant and Biscay placed on women's labour opportunities. It is not surprising that historical records testify to women's engagement in food trades, secondhand sales, and retail, among other occupations in Mechelen, Antwerp, and Bilbao. In certain market sectors, they were important and/or accepted commercial actors. However, the regional differences in how certain market sectors were organised – most visible with the fishmongers and retailers – seem to have produced distinct approaches to regulating women's work.

In Antwerp and Mechelen, most ordinances regulating guild occupations were made in reaction to the needs of the guilds, and often at their explicit requests. The most prominent motivating factor for the Brabantine town ordinances that limited women's labour opportunities involved the guilds' struggle against competition they deemed unfair. This could involve both women working inside the guilds and women working in the informal market that operated in parallel to the guilds. When competition from women in lucrative market fields became too intense, women were clearly addressed as valid competitors. The masculine character of guilds made the female outsiders easy targets in the corporations' attempts to become exclusive.

The town council in Bilbao regulated women's work to ameliorate economic concerns. The many regulations addressing women in the economy reflected the existing labour structures in the town. Many women in Bilbao worked in retail sales, the food trades, and drapery or textile production and sale. The town council of Bilbao had no reason to exclude women from the market sectors in which they clustered. Rather, the town council's objective was to control daily practice while preventing fraud by traders, which could result in loss of income in the town coffers. In contrast to Brabant, where the masculine guilds limited women's labour opportunities in guild market sectors, women in Bilbao rarely competed directly with men, who predominated in more lucrative market sectors. Instead, women worked in complementary markets. Gendered language in

the Bilbao ordinances reflects the council's presumption that trades were either men's or women's work.

Although the Brabantine guilds tried to limit the number of women competitors, all guilds did not have the same policies towards women. There were variations based on preferences of individual corporations, as well as the marital status of the women in question. Some guilds in Antwerp and Mechelen were relatively open to women because they preferred to offer open membership over contending with many potential informal competitors. The retail and food trades, as well as the secondhand dealers, favoured this policy. These guilds allowed women to become members or gave some informal saleswomen associate status and kept them under the guild's jurisdiction. The mercers guilds of Antwerp and Mechelen admitted female members, for example. By contrast, the masculine fishmongers guilds tolerated sales of certain types of fish by informal saleswomen. Nevertheless, as guild membership lists have shown, even in accessible guilds, there were few regular women traders.

A second category of women allowed to be active in most Brabantine guilds were daughters and spouses of guild members. As earlier studies have shown, spousal and household cooperation was crucial to guild life. Husband and wife often worked together in the same (guild) business regardless of that guild's gendered labour restrictions.¹ Because of this, women's work often was highly dependent on their marital status and parentage. There were widows in all guilds, as they were allowed to take over their deceased husbands' workshops. Spouses and daughters could do guild work that was not available to women who were not related to a guild member.

Guild ordinances and membership lists show the importance of the household economy and spousal cooperation in Mechelen and Antwerp. However, analysis of the sentence books of the Mechelen fishmongers guild showed that spousal cooperation and guild participation by household

¹ See, among other: Martha C. Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 9–20; Janna Coomans, "Policing Female Food Vendors in the Late Medieval Netherlands," *Yearbook of Women's History* 36 (2017): 103.

members was not permitted in every circumstance. Local changes in trade organisation probably led the guilds to obstruct trade activity by female family members.

In Bilbao, the household economy is rarely visible in the historical records, as the saleswomen in Bilbao's 'female trades' seem to have operated without the assistance of a spouse and regardless of marital status. Both normative sources and judicial records testify to the autonomy of these women's businesses. However, some husbands might have supported their wives' businesses. Records about the opening of linen shops reveal that spouses (financially) invested in the shop building or location and, in some cases, logistics for the business. Furthermore, women's work in a household workshop might have simply remained under the radar of Bilbao's written records. Since there are few surviving documents for occupations of production in this time period, there is no evidence to confirm or rule out the participation of family women. Work in those occupations by wives and other family members might have resembled the household economy of the Brabantine towns.

Part II. Agency and women's work in Bilbao, Antwerp, and Mechelen

The previous chapters have analysed the institutions involved in regulating and (trying to) define women's labour activities. Guilds, town governments, and the household all played significant roles, even though their importance differed between the two regions. Nevertheless, judicial sources reveal a number of economic practices which diverged from the normative framework set out for women. Male and female urban residents could contest the norms by trying to change or influence regulations they did not like, but also by simply bypassing the regulations. Part II of this book examines women's agency in the context of their economic activities.

This study interprets agency as a person's potential to shape his or her own environment, following Sherry Ortner's definition that: "[...] "agency" is virtually synonymous with the forms of power people have at their disposal, their ability to act on their own behalf, influence other people and events, and maintain some kind of control in their own lives.'¹ These various 'forms of power' have been the topic of many studies. In the past few years, gender historians have rightfully pointed out that agency is not necessarily a synonym of authority and dominance. Moreover, women did not seek to influence or circumvent structures in premodern urban societies because of 'resistance to male authority or patriarchal patterns'.² As I will discuss in Chapter 5, there are few examples of women exercising a direct and formal

¹ Sherry B. Ortner, "Specifying Agency. the Comaroffs and Their Critics," *Interventions* 3, no. 1 (2001): 78.

² Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton, "Introduction. Gender, Agency and Economy: Shaping the Eighteenth-Century European Town," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4-5; Anna Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights in Early Modern Urban Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 5; Merry E. Wiesner, "Having Her Own Smoke. Employment and Independence for Singlewomen in Germany, 1400-1750," in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 209.

influence on the institutions that regulated their work. More common are historical records of women circumventing (legal) structures and 'negotiating the system', as Martha Howell, Dana Wessell Lightfoot and others have found in other premodern towns as well.³ This study of women using both these methods of shaping their environment in Brabant and Biscay will contribute to the comparison of women's labour opportunities in the two different regions.

Chapter 5 analyses women's influence on urban regulations in Mechelen, Antwerp, and Bilbao. Scholars have argued that women's low-status occupations were directly linked to their lack of political power. Therefore, some argue that the political power of the masculine guilds reconfirmed the exclusion of women from their associations.⁴ The first section of Chapter 5 investigates positions of direct influence and authority held by women in the Brabantine and Biscayan towns. Next, I look at the indirect influence of women operating together in groups in Biscay. Some of these female occupational groups had enough economic leverage to negotiate with the Bilbao town council. In the Brabantine towns, the guilds handled most negotiations, which explains the absence of examples of indirect influence on work regulations by women. Finally, Chapter 5 advances a provisional explanation for the regional differences in women's influence.

Regardless of the extensive regulation of work created by town councils, premodern urban residents probably came into contact with informal and/or irregular trade on a daily basis. To save on expenses and earn more money, men and women worked and traded illicitly. In Chapter 6, I analyse

³ Martha C. Howell, "The Problem of Women's Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe," in *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, ed. Amanda Pipkin and Sarah Joan Moran (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 24; Dana Wessell Lightfoot, *Women, Dowries and Agency: Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Valencia*, Gender in History (Manchester: University Press, 2013), 6–7.

⁴ See, among others: Clare Crowston, "Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe: An Overview of Recent Research," *International Review of Social History* 53, no. 16 (2008): 24; Martha C. Howell, "Citizenship and Gender: Women's Political Status in Northern Medieval Cities," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia press, 1988), 38.

women's irregular economic activities and, more importantly, the conflicts these activities generated with guilds and urban governments. In Bilbao, saleswomen broke the town council's regulations, which caused disputes with the council. In Mechelen and Antwerpen, in addition to the vigilance of urban governments, residents could face guild opposition because the guilds lost income to irregular (and informal) trade activities. While women and men in both regions clashed with authorities because they practised irregular trade, women did not depend on the same arguments in court. Chapter 6 studies women's confrontations with the courts and town council over irregular work and women's uses of law in these conflicts.

Throughout this study, I have used the term 'formal' for work done within a recognised institution or association, and 'informal' for work that was not institutionalised. The irregular trade activities of the women analysed in Chapter 6 occurred in formal and informal contexts.⁵ The broad spectrum of irregular market activities, which I also refer to as illicit or illegal activities, includes all activities that violated regulations. However, to be identified as irregular in the written records, women's activities also had to be prosecuted by a judicial authority. As a result, only a small fraction of women's (illicit) work ended up in the written documents that reveal women's uses of law.

⁵ Thomas Buchner and Philip R. Hoffmann-Rehnitz, "Introduction: Irregular Economic Practices as a Topic of Modern (Urban) History - Problems and Possibilities," in *Shadow Economies and Irregular Work in Urban Europe. 16th to Early 20th Centuries*, ed. Thomas Buchner and Philip R. Hoffmann-Rehnitz (Münster: LIT, 2011), 20–21.

CHAPTER 5. WOMEN'S INFLUENCE ON DECISION MAKING IN URBAN BRABANT AND BISCAY

On 11 January 1497, the town council of Bilbao established prices that the *regateras* would charge for candles and grease. The council had promulgated this ordinance 'with consent of the retail women, calling them before the council'.¹ In Bilbao, only the town council could make this type of ordinance since neither the retail women as a group nor any other institution had the authority to do so. Yet, the saleswomen had given their consent before the council had published their decision. As this chapter argues, lack of authority did not mean that women could not influence councils' decision-making. In many premodern European regions, masculine middling groups and associations, such as craft guilds, had great influence over local governments. In some regions, this entailed direct representation in those governments. In others, this influence had not been institutionalised.² However, women's influence on local governments has not received as much scholarly attention. I will explore how women in Antwerp, Mechelen, and Bilbao occasionally influenced local governments and obtained positions of authority related to their work.

This chapter discusses the influence that women in Bilbao, Antwerp, and Mechelen had over the regulation of their work. Furthermore, I will examine official positions of authority held by women in the three towns in connection with their occupations. There is a significant difference between 'influence' and 'authority', as Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski stressed their influential 1988 publication, *Women and power in the Middle Ages*. Scholars have since then shown the many situations in which women could

¹ '[...] los sobredichos sennores del regimiento, con acuerdo de las regateras de candela e azeite llamandoles al conçejo, ordenaron e mandaron e mandaron que diesen las candelas e azeite al presente fasta que sea sebo e para que sea su voluntad a los preçios siguientes [...].' Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévales Del País Vasco 70 (Donostia, 1995), fol. 83r-83v, 11 January 1497.

² See several chapters from: Jelle Haemers and Ben Eersels, *Words and Deeds: Shaping Urban Politics from below in Late Medieval Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020).

practice ‘informal influence’ or ‘power’.³ Depending on their marital status and position in a community, some women found it possible to shape their labour opportunities.⁴ As I will show, this informal influence sometimes produced changes in regulations that affected women’s work opportunities. ‘Authority’ can be defined as ‘the publicly recognised right to give direction and expect compliance’.⁵ Within urban contexts, women rarely possessed such authority, as it was usually reserved for men and masculine organisations.⁶ Nevertheless, there are a few examples, particularly widows substituting for their husbands in positions of authority ordinarily not open to women. The reason for this, I argue, was the prevalence of the household economy in the Brabantine towns.

In the first part of this chapter, I focus on women’s direct political influence regarding work. Sometimes women did assume official positions of leadership or authority. While in Antwerp and Mechelen, marital status supplied the foundation of their ability to fulfil men’s roles, in Bilbao, women occasionally took on low-level positions of authority because of their occupational status. Furthermore, groups of women cooperating to influence regulation filed formal petitions with the local governments. The second section of this chapter discusses the indirect influence of women in Biscay and Brabant. As the example at the beginning of this chapter shows,

³ Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens: University of Georgia press, 1988), 2.

⁴ Merridee L. Bailey, Tania M. Colwell, and Julie Hotchin, “Approaching Women and Work in Premodern Europe,” in *Women and Work in Premodern Europe: Experiences, Relationships and Cultural Representation, c. 1100-1800*, ed. Merridee L. Bailey, Tania M. Colwell, and Julie Hotchin (London: Routledge, 2018), 1–29; Erler and Kowaleski, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, 10; Sofia Ling et al., “Marriage and Work: Intertwined Sources of Agency and Authority,” in *Making a Living, Making a Difference. Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society*, ed. Maria Ågren (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 80–102; W. Mark Ormrod, *Women and Parliament in Later Medieval England* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Ariadne Schmidt, “Contested Authority. Working Women in Leading Positions in the Early Modern Dutch Urban Economy,” in *Women and Work in Premodern Europe. Experiences, Relationships and Cultural Representation, c. 1100-1800*, ed. Merridee L. Bailey, Tania M. Colwell, and Julie Hotchin (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 214–36.

⁵ Ormrod, *Women and Parliament in Later Medieval England*, 12–13.

⁶ Erler and Kowaleski, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, 2.

in the context of their occupations, women interacted with the Bilbao town council to influence regulation and pressured it to change unfavourable rules. As group recognition was a condition for this type of influence, it was rarer in the Brabantine towns, where (male) craft guilds filled this role. However, there are a few records from Antwerp and Mechelen that feature women questioning the guilds' authority and policies. In the final section, I will assess the causes of the differences between Brabant and Biscay in women's political influence.

1. Women's direct, formal influence on the legal system concerning their work opportunities

1.1 Authority

In the patriarchal premodern urban societies, women were generally denied access to government and positions of authority. In Brabant, women could not take part in guild politics, even if they had been able to acquire guild membership.⁷ In late medieval Biscay, citizens could participate in the towns' *asambleas plenarias*, or plenary meetings (which gave citizenship a political dimension). In rural areas, widows, as the heads of households, can be found participating in these *asambleas*.⁸ However, there is no evidence that women in the town of Bilbao participated in these assemblies. The local

⁷ According to Verhavert, women could participate in the plenary meetings of the guilds after they had acquired membership. Raymond Van Uytven, on the other hand, denies this. Verhavert's extensive but possibly outdated study about guilds in Leuven does not cite the source of this information. In my own master's research about women in the craft guilds in Leuven in the fifteenth century, there were no traces of this political possibility. Jan Verhavert, *Het ambachtswezen te Leuven* (Leuven: Universiteitsbibliotheek, 1940), 104–5; Raymond Van Uytven, *Het dagelijks leven in een middeleeuwse stad: Leuven anno 1448* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1998), 54–55; Nena Vandeweerd, "Van Voervynsteren tot Vleeshuys. Open en gesloten deuren voor vrouwen in de laatmiddeleeuwse Leuvense ambachtenwereld," (Unpublished Master Thesis, Leuven, KU Leuven, 2016).

⁸ Janire Castrillo Casado, "Las mujeres del común y la sociedad política en al País Vasco bajomedieval." In *Los grupos populares en la ciudad medieval europea*, ed. Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea, Beatriz Arízaga Bolumburu, and Jelle Haemers (Logroño, 2014), 499–522; María Isabel del Val Valdivieso, "Los espacios del trabajo femenino en la Castilla del Siglo XV," *Studia Historica. Historia Medieval* 26 (2008): 69–70.

government of Bilbao became more exclusive during the fifteenth century, paving the way for an oligarchy of urban aristocratic and merchant families.⁹

While sustained formal political participation by women in Brabant and Biscay was limited, a few exceptional women reached positions normally not accessible to their gender. In Antwerp, one exception was that widows had access to guilds normally closed to women because widows had the right to continue their husbands' businesses.¹⁰ In an ordinance from Leuven, for example, the barbers excluded all women members, except for masters' widows, who could practice the craft as long as they remained widows.¹¹ Normally, positions of authority within the guild were not included in this widows' right. Nevertheless, norm and practice did not always coincide. Sometimes, widows not only took over authority in the household workshop but also in the guild organisation.

As discussed in Chapter 2, in the old clothes sellers guild of Antwerp, women could not be estimators. In 1436 the guild ordinance stated 'that no woman of the craft guild can estimate; alone nor with help'.¹² This position required skill, trustworthiness, and authority, which were politicised values

⁹ Castrillo Casado, "Las mujeres del común y la sociedad política," 502–3; José Ignacio Salazar, "Gobierno local en el Bilbao bajomedieval," *Bidebarrieta* 12 (2003): 183–97.

¹⁰ See, among others: Cristina Ayuso Sánchez, "El mundo laboral femenino en el País Vasco medieval," *Sancho El Sabio: Revista de Cultura e Investigación Vasca* 30 (2009): 121; Ellen Burm and Bert De Munck, "Het broodje gebakken? Huwelijksstrategieën en partnerkeuze van de bakkers(kinderen) te Brussel in de overgang van het Ancien Régime naar de negentiende eeuw," *Stadsgeschiedenis* 2, no. 5 (2010): 148–68; Martha C. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 100–101; Anna C. Fridrich, "Women Working in Guild Crafts. Female Strategies in Early Modern Urban Economies," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 145–46; Grethe Jacobsen, "Women's Work and Women's Role: Ideology and Reality in Danish Urban Society, 1300–1550," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 31, no. 1 (1983): 3–20.

¹¹ SAL, 1523, fol. 129v, 14 February 1439.

¹² '[...] ende dat desgelicx opte voorscreven peyne geene vrouwen van haeren ambachte en sullen mogen scatten alleene, noch met hulpen [...].' Edmond Geudens, *Dit raect het oude cleercoopers ambacht binnen der stede van Antwerpen ende is eene verleeninge vanden jaere M vierhondert ende sessendertich* (Brecht: Braeckmans, 1905), 6.

for the guilds.¹³ The position was not accessible for women, even when they had obtained guild membership. Nevertheless, in 1410, one woman, Zoete Volbrechts, figured on the Antwerp aldermen's list of 'sworn estimators'.¹⁴ Zoete might have been an old clothes seller's widow. In the Antwerp aldermen's registers, one record identified Zoete van den Scribe, widow of Claus Volbrechts, and three later records identified a Zoete Volbrechts.¹⁵ If the four sources refer to the same woman, Zoete remained a widow from at least 1410 until 1426. In this period, she was active in trading annuities and money lending. There were no further references to her connection to the old clothes sellers guild. It is possible that Zoete's husband was recently deceased in 1410. The old clothes sellers might have made an exception to policy and allowed her to assume the position of estimator, or she might have asked the aldermen for permission to circumvent guild privileges. As guild work was traditionally structured around the nuclear couple's cooperation, a widow's right to continue her husband's assigned functions was the immediate logical requirement for the sustainability of that household after the head (the male spouse) died.¹⁶ Since a female estimator was unconventional, if other (adult) male successors had been present, the position might have gone to them instead. Nevertheless, because of the organisation of work in household production units in Brabant, some widows held men's positions as exceptions.¹⁷

In Bilbao, women's positions of authority and power did not stem from their position in the household. Instead, women's occupations were the foundation of their influence on the local government. Sánchez de Salcedo was one of the women who fulfilled an official position of leadership in

¹³ Bert De Munck and Jan Dumolyn, "The Political Culture of Work," in *A Cultural History of Work in the Early Modern Age*, ed. Bert De Munck and Thomas Max Safley, vol. 3, *A Cultural History of Work* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 154.

¹⁴ Jos Van den Branden, "Clementijnboek 1288-1414 (Vervolg)," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 26 (1889): 1-136.

¹⁵ SAA, SR#5, fol. 234v, 1415; SAA, SR#12, fol. 335v, 1426, SAA, SR#12, fol. 391r, 1426.

¹⁶ Judith M. Bennett, "Public Power and Authority in the Medieval English Countryside," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 23-26.

¹⁷ Schmidt, "Contested Authority. Working Women in Leading Positions."

Bilbao. She appears twice in historical documents from 1509. First, on 16 February 1509, four women *cojedoras* were called before the council to pledge oaths that they would practice the occupation in accordance with the council's demands. They had to 'hand over well and loyally to the excise collector the [grain] excises'. Sánchez de Salcedo was to act as overseer for these women *cojedoras*.¹⁸ Probably, Sánchez had been formally appointed by the council to ensure the good conduct of the other traders. The overseers of the grain weights stood guard over the weights and decided who could weigh their own merchandise. Although Sánchez might not have had a high position, she certainly exercised influence over one of Bilbao's most crucial trade items. One week after the *cojedoras*' oaths, Sánchez was called before the council, who instructed her that 'since she guarded the weights, she could give no weights to the *mulateros*', who brought grain into the town on mules.¹⁹

In 1509 Mari Saes de Balmaseda assumed a position similar to that of Sánchez de Salcedo. The town council of Bilbao needed a 'trustworthy person of good conscience who would exercise well and loyally' the position of bread weigher. In 1515, this 'good, trustworthy person of good conscience' was Mari Saes de Balmaseda. She swore ('sy, juro e amen') before the council that she would conduct the job honestly. In return, she would receive a fixed salary.²⁰ Neither Sánchez nor Mari was identified by family relationship or marital status, instead acquiring the positions because of their occupations and reputations. The town council of Bilbao did not bypass appointing these women to positions of authority because the council considered that these women had sufficient expertise.

We should keep in mind that Sánchez de Salcedo and Mari Saes de Balmaseda ranked quite low in the hierarchy of authority in Bilbao and did not have any direct say over policies.²¹ They could exercise authority over

¹⁸ Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 56 (Donostia, 1995), fol. 18r, 9 February 1509.

¹⁹ Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 20v, 16 February 1509.

²⁰ Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 57v-58r, 23 November 1515.

²¹ Ayuso Sánchez, "El mundo laboral femenino," 121.

other women *cojedoras* and bread sellers but not over male traders, as was the case with Zoete Volbrechts, the estimator of the Antwerp old clothes sellers. In contrast to Zoete's authority over women and men, acquired because of her position in the institutionalised household economy, female authority over men in Bilbao would break 'patriachal authority' since it was not linked to women's positions in a household.²² The Bilbao women held positions of authority only because the council had decided to award those positions to them. Furthermore, the role entrusted to Sánchez in 1509 by the town council did not safeguard her work as *cojedora*. Two decades later, when the Bilbao council prosecuted the saleswomen, she was one of the *cojedoras* arguing for continuation of the occupation.²³

1.2 Petitions

Although it was difficult, if not impossible in most cases, for women to hold positions of direct authority, occupying an official position was not the only way to influence the town councils' policies. Petitions were 'one of the most frequently used collective means of the citizens' repertoire to influence urban politics.'²⁴ They were policy proposals presented by an individual or community. In the Low Countries, 'the petition was the instrument par excellence through which burghers could exercise influence on the urban legislation.'²⁵ In other regions, including Castile, middling groups

²² Martha C. Howell, "Citizenship and Gender: Women's Political Status in Northern Medieval Cities," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia press, 1988), 53–54; Schmidt, "Contested Authority. Working Women in Leading Positions."

²³ The details of this conflict will be discussed in the next chapter.

²⁴ Jelle Haemers, "Ad Petitionem Burgensium. Petitions and Peaceful Resistance of Craftsmen in Flanders and Mechelen (13th-16th Centuries)," in *Los grupos populares en la ciudad medieval europea*, ed. Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea, Beatriz Arizaga Bolumburu, and Jelle Haemers (Logroño: Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 2014), 378.

²⁵ Schmidt, "Contested Authority. Working Women in Leading Positions," 215.

See also: Jelle Haemers, "Governing and Gathering about the Common Welfare of the Town. The Petitions of the Carft Guilds of Leuven, 1378," in *La comunidad medieval como esfera publica*, ed. Hipólito Rafael Oliva Herrer et al. (Sevilla: Sevilla University Press, 2014), 160.

commonly used petitions to appeal to their local governments.²⁶ Craft guilds were the most visible collectives that used petitions. Because their economic and political strength gave them the power to pressure local governments, they frequently requested new ordinances or changes in existing regulations by means of these oral or written requests.²⁷ Communities of women petitioning the local courts were much less common, as groups of women seldom had the power to pressure local governments into making the desired change. However, in both Biscay and Brabant, groups of working women sometimes did 'imagine themselves as members of wider social or institutional orders and considered it their right to supplicate in the name of the entire collective,' as noted about late medieval England.²⁸

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Bilbao was governed by an oligarchy; the same aristocratic and merchant families rotated through the town's government posts.²⁹ No economic institutions were represented on the town council, although a few guilds (of merchants) did gain importance at the end of the fifteenth century.³⁰ Nevertheless, the council had to consider and manage the complaints of its citizens. In 1488, citizens complained about Bilbao's retail women (*regateras*) and the times and locations of their trade activities. As a result, the council promulgated an ordinance specifying the hours and locations that the women were allowed to trade.³¹

The council of Bilbao also had to consider requests from the town's occupational groups. On 29 January 1509, for example, the butchers of Bilbao complained that the price they were allowed to charge for bacon was too low

²⁶ Jesús A. Solórzano Telechea, "The Politics of the Urban Commons in Northern Atlantic Spain in the Later Middle Ages," *Urban History* 2, no. 41 (2014): 183–203.

²⁷ Ben Eersels, "The Craft Guilds Are the City. Political Participation in Late Medieval Towns. Brabant and Liège (c. 1360-1500)" (Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Leuven, KU Leuven, 2018), 230–32.

²⁸ Ormrod, *Women and Parliament in Later Medieval England*, 64.

²⁹ Salazar, "Gobierno local en el Bilbao bajomedieval."

³⁰ Ernesto García Fernández, "Las cofradías de oficios en el País Vasco durante la edad media (1350-1550)," *Studia Historica. Historia Medieval* 15 (1997): 31; Solórzano Telechea, "The Politics of the Urban Commons," 189–90.

³¹ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 35r-35v, 24 September 1488.

and successfully convinced the council to increase it.³² Petitions in Bilbao were often presented orally to the council members, which is not surprising given the size of the town.

Although only a few occupations were united into a guild or brotherhood in Bilbao, other groups of (female) occupations influenced the town's government as well. In the ordinances' *narratios* or oral petitions, groups of saleswomen responsible for retail sales and distribution of food supplies in Bilbao occasionally appear. On 18 September 1510, the council banned the fishmongers from Bilbao's market square on the grounds that the smell of their fish was a blight on the marketplace. The fishmongers were instructed to open shops on the surrounding streets.³³ Two weeks later, on 2 October, nineteen female fishmongers submitted a petition to the council. They argued that since foreign merchants came to the market square specifically to buy fish, the fishmongers would lose income if these merchants could no longer find them. Furthermore, they argued, the smell of fish would be even worse in the town's narrow streets. The council revised the previous ordinance and set up a wooden shed in the market square in which the fishmongers could sell fish.³⁴

The sense of community possessed by Bilbao's female fishmongers might have originated partly in the external recognition given to the group by the council. After the 1510 petition of the fishmongers, the town council of Bilbao set up a rotation system to allocate the available fish stalls in order to avoid conflict. This might indicate that the membership of the fishmongers' group rarely changed. The women had licenses and permission from the council, other factors that might have contributed to the

³² 'Este dicho día el dicho conçejo, justiçia e regymiento de la dicha villa, visto commo los carneçeros se reclaman que non pueden dar a çinco maravedis la libra del toçino fresco sy non a grand perdyda de su fazienda porque ay poca carne, por ende mandaron a mi, el escriuano, que les notyfycase a los carneçeros para que den a çinco maravedis e medio la libra fasta que sea la voluntad del conçejo.' Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 13r, 29 January 1509.

³³ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 273v-274r, 18 September 1510.

³⁴ Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 276r-279r, 2 October 1510.

formation of their sense of community. Nevertheless, working in the same occupation and interacting daily were probably the most decisive factors that shaped the fishmongers' network and could have prompted their cooperative effort to contest the town council's regulations. The fishmongers in Bilbao seem to have been 'a close-knit body, tightly bound together by a certain set of rights and privileges', much like female second-hand dealers (Keuflinnen), studied by Wiesner in early modern Nuremberg.³⁵ The fishmongers argued that their request would benefit not only them but everyone in town, an argument echoed by the guilds in late medieval Brabant.³⁶

The 1510 petition was not the only attempt by the fishmongers of Bilbao to influence an ordinance directly. In 1509, Mari Pérez de Durango, one of the fishmongers working at the Portal de Çamudio, complained at the council that the fishmongers who sold in the square took all the fish brought into the town for themselves. Her plea moved the town council to order that the fishmongers in the square had to give 'one-third of the fish to be sold at the Portal de Çamudio in the nets that are there so that it will be divided better amongst the citizens of this town'.³⁷ By acceding to her request, Mari argued, the town council had the chance to improve conditions for all citizens of Bilbao. Mari Pérez de Durango may not have acted alone since she might have represented the other fishmongers working at the Portal de Çamudio. Members of (occupational) groups needed to consult and cooperate before they submitted requests and petitions to the town council.³⁸ Although they could not hold positions of authority, the fishmongers of Bilbao show an awareness of the leverage they possessed as actors in

³⁵ Merry E. Wiesner, "Paltry Peddlers or Essential Merchants? Women in the Distributive Trades in Early Modern Nuremberg," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 12, no. 2 (1981): 8–9.

³⁶ Haemers, "Ad Petitionem Burgensium," 387.

³⁷ '[...] caso que las regateras de la plaça tengan tomado todo el pescado, que le den la terçia parte para que sea vendida en el dicho Portal de Çamudio en los redes que ende estan, porque sea meyor repartido por los vesinos de la dicha villa [...]'. Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 49r-49v, 13 June 1509.

³⁸ Haemers, "Ad Petitionem Burgensium," 380–86.

provisioning the town, and they knew how to use this leverage. It is possible that trading in their own names had required these women to develop political awareness and learn how to act on it.³⁹

In Brabant, women petitioners and women's influence on regulation were less common than in Biscay. Petitions for change to town regulations were usually presented by a recognised association. In Brabantine towns, guilds were naturally the most eminent associations influencing local governments' regulation of work.⁴⁰ Women were usually excluded from the political functions of the guilds.⁴¹ While there is little evidence of individual petitions in the Brabantine towns, it seems that women in Brabant had fewer opportunities to make requests to the local governments because of the prominence of the guilds. This is visible in the 1474 ordinance of the Antwerp glove and purse makers, for example. As discussed earlier, some masters were unhappy about women working in the guild. Whereas the guild excluded women wagedworkers, authorities allowed the female members of guild masters' households to continue their guild work.⁴² Even though this exemption might have come after complaints from guild masters and their wives, the wives' voices were not recognised in the ordinance.

As most petitions about regulations of work in the Brabantine towns came from the guilds, it is not surprising that the only female petitioners came from one of the few recognised female occupational groups not belonging to a guild. In 1478, the *uitdraagsters* of Leuven presented a request to the town council countering a measure by the old clothes sellers guild. The old clothes sellers 'wanted to require them to pay twenty guilders,

³⁹ Ormrod, *Women and Parliament in Later Medieval England*, 64; Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Cornell University Press, 2018), 4.

⁴⁰ Ben Eersels, "Requested and Consented by the Good Crafts. A New Approach to the Political Power of Craft Guilds in Late Medieval Maastricht (1380-1428)," in *Words and Deeds. Shaping Urban Politics from below in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Ben Eersels and Jelle Haemers (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 91-112.

⁴¹ Shennan Hutton, "Women, Men, and Markets: The Gendering of Market Space in Late Medieval Ghent," in *Urban Space in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 414.

⁴² Pierre Génard, "Register van den dachvaerden," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 20 (1883): 400-401.

which they thought was a great novelty and against all they had done and been accustomed to before then.’ According to the women, the guild was trying to control and limit their work opportunities. In reaction, the women went to the town council of Leuven to complain and ask them to set the situation right.⁴³ Since the council did not confirm their request, the *uitdraagsters* might indeed have lost some independence to the old clothes sellers guild. As Bernard Capp has stated concerning petitions from communities of women in early modern England: ‘such petitions reflect nonetheless a first step towards consciously political activity.’⁴⁴ The mere fact of operating as a community might have given the *uitdraagsters* a sense of political identity, as was the case for the female saleswomen of Bilbao. Because of their frequent contacts with the old clothes sellers guild, the *uitdraagsters* might have emulated guild tactics. Nevertheless, their sense of community was not enough to pressure the council of Leuven into granting their requests, as the *uitdraagsters* ‘did not have clearly established and recognised legal rights’, as did the old clothes sellers guild.⁴⁵

2. Indirect influence on the legal framework: occupational groups of women in Biscay

In Bilbao, women’s attempts to influence town regulations seem to have been more constant than the efforts of women in Brabant. While Bilbao women sought influence by means of official complaints and petitions, they could also be more indirectly involved in the town council’s decision-making. As discussed in Chapter 1, Bilbao’s retail women were not wealthy,

⁴³ ‘Item, heden zijn comen voer den raide van der stad zeker vrouwe personen uutdrageressen den raide van der stad te kynnen gevende hoe dat de geswoirene van den ouden cleercopers ambachte hen wouden bedwingen te moeten verborghen tot der sommen toe van twintich rijnschgulden, dwelc hen dochte zijnde een grote nieuwichheit ende tegen tghene des men in dien tot noch toe hadde gedaen ende gehanteert [...]’ SAL, 1524, fol. 9r, 15 July 1478.

⁴⁴ Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford University Press), 306.

⁴⁵ Susan Broomhall, “Women, Work, and Power in the Female Guilds of Rouen,” in *Practices of Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Megan Cassidy-Welch and Peter Sherlock (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2008), 206.

and some may have belonged to one of the lowest social classes. Even though they were allowed to do this work on their own account, regardless of their marital status, they may have had no other choice. As Laurence Fontaine has stated, economic need might have forced them into these visible economic positions, yet that same need also 'opened up areas of freedom and authority to them.'⁴⁶ Historical documents do indeed show that the council of Bilbao was forced to consider the views of these women when regulating their work.

The most subtle form of influence visible in the ordinances of Bilbao was the consent of female occupational groups to the council's new regulations. This can be found in ordinances of three occupations: fishmongers, bakers, and retailers. On 3 July 1512, the town council of Bilbao promulgated a new ordinance for the bread bakers and bread sellers of the town. This ordinance announced decisions on bread prices, women's salaries, and work arrangements. The ordinance had been made in agreement with the bread bakers.⁴⁷ The consideration town council of Bilbao gave to the bakers about regulation of their work has already been established by María Isabel del Val Valdivieso, who demonstrated that the bakers of Bilbao had a say in setting grain prices for the town.⁴⁸ As bread was an essential component of citizens' diets and the women were responsible for the baking process, they held leverage over the council.⁴⁹ Even though the oligarchic town council of Bilbao had the authority to punish the women if they committed offences, it could not regulate the women's work without their consent.

⁴⁶ Laurence Fontaine, "Makeshift, Women and Capability in Preindustrial European Towns," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 57.

⁴⁷ '[...] luego los dichos sennores conçejo, justicia e regimiento el conçierto que se debe de tener se dio con las duepnas orneras de la dicha villa de Bilbao [...]' Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 139v-141r, 3 July 1512.

⁴⁸ María Isabel del Val Valdivieso, "El trabajo de las mujeres en el Bilbao tardomedieval," in *Las Mujeres Vascas en la Historia* (Bilbao: IPES, 1997), 70.

⁴⁹ Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, "Fishmongers and Shipowners: Women in Maritime Communities of Early Modern Portugal," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 1 (2000): 9-11; Burm and De Munck, "Het broodje gebakken?," 151.

The fishmongers and retailers of Bilbao exercised the same kind of influence. Since they were responsible for distributing crucial commodities throughout the town, they had leverage and could at least force the council to involve them in the decision-making progress.⁵⁰ In 1497, and again in 1509, the *regateras de candela e azeite* appeared before the council to consent to new prices the women would charge for candles and grease.⁵¹ A similar situation occurred with the fishmongers in 1515 when the council of Bilbao promulgated their decision that sellers of fresh fish must sell cut fish by weight rather than by piece, as they had done before.⁵² The saleswomen did not ask for new regulations, nor was their participation in the decision guaranteed. Nevertheless, the council needed them to consent to the ordinance, which demonstrates that these women had gained influence by operating as a group and being recognised as such by the council.⁵³

The council could penalise women who did not follow the ordinances, as they had accepted them by giving their consent upon promulgation. Still, granting consent seems to have been part of a larger political strategy of the female traders. On 21 February 1509, eleven *regateras* appeared before the council to hear a new ordinance. They swore that ‘they each will supply their stores with candles and grease’ and comply with ‘the foresaid prices and conditions’. The council noted explicitly that the women had consented to the new prices and work conditions (mostly about the weight of the

⁵⁰ Abreu-Ferreira, “Fishmongers and Shipowners,” 9–11; Laurence Fontaine, “The Role of Peddling in Consumption in Modern Europe,” *Field Actions Science Reports. The Journal of Field Actions* Special Issue 12 (2014): 3.

⁵¹ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 83r-83v, 11 January 1497; Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 98r-99r, 28 February 1509.

⁵² ‘[...] fezieron llamar a las mugeres pescaderas que venden pescado e les mando en sus presonas que ninguna dellas non oviese de vender ningund pescado fresco en grueso e enteros, saluo repartido a cada vno commo querian. Las mugeres dixieron que lo oian [...]’ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 156v, 18 May 1515.

⁵³ Martha C. Howell, “Achieving the Guild Effect without Guilds: Crafts and Craftsmen in Late Medieval Douai,” in *Les métiers au Moyen Âge*, ed. Pascale Lambrechts and Jean-Pierre Sosson (Louvain-la-Neuve: Fédération internationale des instituts d’études médiévales, 1994), 123; Daryl M. Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 154.

candles).⁵⁴ Yet, upon giving their consent, the retailers had also received certain privileges from the council.

'And the council promised them to protect and fulfil the abovesaid and will promise and guarantee that no one else can sell grease or candles on a regular basis, except for the abovesaid obligated party [: the *regateras*].'⁵⁵

By accepting the new ordinance, the retail women had established a monopoly over the sale of candles and grease in Bilbao. Their consent to the ordinance was the result of a process of giving and taking, just as it often was for the petitions of masculine guilds. Once recognised as an occupational group (even when not formally institutionalised), women could argue for rights similar to those of male occupational groups. However, the question of how their gender influenced the local government's reactions remains.

The group of *regateras* in Bilbao consented to ordinances about their work. They could claim the trade for themselves as the council recognised them as a legitimate group of traders. A clear arrangement between the council and the saleswomen – respecting regulations versus guaranteeing the women's monopolies – can also be seen in a 1509 ordinance concerning the fishmongers. The council needed to regulate the fish trade, as they complained that many of the fishmongers selling dried fish 'do not give

⁵⁴ [...] donna Sancha de Artaça e Marina de Ybarra e donna Maria Saes de Quexana e Maria Peres de Asteyça e Marina de Ayala e Marina d'Errola e Teresa de Arryquibar e donna Catelina de Dobaran e donna Maria Peres de Tellaeche e donna Maria Peres de Angostura e Antona de Novia, muger de Martin de Arys; luego las sobredichas regateras se obligaron por sus personas e vienes, cada vno por sy, de tener e vasteçer cada vno su tyenda e de dar abasto de candelas e aseyte desde oy dia fasta el dia de Todos Santos [...]. Para todo lo sobredicho las sobredichas regateras, cada vna sobre sy e por sy, para basteçer cada vno su tyenda e dar abastadamente en los preçios e condyçiones susodichos durante el sobredicho termino, se obligaron, so las penas susodichas consentyendo en todo lo susodicho.' Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 21r-21v; 21 February 1509.

⁵⁵ 'E el dicho conçejo les prometyo de les guardar e cunplir lo susodicho e de debedar e plegonar que otro ninguno non benda aseyte nin candela por menudo, saluo los sobredichos obligados.' Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 21r-21v, 21 February 1509.

good fish and sell the fish for higher and lower prices' than those set by the council. It seems that the town council of Bilbao could not simply force new regulations on the fishmongers. The council had to promise the fishmongers to limit competition from foreign merchants and other fishmongers who did not sell dried fish already and now wanted to distribute fish in Bilbao.⁵⁶ Because of their important and recognised role in provisioning Bilbao, the town council had to take the female fishmongers into consideration when regulating their work.

In the Brabantine towns, there are no examples of women's indirect influence on the local governments similar to those observed in Bilbao. This may be another instance of women's voices disappearing behind the powerful voice of the male guilds. Nevertheless, the absence of visible influence in the written sources does not mean women did not express opinions on urban and guild politics. In 1508, the Mechelen fishmongers guild allowed a sixteen-year-old boy to become a master in the guild. The wife of Rombout Vennen – the same woman we encountered in Chapter 4 as an active participant in her husband's trade – expressed her discontent by claiming that 'now the guild has come into the hands of children.' Such public expressions of discontent were not welcomed by the guilds, and Rombout Vennen's wife was sent on a pilgrimage to Halle.⁵⁷ As Jelle Haemers and Chanelle Delameillieure have shown, Brabantine urban governments regularly had to deal with women's subversive 'discussions about how a city should be governed'.⁵⁸ The Mechelen fishmongers' sentence books and the *Correctieboeken* of the Antwerp aldermen show examples of

⁵⁶ 'E luego, el dicho conçejo, justiçia e regymiento de la dicha villa acordo que por quanto las regateras que benden en la dicha villa el pescado seçial remojado por menudo non dan a las veses buen pescado e suele muchas veses tomar el dicho pescado muchas alçadas e baxadas en el preçio a las veses, e despues de puesto por el regymiento vn preçio [...] E el dicho conçejo les prometyo que otra regatera ninguna en el sobredicho tienpo non bendera en la dicha villa pescado remojado synon las sobredichas obligadas [...]'. Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 87r-87v, 14 November 1509.

⁵⁷ '[...] soe seyde sij, "nu es d'ambacht toet de kinderhanden comen".' SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 54r, 8 May 1508.

⁵⁸ Jelle Haemers and Chanelle Delameillieure, "Women and Contentious Speech in Fifteenth-Century Brabant," *Continuity and Change* 32, no. 3 (2017): 323–47.

women – either in connection with their involvement in their husbands' trades or in their own names – expressing criticism.⁵⁹

Although in Brabant women were prosecuted for their political opinions, and guild and urban authorities took women's expressions of discontent seriously, the question remains whether women's words had any impact on the authorities' policies. Indirect influence might have worked in other – untraceable – ways. Craft members' individual complaints or petitions that might have led up to official petitions or regulations do not resonate in the normative sources. Moreover, petitions were generally made after a meeting of guild members.⁶⁰ From some households in the Brabantine towns, women's complaints might have seeped through to guild authorities via their husbands. However, there is no evidence of this in the written sources that survive.

3. The roots of women's influence in Brabant and Biscay

In Bilbao, female traders regularly interacted with the town council and influenced their decisions. There is less evidence of such influence in Mechelen and Antwerp. One reason for this discrepancy in the political position of working women lies in the different sizes of the three towns. The governing institutions of Mechelen and Antwerp were on a larger scale than those of Bilbao, where the town council – a body of only sixteen members approximately – was responsible for the entire government of the town.⁶¹ The smaller size of Bilbao might have made it easier for its citizens, both men and women, to approach the town council. However, the effect of Bilbao's smaller size might not have been visible in the written records. In his study

⁵⁹ In Antwerp, for example, in 1437, Katelijne van Bierbeek was sent on a pilgrimage to Aken, in Germany, after she had spoken negatively about the town and its craft guilds. F. Melis-Taeymans, *Correctieboek 1414-1512* (Antwerpen: Stadsarchief, 1979), 60v, 17 August 1437.

⁶⁰ Haemers, "Ad Petitionem Burgensium," 380–86.

⁶¹ Salazar, "Gobierno local en el Bilbao bajomedieval"; Raymond Van Uytven, *De geschiedenis van Mechelen: van heerlijkheid tot stadsgewest* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1991), 58–65; Floris Prims, *Geschiedenis van Antwerpen. VI. - Onder de hertogen van Bourgondie-hertogen van Brabant (1406-1477). 2e boek - de economische orde*, vol. 14 (Brussel: Standaard, 1937).

of guild participation in the governments of three towns in the Southern Low Countries, Ben Eersels has argued that the smaller size decreased the need in those towns for formal political initiatives and 'institutional bargaining'.⁶² From this point of view, formal petitions and bargaining from the groups of saleswomen in Bilbao might have been less paramount, and their influence less likely to have been recorded in the ordinances.

A second possible reason for the difference between Brabant and Biscay is the distinct way work was organised in the towns. As the previous chapters have concluded, the fact that in Bilbao, no guilds had institutionalised small-scale (food) trade might explain the expanded political influence of women. In shaping political influence, scholars have indicated the importance of community, whether formal or informal, and the recognition of those communities by local governments.⁶³ In Bilbao, women traders had no male institutionalised competitors and were therefore recognised as valid economic actors by the town council.

In Brabant, craft guilds claimed this formal, recognised trade. Furthermore, they positioned themselves as representatives of the common good while excluding large segments of urban society.⁶⁴ Men and women who were not included in the guilds' networks were therefore excluded from formal participation in guild life, both economic and political.⁶⁵ Since in Brabant few women were grouped together in a recognised occupation, they would have been less likely to build an occupational group identity. For this

⁶² Eersels, "The Craft Guilds Are the City," 232–33.

⁶³ Eersels, 83–87; Jan Dumolyn, "Guild Politics and Political Guilds in Fourteenth-Century Flanders," in *The Voices of the People in Late Medieval Europe. Communication and Popular Politics*, ed. Jan Dumolyn et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 30–31; Ormrod, *Women and Parliament in Later Medieval England*, 64.

⁶⁴ Maarten R. Prak, "Corporate Politics in the Low Countries: Guilds as an Institution, 14th to 18th Centuries," in *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries: Work, Power and Representation*, ed. Maarten R. Prak et al. (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2006), 74–106.

⁶⁵ Danielle van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women in Early Modern Dutch Towns," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton, Routledge Research in Gender and History 116–133 (New York: Routledge, 2013), 130.

reason, women working outside of a household unit would find it more difficult to influence regulation of their work. Instead, they would depend on guilds and other recognised institutions to represent their interests to the town councils. Women rarely attempted direct influence on the town councils by submitting formal petitions in Brabant. The only surviving evidence of such an action was by the *uitdraagsters*, a group of women working outside of a guild structure that seems to have possessed a type of group identity.

CHAPTER 6. EVADING REGULATIONS. IRREGULAR TRADE AND LEGAL LOOPHOLES

This chapter studies women's irregular trade activities, prosecution of these activities by the authorities, and the way common women and men who had committed market offences made use of the different judicial institutions in an attempt to obtain the best possible result. In both Brabant and Biscay, irregular trade was part of the urban economy. Although women involved in irregular trade left behind traces of their market activities only when they came into conflict situations, it is clear that in both regions, women committed similar transgressions. However, there were differences in the ways that urban governors problematised these transgressions, as well as in the management of subsequent punishments by institutions and urban residents. The reason for this, I argue, is the role of guilds in Brabantine urban economies and public life in general.

The appearance of women in Brabant and Biscay's irregular trade circuits is not surprising since previous studies have noted the omnipresence of women in illicit trade in premodern urban Europe.¹ Bart Lambert found that 28.3 per cent of the people of Flemish origin prosecuted for irregular

¹ Peter Stabel, "From the Market to the Shop: Retail and Urban Space in Late Medieval Bruges," in *Buyers and Sellers. Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruno Blondé et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 101; Anne Montenach, "Formal and Informal Economy in an Urban Context: The Case of Food Trade in Seventeenth-Century Lyon," in *Shadow Economies and Irregular Work in Urban Europe. 16th to Early 20th Centuries*, ed. Thomas Buchner and Philip R. Hoffmann-Rehnitz (Münster: LIT, 2011), 96; Christof Jeggle, "Blurred Rules: Regulation and the Problem of Non-Regular Practices in the Linen Trades in Seventeenth-Century Münster/Westphalia," in *Shadow Economies and Irregular Work in Urban Europe. 16th to Early 20th Centuries*, ed. Thomas Buchner and Philip R. Hoffmann-Rehnitz (Münster: LIT, 2011), 73–90; Ana María Rivera Medina, "Economía informal: la baratería en la frontera marítima Atlántica medieval," in *Las fronteras en la edad media hispánica, Siglos XIII-XVI* (Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2019), 583–96; Thomas Buchner and Philip R. Hoffmann-Rehnitz, eds., *Shadow Economies and Irregular Work in Urban Europe: 16th to Early 20th Centuries* (Münster: LIT, 2011).

trade in fifteenth-century Sluis, a Flemish harbour town, were women.² Of course, not all irregular activities were documented in written sources because some were not penalised. Many urban (and rural) residents were active in informal trade practices, which were not by definition punishable offences. Informal trade was crucial for the distribution of goods to people on the lower strata of the towns.³ Susanne Schöts has argued that informal traders provided urban residents with 'goods that traders such as shopkeepers and peasants could not sell.' However, they were providing urban poor people with flawed and cheap products.⁴ It was thus in the interest of urban authorities to permit informal trade to a certain extent. Furthermore, even if trade explicitly violated regulations – and therefore fell under the 'illicit' category – town governments did not always intervene. Since they did not have the ability to banish all irregular activities, they focussed on controlling the most centralised and lucrative trades.⁵ Irregular economic activities on a smaller scale often went unrecorded.

In the *Correctieboeken* of Antwerp, there are a few sentences given to women for illicit trade activities. In Antwerp, this type of prosecution was rare in comparison to the many prosecutions recorded in the sentence books of the Flemish harbour towns that Lambert has studied. Most men and women sentenced in the Antwerp correction books had committed other offences, such as verbal and/or physical violence, sex offences, or 'lewd ways of life'. The punishments were meted out by the town council of Antwerp,

² Bart Lambert, "Merchants on the Margins: Fifteenth-Century Bruges and the Informal Market," *Journal of Medieval History* 42, no. 2 (2016): 238.

³ Marta Vicente, "Images and Realities of Work: Women and Guilds in Early Modern Barcelona," in *Spanish Women in the Golden Age: Images and Realities*, ed. Alain Saint-Saëns and Magdalena Sánchez (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996), 133; Montenach, "Formal and Informal Economy in an Urban Context: The Case of Food Trade in Seventeenth-Century Lyon," 104.

⁴ Susanne Schöts, "Female Traders and Practices of Illicit Exchange. Observations on Leipzig's Retail Trade between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Century," in *Shadow Economies and Irregular Work in Urban Europe. 16th to Early 20th Centuries*, ed. Thomas Buchner and Philip R. Hoffmann-Rehnitz (Münster: LIT, 2011), 136.

⁵ Stabel, "From the Market to the Shop," 102; Jeggle, "Blurred Rules," 77, 88–89.

which was responsible for sentencing minor criminal offences.⁶ Offenders were sent on pilgrimages – with the destinations aligned to the weight of their transgressions. The Antwerp councilmembers rarely concerned themselves with prosecuting the broad range of irregular trade practices, as the town's guilds also had jurisdiction in this area. However, there are five sentences illuminating the possible market transgressions that female urban residents might commit. Katelijne Truykens, for example, was sent on a pilgrimage to 's-Hertogenbosch in 1482 because she had encouraged other women to charge an impermissibly high price for rye bread.⁷ Janne Vosselmans was sent to the same place in 1445 because she had sold rotten goods.⁸ Liesbet Alaerts was sent on a pilgrimage to Mechelen because she had sold tin and lead scales pretending they were silver.⁹ Jan Volcmaer and his wife had sold bad-quality bread and were therefore sent on a pilgrimage to Cologne.¹⁰ Finally, in 1438, six women were sent to Mechelen for selling poultry illicitly.¹¹ Although each sentence treats a distinct practice, in all cases the women were trying to circumvent regulations.

The sentence books of the Mechelen fishmongers show the diverse range of offences for which guild members and people in their households were prosecuted (see Table 16).¹² Almost one-third of the sentences concerned urban residents illicitly working or trading against guild

⁶ The council included the bailiff, the mayor, and the aldermen of the city. See: Bert Verwerft, "De Beul in Het Markizaat van Antwerpen Tijdens de Bourgondische En Habsburgse Periode (1405-1550)" (Unpublished Master Thesis, Ghent, UGent, 2007), 232.

⁷ F. Melis-Taeymans, *Correctieboek 1414-1512* (Antwerpen: Stadsarchief, 1979), 263, 12 August 1482.

⁸ Melis-Taeymans, 163, 18 June 1445.

⁹ Melis-Taeymans, 152, 15 May 1442.

¹⁰ Melis-Taeymans, 130, 7 May 1438.

¹¹ Melis-Taeymans, 125, 29 January 1438.

¹² Between 1492 and 1561, there are 968 sentences in the two guild sentence books. The higher number of offense types in Table 16 result from the existence of 196 sentences with a double offense type-tag. A 1520 sentence, for instance, falls under both the 'verbal violence' and 'irregular work and trade' categories. Anthonis van Exele was sent to Valenciennes because he had said that Jan Waelpot was a cheater and a snitch. Furthermore, he had worked as a fishmonger after the guild jurors has prohibited this. SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 93v, 1520.

regulations. Ten per cent of these sentences were for women and another ten per cent for men and women together. The number of women involved in sentences for illegal work and trade by the Mechelen fishmongers guild is substantial. Moreover, the number of women punished for irregular work is higher than for any other offence, and the proportion of women offenders is also highest in this category. The most common offence of men was verbal violence. Thirty per cent of the sentences of men involved verbal violence. For women, this was only 21 per cent. By contrast, the most common for women was irregular work and trade. From the women sentenced by the fishmongers guild, 56 per cent involved irregular work and trade. While this does not mean that women worked illegally more often than men did, it does show that the guild paid more attention to women's irregular activities than to other offences committed by women. As the sentence books only feature prosecuted offences, the number of unrecorded petty crimes is unknown. In addition, the guild sentence books naturally do not represent all the offences committed in Mechelen, but only those falling under the fishmongers' jurisdiction. Looking at other trades could change these statistics, but this would require additional series of sentence registers.

In Bilbao, there are no serial records of the town's prosecution of illicit trade. Instead, three extensive court cases give insight into women's irregular practices, the council's prosecutions, and women's use of the law. These cases indicate that women in Bilbao engaged in irregular work as their counterparts did in the Brabantine towns. In addition to these court cases, the town council of Bilbao regularly justified ordinances by claiming that retailers and other saleswomen committed fraud and other irregular trade practices and thus damaged the town economy (see Chapter 3). In 1482, for example, the council pronounced new regulations for the town's bread sellers because 'the bread sellers were used to coming to the market and buying many *fanegas* of grain every week [...] which they would send

Table 16. Registered sentences per offence type in the Mechelen fishmongers guild's sentence books by gender of the accused party.

Offence type	Gender of the accused party				Total
	Men	Women	Men and women	Unknown	
Irregular work and trade	267	32	34	2	335
Verbal violence	317	12	1	/	330
Physical violence	163	/	/	/	163
Craft insubordination	113	2	1	/	116
Cultural/religious offense	59	1	/	1	61
Debt conflict	31	3	1	/	35
Gossip/false accusations	9	1	1	/	11
Theft	5	1	/	/	6
Damage	6	/	/	/	6
Unknown	94	5	2	/	101
Total	1064	57	40	3	1164

Source: SAM, Visverkopers 321; SAM Visverkopers 322.

to others overseas', a practice that caused grain shortages in Bilbao.¹³ In the neighbouring town of Guernica, the town council promulgated similar regulations for the bread sellers, also accusing them of buying too much grain, which prevented other urban residents from buying grain for their own use.¹⁴ The problem with the council's claims of fraud and economic damage in the ordinances' *narratios* is that they were only included to support the legitimacy of the ordinances.¹⁵ However, Biscayan court cases also support these charges, as both the council and the women themselves elaborate on their market activities in extensive litigation.

One of the difficulties with the Biscayan source corpus is that there are few documents recording women's minor offences. Since the occurrence and adjudication of minor transgressions were not written down, there is little historical evidence about the lower courts, such as that of the town councils, available to us. Only when parties contested fines and sentences in the higher courts of the duchy and kingdom are there surviving written records. The sparse records of the few court cases involving irregular work provide a detailed view of the progress of these court cases – from the lowest judicial venues available to Bilbao's residents to the sentences of the highest judges in the Kingdom of Castile. Furthermore, these court records also illuminate how women circumvented regulations and engaged in irregular activities. The case of the fishmonger Mayora de Iturribalçaga provides a good example.

¹³ Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévales Del País Vasco 70 (Donostia, 1995), fol. 17r-17v, 11 January 1482.

¹⁴ Beatriz Bolumburu Arizaga, María Luz Ríos Rodríguez, and María Isabel del Val Valdivieso, "La villa de Guernica en la baja edad media a través de sus ordenanzas," *Vasconia: Cuadernos de Historia - Geografía* 8 (1986): 218–19.

¹⁵ Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea, "Ideologies and Political Participation of the Commons in Urban Life of Northern Atlantic Spain during the Late Middle Ages," in *Words and Deeds. Shaping Urban Politics from below in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Ben Eersels and Jelle Haemers (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 185. In the next section I will show a parallel use of the poverty argument by Bilbao's town council in court cases targeting – according to the council – irregular traders.

Mayora de Iturribalçaga probably began her trade activities in 1509, when she obtained permission from the town council of Bilbao to resell fish in town.¹⁶ One year later, she was involved in the petition that the fishmongers presented to the town council (see Chapter 5).¹⁷ Nevertheless, in 1527, Mayora appeared in the higher courts to argue for the reversal of an ordinance the council had issued two years earlier. According to the council, the women *regateras* usually bought all the fish available for themselves and their associates and then resold it at extortionate prices. Therefore, the council prohibited sellers of dried fish and sardines from buying fresh fish for any purpose other than their own consummation. Mayora took the case to the *corregidor* of Biscay – a representative of the king who stood above the town councils and could confirm or contravene their decisions. Mayora pleaded for annulment of the ordinance. In February 1528, the *corregidor* decided in Mayora's favour. Faced with the removal of this ordinance, the town council appealed that decision to the Higher Judge of Biscay, who decided in favour of the town council to retain the ordinance. However, this did not cause all the sellers of sardines and dried fish to heed the new regulation. In 1532, Mayora and three other women fishmongers were fined for selling fresh fish.¹⁸

Although Mayora de Iturribalçaga denied performing the practices of which the town council accused her, it is likely the council did indeed make this ordinance because too many sardine sellers committed fraud while selling fresh fish. The sardine sellers were not illicit traders. They might have been informal because they were not institutionalised, but each fishmonger had permission from the council of Bilbao to sell fish. However, some of them might have often crossed 'the thin line that divided legal from illegal activities.'¹⁹ In the case of Mayora, this was the type of fish she sold

¹⁶ Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 56 (Donostia, 1995), 55r, 4 July 1509.

¹⁷ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 276r-279r, 2 October 1510.

¹⁸ AFB, Municipal, 0304/001/011.

¹⁹ Ariadne Schmidt, *Prosecuting Women: A Comparative Perspective on Crime and Gender before the Dutch Criminal Courts, c.1600 - 1810* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 248.

as well as its quality and the price she charged for it. Saleswomen and men crossed the line in both Brabant and Biscay. In the following sections, I will analyse the interactions between juridical authorities and (illicit) traders, beginning with the background and social position of these traders.

1. Market offences and irregular traders in Brabant and Biscay

A diverse group of urban residents engaged in irregular trade activities in Brabant and Biscay. Both men and women participated. In Bilbao, most women, both from the town and from outside its jurisdiction, who were involved in the cases of irregular trade were probably poorer. In the Brabantine towns, some irregular saleswomen came from a similar poorer background, but others might have been more affluent urban residents who had decided to break guild regulations. Although the amount of wealth enjoyed by Brabantine irregular traders is not clearly specified, there seems to have been wide diversity.

In Bilbao, while some women punished for illegal trade activities were citizens, the town council also clashed with non-citizens over irregular trade. In 1544, the council had a dispute with two men, citizens of the neighbouring town of Portugalete, who had sent their female servants to Bilbao to buy grain. These women had exported more grain from Bilbao than the town's bylaws permitted.²⁰ The incident triggered a lengthy court case involving the town council of Portugalete, who took over the defence of their citizens. As Portugalete naturally stood to gain an advantage if allowed to import more grain from Bilbao, similar conflicts had risen before.²¹ In the 1551 court case, the Portugalete council lost when the president of the Chancellery in Valladolid decided in favour of the Bilbao town council. Nevertheless, the conflict provides more evidence of the entanglement of the town government with irregular trade in many market

²⁰ AFB, Municipal 0034/001/008, 15 December 1551.

²¹ María Isabel del Val Valdivieso, "El trabajo de las mujeres en el Bilbao tardomedieval," in *Las mujeres vascas en la historia* (Bilbao: IPES, 1998), 74; Beatriz Bolumburu Arizaga, "El abastecimiento de las villas vizcaínas medievales: política comercial de las villas respecto al entorno y a su interior," *En la España Medieval* 6 (1985): 293–316.

fields, which forced them to tolerate the irregular traders whom they considered most harmless.²²

In the Brabantine towns, traders could be guild members, as well as the guild's informal competitors. Most of the women whose penalties for irregular trade were recorded in the *Correctieboeken* from Antwerp were outsiders to guild life. In contrast, the sentence books of the guilds offer much evidence of guild members involved in irregular trade. The widow Eskens, for example, was sent on a pilgrimage to Mons in 1497 because she had sold fish even though 'the jurors had prohibited her [from doing] this'.²³ In 1499, along with the wife of Romment Quistwater, she was sent again to Mons for selling outside the boundaries of the area allowed for sales.²⁴ Similarly, the Antwerp mercers guild prosecuted women for irregular activities. For example, the widow Verbeke was fined one pound of wax to be used in the guild's chapel because she had sold flawed tin products. Guilds prosecuted irregular trade by both outsiders and their own members.

It is not surprising that there is such a diverse group of traders engaging in irregular activities in the source documents of Bilbao, Antwerp, and Mechelen because several scholars have already noted the appearance of urban residents involved in irregular economic activities in legal records.²⁵ These irregular traders probably shared the same economic motive: trading illicitly to make a living or increase their income. A limited number of historical records from Brabant and Biscay recording women involved in irregular trade allow for speculation about the women's social position. Although there is too little evidence to support a firm conclusion, many of the transgressors might have held lower social status, especially in Bilbao.

²² Stabel, "From the Market to the Shop," 102; Jeggle, "Blurred Rules," 77, 88–89.

²³ SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 20v, 1497.

²⁴ SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 29r, 1499.

²⁵ Montenach, "Formal and Informal Economy in an Urban Context: The Case of Food Trade in Seventeenth-Century Lyon," 94; Buchner and Hoffmann-Rehnitz, *Shadow Economies and Irregular Work in Urban Europe*; Lambert, "Merchants on the Margins"; Danielle van den Heuvel, "Selling in the Shadows: Peddlers and Hawkers in Early Modern Europe," in *Working on Labor. Essays in Honor of Jan Lucassen*, ed. Marcel van der Linden and Leo Lucassen (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 125–51.

In the Brabantine towns, the social status of women involved in illicit trade was mixed. Although most sources have no information about the social status of those involved, the *Correctieboeken* of Antwerp provides hints. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, those charged could buy off most pilgrimages listed in the *Correctieboeken*. There was a fixed amount for each destination that the condemned could pay in lieu of making the actual journey.²⁶ Many of those who actually went on pilgrimage did not have the money to pay the sum. All the women in the five sentences about irregular trade discussed earlier in this section returned to the Antwerp aldermen with letters providing proof of their pilgrimages. Irregular trade might have been their main source of income. In addition, those urban residents who possessed permission to trade, such as Jan Volcmaer and his wife, who received 'good and costly grain' from the town council of Antwerp, likely jumped at the chance to increase their income by deviating from the town's exact regulations.²⁷ Women involved in guild life formed a second group of irregular saleswomen in the Brabantine towns. In the Antwerp *Correctieboeken*, fewer of them returned with letters of proof, having instead paid off their pilgrimages.²⁸ A link with the craft guilds may have given women in Antwerp and Mechelen a degree of protection. Or, reversing the causality, more of the guild women may have enjoyed a middling status in the first place.²⁹

An indication that in Bilbao, female traders involved in irregular activities probably belonged to lower social classes is their occupational titles. Most women registered in the taxation register of 1470 with an occupational title paid the lowest tax rate (see Table 3, page 62). The two *sardineras* on the taxation list suggest a low social status for Mayora de Iturribalçaga and her colleagues. The *cojedoras*, the brokers in the grain trade of Bilbao that we encountered in Chapter 4, probably did not hold high status because, as we will see later, most of them cited their need for an

²⁶ Van Herwaarden, *Opgelegde bedevaarten*, 18-21.

²⁷ Melis-Taeymans, *Correctieboek 1414-1512*, 130, 7 May 1438.

²⁸ E.g. Melis-Taeymans, 123, 17 August 1437; Melis-Taeymans, 8, 11 February 1415.

²⁹ See also: Nena Vandeweerd, "Women, Town Councils, and the Organisation of Work in Bilbao and Antwerp: A North-South Comparison (1400-1560)," *Continuity and Change* 36, no. 1 (2021): 61-87.

income when they were defending their occupations. Another group of women traders, the hosts of the linen buyers in Bilbao, also discussed below, also pleaded that they needed an income. Even if the women were strategically deploying their social status as a persuasive argument, their claims might have been sincere. It is quite likely that some women engaged in irregular activities because of financial needs. Nevertheless, the Bilbao saleswomen who took their cases to the higher courts in Valladolid were not completely without financial resources. Taking a case to court was a costly affair. Although the 1470 Bilbao tax register supports the low social status of the saleswomen at that time and place, the same cannot be assumed for the women involved in the sixteenth-century court cases, even though they practised the same occupation. While they might have been poor, they might still have had a network or financial resources to access that enabled them to take their cases to the Valladolid Chancellery. In both regions, the social status of irregular traders might have varied, which means that we need a more diversified source base to make definitive conclusions.

2. Problematic traders: prosecutions by institutions

Not all irregular trade appeared in the sources, and urban authorities did not consider every irregular practice problematic. As Ariadne Schmidt has stated, informal trade was not always irregular, and irregular trade was not always prosecuted.³⁰ Yet, the sources do indicate that some women were engaged in irregular activities. Under certain circumstances, irregular trade actually resulted in fines and legal constraints. Those circumstances are the subject of this section, which argues that the distinctions between Brabant and Biscay in the degree to which they problematised irregular trade emerged from the influence of guilds in the Brabantine towns. In Bilbao, women were not punished for engaging in informal trade but only for particular (prohibited) practices. In Antwerp and Mechelen, women were penalised for working at trades that were monopolised by guilds, as well as for prohibited activities. In short, the guilds' push to gain monopolies added

³⁰ Schmidt, *Prosecuting Women*, 249.

an extra layer to the authorities' assessment of which trade activities were irregular.

In Bilbao, women's informal work was ingrained in the organisation of the town economy. The council therefore only intervened when behaviour occurred that they considered damaging to the town, its economy, or residents. Because informal work only became irregular by judgment of the town council, there was no clear, fixed border around it. The council of Bilbao cited damage to the town economy as their reason for prohibiting the work of the *cojedoras*, brokerage by the hosts of linen buyers, and sales of fresh fish by the *sardineras*, the subject of Mayora de Iturribalçaga's protest. The three court cases that arose from these prohibitions are extensive and complex. A comprehensive explanation of the cases is now necessary, as they are significant for the remainder of this chapter. Since the case of Mayora has been developed previously, I will now focus on the court cases of the town council of Bilbao against the *cojedoras* and the council against the hosts of the *plumeras*.

The case against the hosts of the linen buyers (or *plumeras*) started in 1517 when a group of seven female linen sellers appeared before the town council to complain about their hosts. The *plumeras* were women living in the County of Biscay and surrounding areas who travelled to Bilbao to buy linen cloth. They would use the linen to make padded products, such as mattresses and pillows, to sell these, possibly in Bilbao or nearby areas.³¹ They came to Bilbao for multiple days and lodged with citizens, mostly other women, of the Biscayan hub. The women linen sellers in Bilbao had previously complained in 1488 about the hosts extorting them by charging for facilitating transactions between the linen sellers and linen buyers.³² Reacting to those (written) complaints, the council of Bilbao promulgated an ordinance in 1488 that prohibited hosts from charging more than half a *maravedí* per *vara* of linen for brokering. The council had to remind the hosts

³¹ Janire Castrillo Casado, *Las mujeres vascas durante la baja edad media: vida familiar, capacidades jurídicas, roles sociales y trabajo* (Madrid: Sílex, 2020), 292.

³² Enríquez Fernández et al., *Ordenanzas municipales de Bilbao (1477-1520)*, fol. 33r-33v, 11 July 1488.

about the regulation through new ordinances in 1499 and 1515.³³ Despite these regulations, the linen sellers summoned four hosts before the council in 1517 and accused them of extortion. According to the sellers, the hosts asked for money in return for bringing linen sellers to the buyers' shops. If they did not pay the hosts, the hosts threatened to go to other sellers who would pay them. The council fined the hosts two hundred *maravedís* and repeated the prohibition on brokerage.

After being fined, three hosts appealed to the Higher Judge of the *Sala de Vizcaya* in the Royal Chancellery in Valladolid. The hosts claimed that they had the right to 'show the tradeswomen the shops, houses, and booths where the linen sellers in Bilbao were', charging one *maravedí* for this as they had done 'as long as it could be remembered'.³⁴ Their arguments had little impact on the prohibition against charging money for brokerage. The Higher Judge claimed that:

'the foresaid *doña* María Lopez de Angulo and her companions do not ask for or take *blancas* for the *varas* of linen that the tradeswomen linen buyers buy in the aforesaid town, but instead, let the foresaid foreign tradeswomen go and buy freely in any shop or stall from any seller.'³⁵

Nevertheless, the Higher Judge agreed to the women's appeal of the fine and ordered the town council of Bilbao to return the goods it had confiscated as collateral.³⁶ Both the council and the women protested against

³³ Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 98r-100r, 28 June 1499; Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 59r, 10 December 1515.

³⁴ '[...] a las mercaderas les mostrar las lonjas e casas e tiendas de las vendederas de lienços de la dicha villa como ficieron desde del dicho tienpo ynmemorial [...]'. ARChV, Registro de Ejecutorias, Caja 359, 65, 1523.

³⁵ '[...] con este aditamiento que debo mandar y mando que a la dicha dona Mari Lopez de Angulo e sus consortes no demanden ni lleven las blancas por razon de las varas de lienços que las dichas mercaderas plumeras conpraren en la dicha villa signo que dexas a las dichas mercaderas forasteras quisieren puedan libremente yr a conprar a qualesquier tiendas e lonjas de qualesquier mercaderes ansi de la dicha villa como burgaleses y estrangeros como quisieren.' AFB, Municipal, 0031/002/010, fol. 10v.

³⁶ '[...] y las dichas *doña* Mari Lopez de Angulo e sus consortes apelaron bien. Por ende que debo revocar y reboco el dicho mandamiento y trance y remate e todo lo

this decision, the council because they did not want to return the goods and the women because they wanted permission to charge for their role as intermediaries between linen buyers and sellers. Neither sides' protests were effective, and the president of the Royal Chancellery confirmed the decision of the Higher Judge and closed the court case on 30 January 1523.³⁷

Twenty-four years later, on 21 January 1547, there were more complaints about the hosts of the *plumeras*, as some of them had continued to charge money for brokerage. The mayor of Bilbao interrogated seven hosts (two married couples, one man, and two women) and fined them 500 *maravedís*. The hosts again appealed to Valladolid, claiming that they had to charge for brokerage to recoup the costs of lodging and feeding the *plumeras*. The judges in Valladolid turned a deaf ear to their complaints and, on 27 May 1549, decided that the fine given by Bilbao's mayor had been appropriate.³⁸

For the town council of Bilbao, brokerage by intermediaries was a recurring problem in other sectors besides the linen trade as well. In the second court case, the council was essentially contesting the same irregular activities, this time by the *cojedoras*. The *cojedoras*, as we have seen in Chapter 3, were women who guarded grain brought in by merchants on mules and handled the payments of buyers. On 7 October 1524, the town council of Bilbao published an ordinance prohibiting the occupation of *cojedoruría*. The council claimed that the women brokers committed fraud and deception and were increasing grain prices for their own profit.³⁹ The local

fecho e procedido por el dicho alcalde contra las dichas doña Mari Lopez e sus consortes e doi lo todo por ninguno e de ningún valor y se fetto e haciendo e librando en este dicho pleito lo que de justicia debe ser fecho que debo de mandar y mando que sean vueltas y restitu y daba las dichas doña Mari Lopez de Angulo e sus consortes las prenda que les fueron sacadas e rematadas tales e tan buenas como estaban al tiempo que se las sacaron e tomaron sin costa alguna [...]. AFB, Municipal, 0031/002/010, fol. 10r-10v.

³⁷ AFB, Municipal, 0031/002/010, fol. 13r-14r.

³⁸ AFB, Municipal, 0031/002/010, fol. 16r-23r.

³⁹ '[...] dexan los dichos trigos en el mercado a su cargo de las dichas cogedoras e ellas azen lo que quieren e dan a los que ellas querieren dexando a otros que lo abian e querían comprar e vender mas caro de lo que el mulatero abia de vender [...]'. ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5, fol. 6r.

government called four *cojedoras* to appear before them and listen to the ordinance being read aloud so that they could spread the word about the new regulation. A fine of 5000 *maravedís* was set for those breaking the new rules.⁴⁰

Rather than simply accepting the new ordinance, in 1525, the *cojedoras* appeared before the Higher Judge of Biscay at the Royal Chancellery of Valladolid to argue its annulment. The first of their principal arguments was that the town council and *corregidor* of Biscay had no right to make this ordinance, as it impinged on the county's privileges. According to them, as citizens of Biscay, they had the right to earn an income and trade freely without being impeded by the town council. Because the ordinance contradicted this privilege, it was invalid. Next, the *cojedoras* stressed that the council's claims of fraud and extortion were lies, they conducted trade fairly and honestly, and the grain merchants chose, on their own initiative, to work with *cojedoras*.⁴¹ Finally, the women pointed out other women in the town who were allowed to earn a living by brokerage, such as the hosts of the *plumeras*.⁴² Although the conflict between the town council and the hosts had already been resolved by that point, and the hosts were forbidden to do this brokerage, clearly they were continuing the activity – and not only in secret. The idea that their activities were prohibited might not have been accepted by the town population, as the *cojedoras* saw the hosts' brokerage activities as a precedent for defending their own role as intermediaries.

Both sides made extensive arguments and counterarguments. On 9 December 1525, the *corregidor* ordered that the women could not practice

⁴⁰ In 1524, a wage worker earned thirty-eight *maravedís* for a day's work. The income of the *cojedoras*, who – as we will discuss in a later section – probably belonged to lower classes, was likely less than this amount. The fine of 5000 *maravedís* for practicing *cojeduría* was thus an enormous amount.

⁴¹ '[...] e cada una e qualquier dellas pudiesen estar e estuviesen en el dicho mercado a ganar e procurar su vida por la dicha manera onesta [...].' ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, caja 3467, 5, fol. 3r.

⁴² '[...] e abia otras mugeres e personas que tenían cargo de ospedar a las plumeras e de les comprar e vender lienços e otras cosas por salarios que les daban e asy mismo corredores e huéspedes que tenían semejantes oficios [...].' ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, caja 3467, 5, fol. 3r-3v.

their occupation while the court case was being adjudicated, and if they did so, the town government could imprison them. This decision evoked a new flurry of arguments from both parties. When a few of the women were imprisoned, the attorney for the women demanded compensation for the damages that the women suffered because of their imprisonment. Moreover, he claimed that the grain merchants needed intermediaries and that the council, who was aware of this, wanted to get rid of the *cojedoras* only to replace them with the council's own representatives, who would increase grain prices since the council members 'were rich and powerful and would be able to buy everything and the poor would die of hunger.'⁴³ On 3 November 1526, the Higher Judge of Biscay decided in favour of the council. Although the *cojedoruría* was prohibited, the arguments of both parties had made an impact. The fine for women disobeying the regulations was lowered to 600 *maravedís*. Furthermore, the Higher Judge determined that if the council required intermediaries in the grain trade in the future, it had to allow the same group of women to do so.⁴⁴

A few months later, in May 1527, the president of the Chancellery confirmed the sentence of the Higher Judge and closed the case, but it was opened again in 1531. Many of the women involved in the first court case, as well as a few new ones, had again begun to work as *cojedoras*, with permission of the council, or so they claimed. They were interrogated and

⁴³ '[...] como heran ricos e poderosos lo pudiesen conprar todo e las probes gentes muriesen de anbre [...]'. ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, caja 3467, 5, fol. 9r.

⁴⁴ '[...] mando que las dichas doña Toda de Larea e las otras sus consortes no usasen del oficio de cogedoras de la Açoque de la dicha villa segund que mas largamente en el dicho auto e mandamiento del dicho juez de residencia si contiene de que por parte de las dichas doña Toda de Larrea e las otras sus consortes fue apelado que juzgo e pronuncio e mando bien e la parte de las dichas doña Toda de Larrea e las otras sus consortes apelo mal por ende que debo confirmar e confirmo el dicho auto e mandamiento del dicho juez de residencia con este aditamento e declaración que la pena contenida en el dicho mandamiento e ordenança que fue puesta a las dichas cogedoras sea solamente seis cientos maravedís e no mas e con tanto que sy a los dichos justicia e regimiento de la dicha villa de Vilbao les paresciere que debe aver de estar algunas cogedoras en el dicho Açoque, que sean las dichas doña Toda de Larrea e sus consortes [...]'. ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, caja 3467, 5, fol. 9v-10v.

fined.⁴⁵ In 1535, the council summoned several *cojedoras* to appear before the *corregidor* of Biscay for practising the occupation. They were all found guilty, once again. It is unclear whether all those women who performed *cojedora* practices paid repeated fines. What is clear, however, is that court cases against them had little effect. The last information we have about the occupation of the *cojedoras* comes from 1536, when the Higher Judge and President of the Chancellery in Valladolid permitted a woman, Marina de Bedia, a former *cojedora*, to collect rents on grain from the merchants – a task closely related to her former occupation.

The two court cases of Bilbao, as well as the case against Mayora de Iturribalçaga and the other sardine sellers, show women's irregular activities as they were trying to earn livings for themselves and their families. The cases also clearly illustrate how the town council dealt with these activities. Initially, the council was lenient, up to a certain point. The *cojedoras* claimed that the council had permitted them to practice the occupation, even if the council's own ordinances prohibited it. Moreover, as Mayora de Iturribalçaga said in their defence, *sardineras* had sold fresh fish for many years before the council took action against them by promulgating a new ordinance.⁴⁶ The council only prohibited or impeded women's informal trade activities if it considered them damaging to the urban economy. As I argued in Chapter 3, the *cojedoras* and *sardineras*' gender was not as much the decisive factor determining the attitude of Bilbao's town council as was the actual economic activities of the women. Once again, the women's central function in provisioning the town might have been the main motivation for the council's focus on the Bilbao saleswomen. Its first step was the promulgation of normative ordinances. These allowed town officials to fine women if they were found guilty of irregular trade activities, although the council's norms and daily practice did not always align. Court cases were repeated, as it was hard for Bilbao's council to abolish the saleswomen's irregular activities. Finally, if the women did not accept the council's regulation – as was the initial impetus for all three court cases –

⁴⁵ In the next section, I will discuss their arguments in more depth.

⁴⁶ '[...] porque la dicha su parte abia mucho tiempo que tenia el dicho oficio de bender los dichos pescados frescos [...].' AFB, Municipal 0304/001/011, fol. 12v-13r.

the council did not shy away from the extensive litigation that followed. The council's main arguments were the desire for fair work practices and the negative impact of the women's activities on other traders in town.

In Brabant, just as in Biscay, local governments and craft guilds shared similar concerns over the effect of irregular trade on the town economy. Punishment for irregular activities by some female urban residents followed the same patterns as punishment for male residents. In 1542, the Antwerp mercers fined the widow of Jan Roelants for selling poor-quality tin.⁴⁷ In 1550, she was fined again for the same transgression.⁴⁸ The widow was not fined because she engaged in guild work informally. She was probably a guild master's widow, exercising her widow's right. However, her faulty work decreased product quality and, with it, the guild's reputation. In the premodern period, the reputation of guilds was a highly significant factor influencing economic trust of potential buyers in guildsmen's and guildwomen's products.⁴⁹ The penalties for urban residents who threatened this reputation are not surprising. Male members received sentences for similar offences. The Mechelen fishmonger Gielis Vijt, for example, was sent on a pilgrimage to Valenciennes and fined two pounds of wax for the guild's chapel because he had offered bad herring for sale by switching crates of good herring with crates with rotting fish.⁵⁰ In 1523, the Antwerp mercers sentenced two grocers for selling flawed goods.⁵¹ As Peter Collinge has also found for the eighteenth-century English mercer companies, the guilds in the Brabantine towns' took action against them [men] for the same reasons that they did against women'.⁵²

In addition to economic quality, guilds and local governments in the Brabantine towns also policed cultural practices. Town and guild

⁴⁷ SAA, GA#4212, fol. 157r, 1542.

⁴⁸ SAA, GA#4212, fol. 164r, 1550.

⁴⁹ Peter Stabel, "Workplace Cultures," in *A Cultural History of Work in the Medieval Age*, ed. Valerie L. Garver (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 98.

⁵⁰ SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 65r, 1509.

⁵¹ SAA, GA#4212, fol. 127r.

⁵² Peter Collinge, "Guilds, Authority and the Individual: The Company of Mercers Prosecution of Dorothy Gretton in Early Eighteenth-Century Derby," *Business History* 61, no. 2 (2019): 291.

authorities were especially vigilant about urban residents working on Sundays. A 1433 ordinance from the Leuven blacksmiths noted that some guild members were working on Sundays, which violated the prescription of the Church. As a consequence, the town council of Leuven was repeating the prohibition against work on Sundays.⁵³ The guild sentence books of the Antwerp mercers and the Mechelen fishmongers also show this concern with daily practice. In 1517, for example, seven women were fined because they had sold fish on Sundays during the lent.⁵⁴ In 1526 the widow of Claes Heyns of Antwerp had to pay three *stuivers* to the mercers guild because she had worked on Sundays.⁵⁵ A few years later, 'fat Lies', a cheese seller, shouted at the mercers' deans and jurors that they 'stunk and were drunks who would use the fines for drinking' after guild authorities fined her for working on Sundays and religious holidays.⁵⁶ All of these offenders were allowed to continue selling commodities but were charged fines for the circumstances surrounding some of those sales.

In both Brabant and Biscay, urban authorities were preoccupied with ensuring proper trade conduct and managing the economic consequences of irregular trade. However, in Brabant, in those market sectors involving guilds, authorities also prosecuted women for selling products monopolised by the guilds.⁵⁷ In 1504 Leuven, for example, three women

⁵³ 'Want sommige vanden gesellen van den smede ambachte – als maerschalccke smede, mesmakers, potghieters, plattijnmakers, sadelmakers ende meer anderen die int selve ambacht zijn – op sondage vigilië dage ende andere geboden heylige dage ontidichlijck gaen sitten wercken ende huer ambacht doen ende oick op huere vinsteren voer huere doren hen werck voortdoen ende voortsetten gelijck oft werckdach waere, gode noch 't gebot van der heyliger Kerken niet aenzien. [...] Daerom is overdragen in der stadtrade met vollen gevolghe dat van nu voertaen man noch wijff van den voirscreven ambachte des meer doen en selen in gheenre wijze.' SAL, 4648, fol. 12v-13r, 6 December 1433.

⁵⁴ SAM, Visverkopers 321, fol. 85v, 1517.

⁵⁵ SAA, GA#4212, fol. 131r, 1526.

⁵⁶ '[...] seggende dat wij sloecklars waren ende dat wij den wijn darop dronken ontfangen vor de bruecken [...]'. SAA, GA#4212, fol. 142r.

⁵⁷ As Anne Montenach has stated, women were forced into these irregular activities by the same institutions 'denying them access to legal forms of commerce'. As result, many women – and other urban residents – had to 'resort to illegal activities'. In 1983, Gerthe Jacobsen noted that the stricter work structure with closed guilds in

were accused by the fishmongers guild of selling saltwater fish. As the women lived in houses on the edge of the town's fish market, they claimed that they were allowed to sell the fish from their houses. The fishmongers countered that only guild members were allowed to sell saltwater fish. The aldermen decided for the guild and prohibited the women from selling saltwater fish from their houses on the fish market, as they were not guild members.⁵⁸ Because urban governors routinely enforced the corporation's monopoly which limited the number of tasks women could do, in Brabant, there was an additional reason for prosecution – one that cannot be found in Bilbao.

In the Brabantine towns, both men and women were punished for breaking the guild monopoly. Jan van der Rijt and Jacob Hagen were charged by the drapers guilds of Antwerp in 1471, for example. Jacob, a cloth merchant, had an agreement with Jan, a cloth manufacturer, to produce cloth using tools purchased by Jacob. The guild sued the pair because only guild members had the right to own such tools. Jacob had also failed to pay the guild for producing the cloth, a payment he had bypassed by cooperating with Jan. These types of infringements were, of course, directly connected to the guilds' efforts to gain and preserve a monopoly and their strong economic and political position in the Brabantine towns. The activities of women selling saltwater fish or merchant and cloth manufacturers teaming up were only irregular because strong guilds had laid claim to these areas of work.

Denmark throughout the Late Middle Ages caused an increase in the number of offenses concerning irregular trade. See: Anne Montenach, "Trades in Lyon in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 29; Grethe Jacobsen, "Women's Work and Women's Role: Ideology and Reality in Danish Urban Society, 1300–1550," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 31, no. 1 (1983): 11.

⁵⁸ SAL, 4659, fol. 10v-11v, 18 December 1504.

3. Making use of law

Women engaged in irregular trade, and under certain circumstances, the authorities – town councils and guilds – problematised their activities and prosecuted the actors involved. These actors did not merely accept punishment. In some cases, they defended themselves with arguments and strategies known to many urban residents, in the same way that scholars have shown female urban residents using the law, principally in cases of petty crime and (extra)marital disputes.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, as Muurling has recently stated, there has been less research on the 'legal leeway' of women in other areas.⁶⁰ In this section, I will examine the legal options of saleswomen charged with irregular trade. As we will see, women in both Brabant and Biscay were aware of their juridical options and the different institutions that were involved. Furthermore, women deployed a recurring set of arguments in their defence. However, the outcome of these conflicts in both regions seems to have depended mainly on individual assessments by judicial institutions. Only when women operated in a recognised association and could appeal to legal privileges, could they count on a more certain outcome.

3.1 *Brabantine local governments, craft guilds, and forum shopping*

In 1502, the deans and jurors of the Antwerp mercers guild called Joos Suermont before them to be sentenced for his transgressions.⁶¹ In their inspection of the market, guild authorities had confiscated a barrel of green ginger from Joos. Although the record does not make clear what was wrong with the ginger, Joos was summoned to appear before guild authorities. Refusing to do so, he instead sent his wife, who pleaded for restitution of

⁵⁹ See, among others: Sanne Muurling, *Everyday Crime, Criminal Justice and Gender in Early Modern Bologna* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020); Schmidt, *Prosecuting Women*; Daniel Smail, *The Consumption of Justice: Emotions, Publicity, and Legal Culture in Marseille, 1264 - 1423* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁶⁰ Muurling, *Everyday Crime, Criminal Justice and Gender*, 84.

⁶¹ The conflict between Joos Suermont and his wife and the mercers of Antwerp was discussed briefly in Chapter 4, see page 155-156.

the barrel. The mercers' deans and jurors agreed and did not punish Joos but warned him not to repeat his transgressive behaviour.⁶²

Two weeks later, one of the guild jurors followed Joos' wife as she was taking two barrels of green ginger home. When he tried to inspect the barrels, she shouted to him: 'you traitor, are you here again to betray me as you did once at the market?'⁶³ As Joos was held responsible for the actions of his wife, he was again ordered to appear before the guild. Again refusing, he instead presented a defence to the town government of Antwerp. Although guild authorities considered this an insult and a monumental offence, they took the opportunity to penalise Joos. The mayor and aldermen of Antwerp heeded their arguments because Joos and his wife were fined six *rijders* unless Joos was to appeal the sentence within eight days.

A few days later, three friends – also members of the mercers guild – appeared before the urban government and pleaded that Joos should be judged by the guild rather than by town authorities. Possibly, the fine of six *rijders* – an amount equal to a carpenter's wages for thirty-six days of labour⁶⁴ – was higher than Joos had expected to receive from the town government, which agreed to the request of Joos' colleagues. The guild's deans and jurors decided that Joos must go on pilgrimage to Halle, south of Brussels, and pay for four pounds of wax to be used in the guild chapel. Joos accepted this sentence and appeared before the deans and jurors of the guild on 14 November 1502, asking for forgiveness for the 'injurious words that he and his wife had spoken to the deans and jurors'.⁶⁵

⁶² The guild's jurors and deans referenced 'discovering' Joos' transgressions, which might mean he was involved in faulty trade.

⁶³ '[...] soe heeft deselve Jan de Coninck hair gevolgt tot Joosens Huyse ende begeert te ziene hetgeen dat dairinne was, dwleck de huysvrouw van Joos voirescreven nyet en heeft willen gehingen, mair heeft denselven Janne de Coninck overladen met quade ende felle wordden seggende, 'ghij verrader, zijde hier weer om mij te verraden gelijck gij mij eens van den merct gedaen hebt.' GA#4212, fol. 122v, 1502.

⁶⁴ David Jacks and Leticia Arroya-Abad, 'Belgium 1366-1603', *Global Prices and Income database*, last revised on 4 May 2005.
<https://gpih.ucdavis.edu/Datafilelist.htm>.

⁶⁵ '[...] den xiiiien dach in novembris ende bidden den dekens ende gezwoirne vergiffenisse van den injurien ende wordden die hij ende zijn huysvrouw den

Although Joos (and consequentially his wife) did end up paying a fine for substandard trade practices and verbal assault, the record of the conflict offers a prime example of how urban residents used different courts and institutions to their advantage. While forum shopping did not always safeguard them from prosecution, they could choose among courts to secure the most advantageous outcome if they were caught violating regulations. Joos might have preferred a fine from the town government over potential (temporary) banishment from the mercers guild. When the outcome from that court was not the one for which he had hoped, he might have called upon his colleagues to obtain a transfer of venue so that he could defend himself before guild authorities. While the Antwerp *Correctieboeken* demonstrates that the aldermen punished irregular traders, the case of Joos reveals the same institution as one that citizens could use, or at least try to use, to their own advantage.⁶⁶

In Brabant, as women's work often took place on the margins of the guilds, it was not always clear which institutions were responsible for controlling their labour activities. Women could use this to their advantage by contesting a guild's judgement in another urban court. Since craft guilds were still subordinate to the town councils, this could prove to be a viable strategy.⁶⁷ In 1547, Janneke de Waelinne successfully deployed this method to challenge a sentence by the Antwerp old clothes sellers guild. The guild had fined Janneke six Carolus guilders for irregular practices, and the dean confiscated some goods from Janneke as payment of the fine. Nevertheless, rejecting the guild's judgement, she argued before the aldermen of Antwerp that 'she did not come to the market with the intention of auctioning or

dekens ende gezwoirne misseet ende gedaen hadden.' GA#4212, fol. 123r-123v, 14 November 1502.

⁶⁶ Sanne Muurling has shown a similar result for early modern Bologna. See: Muurling, *Everyday Crime, Criminal Justice and Gender*, 81–107.

⁶⁷ Muriel González Athenas, "Legal Regulation in Eighteenth-Century Cologne. The Agency of Female Artisans," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 158; Anne Montenach, "Working at the Margins: Women and Illicit Economic Practices in Lyon in the Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Women and Work in Premodern Europe*, ed. Merridee L. Bailey, Tania M. Colwell, and Julie Hotchin (New York: Routledge, 2018), 197–98.

selling her goods, but she was only there to accompany her master.⁶⁸ Janneke might have been selling secondhand goods to supplement her wages as a servant. The aldermen decided against the guild's sentence and ordered the corporation to return Janneke's property.⁶⁹ Previous studies have pointed out that women could affect their opportunities by submitting their cases to local governments despite guild opposition, just as Janneke de Waelinne did in Antwerp.⁷⁰ By appealing her case to an alternate institution, Janneke turned the guild's complaints against her 'into bargaining power instead', a successful way to exercise agency within the existing framework.⁷¹

Why the Antwerp aldermen heeded Janneke's plea remains unclear. In her study of the silk trade in early modern Barcelona, Marta Vicente found that 'the city regarded women's work as necessary to the city's economy and the survival of women and their families, while the guilds considered it a threat to their interests.'⁷² In Antwerp, as well as other premodern European towns, secondhand trade was vital to the urban economy. The limited funds available to some urban residents made it a significant avenue of acquiring the necessities of life.⁷³ The aldermen might have absolved her debt to the guild because they regarded her as a poor woman. What the guilds considered an infringement of their privileges, the town council might have

⁶⁸ '[...] Want zij alhier op de merct aldair de voirscreven Hubrecht haer huer goet afgenomen hadde nyet gecommen en ware met intentien van huer goet te veylen oft vercoopen, mair hadde alleenlijck hueren meestere aldair passerende aengesproken [...]'. SAA, GA#4274, fol. 13v-14r, 21 June 1547.

⁶⁹ '[...] ende selen daenleggeren schuldich zijn hair huer goet te restituerene.' *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰ Montenach, "Working at the Margins," 197–98; Vicente, "Images and Realities of Work," 135; Kristien Harmsen and Helene Hubers, "'En zij verkocht de vis ...'. Visverkoopsters in Utrecht en Antwerpen van de veertiende tot en met de zeventiende eeuw," *Dinamiek* 8, no. 2 (1991): 31–33.

⁷¹ Muurling, *Everyday Crime, Criminal Justice and Gender*, 106–7.

⁷² Vicente, "Images and Realities of Work," 135.

⁷³ Kate Kelsey Staples, "The Significance of the Secondhand Trade in Europe, 1200–1600," *History Compass* 13, no. 6 (2015): 297–309; Harald Deceulaer, "Second-Hand Dealers in the Early Modern Low Countries: Institutions, Markets and Practices," in *Alternative Exchanges: Second Hand Circulations from the Sixteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Laurence Fontaine (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 13–42.

perceived as a necessary irregularity. As we will see, in Bilbao, women routinely used the 'poverty argument' to receive lighter sentences.

Although citizens could use different authorities to their advantage, guilds sometimes tried to prevent appeals to the town government. Guild leaders also went to court on their own initiative to ask urban authorities to penalise irregular traders, thus preventing traders from circumventing guild judgements. Margriet Michielssen, for example, was charged by the old clothes sellers guild before the aldermen for buying goods at auction in order to resell them although she was not a guild member. When she defended herself, the guild's willingness to leave the judgement up to the aldermen might have convinced these city leaders that the guild's charges were valid. In addition to confirming the fine that the guild had suggested, the aldermen stated that the guild had been right to constraint Margriet's irregular activities.⁷⁴ The masculine guilds used the same strategies as individual urban residents did. Forum shopping among institutions could work to the guilds' advantage, as well as against them.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ SAA, GA#4276, fol. 135v-136v, 7 February 1532.

⁷⁵ Forum shopping among institutions was not limited to the lowest juridical institutions (from guilds to town councils). In Brabant, citizens also took advantage of power differentials between towns. In 1453, Marten de Schrijver, a citizen of Antwerp, responded to a complaint by the butchers guild of Lier, a town neighbouring Antwerp, before the Antwerp town council. In conflicts between citizens of Antwerp and Lier, citizens of Antwerp had the right to be judged in their own town. Marten belonged to the Lier butchers guild, as well as to the Antwerp linen weavers guild. The butchers complained about this and sought to force Marten to choose between the two guilds. Marten defended himself by pointing out that many Lier butchers belonged to more than one guild. The town council of Antwerp determined that 'without the fact that Marten was a citizen of Antwerp' influencing their decision, Marten could continue practicing both two occupations. Although their claim to impartiality seems suspicious, it is, of course, impossible to know what convinced the governors of Antwerp. But in any case Marten's use of different juridical institutions played out in his favour. SAA, PK#3391, fol. 154r, 16 May 1453.

3.2 *Women's juridical strategies in Bilbao's town council and the Castilian royal higher courts*

As Ariadne Schmidt has stated, most court cases were pursued to 'restore the normal situation.'⁷⁶ By suing the town council in court in the three court cases examined above, the Bilbao saleswomen must have hoped that they would be able to continue their economic activities. Nevertheless, in all three cases – the council's obstruction of activities by the hosts of the linen buyers, the *cojedoras*, and the sardine sellers, and the ensuing court cases – the women litigants did not win sizeable victories. The *cojedoras* were forced out of their occupation after the judges in Valladolid confirmed the ordinance of Bilbao's council, even if the *cojedoras* likely continued in practice. The intermediary trade activities of the hosts of the *plumeras* were limited, and they could be fined heavily if they violated the limitations. Mayora de Iturribalçaga was fined and her plea that she and the other *sardineras* be allowed to sell fresh fish was denied. And yet, groups of women did initiate all three cases.

A significant difference from the Brabantine cases against female irregular traders was that the Bilbao women instigated court cases after new regulations had been promulgated. Most of the Brabant court cases occurred a long time after new regulations had been issued by the town governments. In Bilbao, saleswomen sued the town government in an attempt to change local regulations, in addition to initiating the lawsuits. For late medieval England, Tom Johnson has stated that litigation and court cases were the urban commons' way to access town politics.⁷⁷ Although he claims that English women did not have this option, the groups of Bilbao saleswomen might have known that the higher courts offered them the best chance of influencing the town council's regulations, even if the women were ultimately unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the women were taking a large risk by launching litigation. Court cases that reached the court of appeals were costly affairs, and many urban residents opted to pay a fine rather than

⁷⁶ Schmidt, *Prosecuting Women*, 50.

⁷⁷ Tom Johnson, *Law in Common: Legal Cultures in Late-Medieval England* (Oxford: University Press, 2020).

going through the expensive and time-consuming application process.⁷⁸ Bilbao's saleswomen drove their cases to the highest juridical institutions, thereby risking high fines and litigation costs. For a conflict to get to the *Sala de Vizcaya* required a substantial amount of money. The Chancellery required that the plaintiffs be able to pay the costs of the court case if their suit was lost. Moreover, in theory, only cases involving more than approximately 5000 *maravedís* could be adjudicated by the Higher Judge of Biscay, who decided cases appealed to the *Sala de Vizcaya*.⁷⁹

In Bilbao, there are no surviving written records of disputes among brotherhoods, town governments, and urban saleswomen, although Bilbao's town council probably sentenced and fined urban dwellers for not obeying regulations. The only historical evidence available is in the records created after women appealed to the higher courts of the Kingdom of Castile, which operated on a larger, more formalised scale. Traditionally, the urban residents of Bilbao were supposed to appeal first to the *corregidor* of Biscay. After this, they could take their case to the *Sala de Vizcaya* at the Royal Chancellery in Valladolid, and make a final appeal to the president of the Chancellery.⁸⁰

Litigation by saleswomen that reached the higher courts probably started as an oral petition to Bilbao's council, such as the one from the fishmongers in 1510. Lack of response from the town council might have prompted the women to take their cases to the next institution: the *corregidor* of Biscay, as Mayora de Iturribalçaga did. After pleading to the council, she moved next to the *corregidor*, asking him to abolish the ordinance prohibiting the sardine sellers from selling fresh fish. What is more, the *corregidor* sided with her and did negate the ordinance.⁸¹ However, the

⁷⁸ Smail, *The Consumption of Justice*, 83.

⁷⁹ Jacinto Martín Rodríguez, "Figura histórico-jurídica del Juez Mayor de Vizcaya," *Anuario de Historia Del Derecho Español*, no. 38 (1968): 648.

⁸⁰ Cristina Emperador Ortega, "El archivo de la Real Chancillería de Valladolid y la Sala de Vizcaya: fondos documentales producidos por una sala de justicia en el Antiguo Régimen," *Clío & Crímen: Revista Del Centro de Historia Del Crimen de Durango*, no. 10 (2013): 13–34.

⁸¹ '[...] declaro e mando que todos los que quisiesen bender pescado fresco e sardinas e otras cosas lo pudiesen hazer libremente e fueron los del dicho regimiento

council of Bilbao used the same juridical avenue to appeal the judgement of the *corregidor* to the Chancellery courts and eventually won the case. It is unclear whether Mayora knew how conflict might progress when she went to the *corregidor*, and whether this knowledge would have changed her initial moves in the litigation process.

While Mayora de Iturribalçaga might not have been prepared to go to the highest courts in the kingdom of Castile, the *cojedoras* and the hosts of the linen buyers themselves initiated cases in the Chancellery. When their lawsuits were denied by the *corregidor* of Biscay, the woman pushed on to the highest courts. There are a number of reasons why the Bilbao saleswomen were inclined to take this initiative.

One reason might have been that, as Merry Wiesner-Hanks emphasised about female peddlers in early modern Germany, running businesses pressed women to develop into 'forceful personalities'. 'Verbal dexterity, independence, and initiative' were all characteristics women needed to keep their businesses afloat, even though these features were 'generally regarded as negative in women.'⁸² Taking legal action was one way for the *cojedoras* and the hosts of the *plumeras* to protect their businesses.

A second possible motivation is that Bilbao's saleswomen adapted strategies from preceding cases and cited work by other saleswomen as evidence to support their own defence. The *cojedoras* deployed the brokerage work by the hosts of the linen buyers to support their claim that if other citizens of Bilbao could act as brokers, they could do so as well.⁸³

condenados en costas por aver fecho bedamiento [...]. AFB, Municipal 0304/001/011, fol. 3r.

⁸² Merry E. Wiesner, "Having Her Own Smoke. Employment and Independence for Singlewomen in Germany, 1400-1750," in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 207.

⁸³ '[...] e abia otras mugeres e personas que tenían cargo de ospedar a las plumeras e de les comprar e vender lienços e otras cosas por salarios que les daban e asy mismo corredores e huéspedes que tenían semejantes oficios [...]. ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5, fol. 3r-3v.

Moreover, some of the *cojedoras* testified that they practised the occupation because they saw other women doing it.⁸⁴

A third consideration is that by utilising precedents and other strategies discussed in the next section, the individual advantage that women could gain outweighed the risks of going to court. Smail found that most applications to the Marseilles appeal courts resulted in reduced fines.⁸⁵ Bilbao's saleswomen might have known that the chance they would gain small advantages was significant if they appealed. Even though Bilbao's saleswomen did not succeed in changing the town council's ordinances, the Chancellery judges awarded them some concessions. While the hosts of the linen buyers were forced to abandon their role as brokers, the town council of Bilbao had originally fined three hosts – Elvira de Guemes, *doña* María Lopez de Angulo and María Lopez de Laycama – 200 *maravedís*, and had taken the women's jewels, pots, and pans to pay the fine.⁸⁶ Although the Chancellery judges agreed with the council's prohibition of brokerage, the judges did order Bilbao's town government to return the goods to the women.⁸⁷ A few years later, the judges of the Chancellery made a similar decision for the *cojedoras*. Their occupation would still be prohibited, but the fines the town council had given them were substantially reduced.⁸⁸ On a group level, the *cojedoras* and linen buyers' hosts did not gain any advantage by taking their petition against the town council's ordinances to the higher courts. Individually, they did gain financial compensation.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ María Saez de Urribe, for example, answered to the interrogators who asked her if she knew that the occupation was prohibited '[...]que como beyia que andaban muchas cojedoras yendo tanvien ella fue al regimiento e pidió licencia para que cojiese como las otras [...]'. ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5, fol. 17r-17v, 4 May 1531.

⁸⁵ Smail, *The Consumption of Justice*, 85.

⁸⁶ Possibly, the women had been too poor to pay the fine of 200 *maravedís*. One of the *cojedoras* claimed she was poor and did not even have 200 *maravedís*. Another possibility is that the hosts refused to pay and the council had taken the goods as payment instead.

⁸⁷ AFB, Bilbao Antigua, Municipal, 0031/002/010, fol. 10r-10v.

⁸⁸ ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5.

⁸⁹ Jeannette Kamp and Ariadne Schmidt found a similar pattern in cases of illegitimate pregnancy in early modern Germany. Women reported themselves to

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the council of Bilbao was not able to abolish the women's occupations. The persistent reopening of court cases suggests that the women never completely stopped working as brokers. The saleswomen of Bilbao might have strategically used the possibility of going to court to achieve individual advantages. At the same time, they might have known that they could continue the trade illicitly – which could result in another risky court case.⁹⁰ Possibly, as Muurling has found for early modern Bologna, women initiated the court cases 'as part of a negotiation process' while keeping open the possibility of an informal settlement with the town council of Bilbao.⁹¹

3.3 Court arguments: economic motives and damaged town economies

Many urban residents engaged in irregular trade activities because they needed income. While financial shortfalls were not the only motive for engaging in irregular trade, poverty proved to be a useful argument in court. Local governments were inclined to allow residents to work irregularly if this was an alternative to dependence on local charitable institutions, often funded by the same governments. In such cases, the town councils often allowed transgressions and irregular trade even if it violated their regulations.⁹² Both urban residents and institutions in Brabant and

criminal courts, because this would increase their chances of getting financial compensation and/or paternity recognition. See: Jeannette Kamp and Ariadne Schmidt, "Getting Justice: A Comparative Perspective on Illegitimacy and the Use of Justice in Holland and Germany, 1600–1800," *Journal of Social History* 51, no. 4 (2018): 683–84.

⁹⁰ Sheilagh Ogilvie, "How Does Social Capital Affect Women? Guilds and Communities in Early Modern Germany," *American Historical Review* 109, no. 2 (2004): 342; Danielle van den Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women in Early Modern Dutch Towns," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton, Routledge Research in Gender and History 116–133 (New York: Routledge, 2013), 130.

⁹¹ Muurling, *Everyday Crime, Criminal Justice and Gender*, 100.

⁹² Merry E. Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," in *Germany: A New Social and Economic History, Vol. 1: 1450-1630*, ed. Bob Scribner, vol. 1 (London: Arnold, 1995), 223; Jeggle, "Blurred Rules," 88–89; Danielle van den Heuvel, "Selling in the Shadows: Peddlers and Hawkers in Early Modern Europe," in *Working on Labor*.

Biscay used the 'poverty argument' in court cases involving irregular work. In Brabant, the poverty argument was deployed by individual economic actors, as well as the guilds and other recognised associations. In Biscay, before both the town council and the higher courts, women proffered the poverty argument. When female merchants put forward arguments of poverty in court, town councils pointed out the economic damage these women had caused as a counterargument.

The scarce evidence of Brabantine merchant women claiming to be poor is likely due to a lack of sources. The majority of the evidence of irregular trade comes from guild and other urban sentence books, in which only final verdicts were written down. The litigants' arguments were not recorded. The Biscayan records contain the extensive arguments put forward in court, and so reveal women citing their poverty as a legal argument to justify their infringement of the town's regulations. In one Brabantine record – a conflict between a butchers' widow and the Leuven butchers guild – the widow did appeal to her lack of funds. In 1566, the Leuven butchers petitioned for an ordinance to prohibit butchers' widows from exercising the widow's right.⁹³ After the prohibition, widow Margriet Schrijvers asked for an exemption from the new regulation. She presented herself as 'a poor widow, responsible for nine or ten children and with many debts that her husband had contracted with the town and others.'⁹⁴ Together with two other widows – who might have given similar arguments – Margriet was granted an exemption and allowed to continue working at her husband's trade. The town council of Leuven would not have gained any advantage by denying the widow the right to work in the guild. As she pointed out, she still owed the town money, which she would not be able to pay if she lost her means of support and had to depend on charity to survive. This case, along with many similar ones, demonstrates that the poverty argument was a powerful tool individuals could deploy to gain a personal

Essays in Honor of Jan Lucassen, ed. Marcel van der Linden and Leo Lucassen (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 144.

⁹³ SAL, 4652, fol. 204r-205v, 31 May 1570.

⁹⁴ '[...] dese arme weduwe, belast met neghen oft thien kinderen, ende bovendyen met vele schulden bij wijlen haeren man soo aende stadt als andre gemaect [...]'. SAL, 4748, 6 September 1567.

advantage in court. Widows in the Leuven butchers guild were still prohibited, but Margriet obtained an exception by arguing that her personal situation merited extra consideration.⁹⁵

In Biscay court cases involving irregular trade, women also deployed the poverty argument. Two linen sellers, Joana and Milia, won an exception from Bilbao's ordinance ordering all linen sellers to have shops in the centre of town. They asked 'as a method of charity' for the council gave them more time to sell linen outside of the town centre.⁹⁶ The town council, 'seeing their necessity', granted them exceptional permission to do so for approximately two months.⁹⁷ Once again, a personalised argument based on their financial situation proved effective in the local court. Rather than forcing Joana and Milia to become dependent on begging or locally-funded charities, Bilbao's town council permitted them to continue making a living, even though they violated regulations.⁹⁸ Instead of rigidly adhering to the letter of the regulation, the council assessed cases of irregularity on an individual basis.

In Castile's higher courts, women also used the poverty argument as they defended their livelihoods. Several *cojedoras* of Bilbao referred to their economic status when they were questioned about their irregular activities. In 1531, Toda de Larrea argued that she had taken up the occupation again after leaving it for a few years because she had no other income (see Chapter

⁹⁵ Smail, *The Consumption of Justice*, 85; Sofia Ling et al., "Marriage and Work: Intertwined Sources of Agency and Authority," in *Making a Living, Making a Difference. Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society*, ed. Maria Ågren (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 85.

⁹⁶ 'Este dicho dia, por quanto por el conçejo fue e esta mandado a las dos lençeras que estan en la plaça que quitasen sus tablas e non los tovesen ende synon dentro en la villa sy queryan tener tyenda de comprar e vender, so çierta pena, e agora avian pedydo por su petyçion por via de limosna alguna largase para algunos dias.' Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 19r, 12 February 1509.

⁹⁷ 'Este dicho dia, respondyendo el conçejo a la petyçion de las dos lençeras que estan en la plaça, visto al presente su neçesydad que tyenen e vsando con ellas con pyedad, el conçejo les da liçençia doy fasta el dia de Pascoa de Resurreçion primero que viene que tengan en la dicha plaça sus tablas de lienço [...].' Enríquez Fernández et al., fol. 19v, 12 February 1509.

⁹⁸ Ling et al., "Marriage and Work," 85; Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," 223.

4).⁹⁹ On the same day, Marina de Gardea claimed that she knew the occupation had been prohibited, but 'she was married, and her husband had gone away and out of great necessity,' she had begun working at it anyway.¹⁰⁰ Two more *cojedoras* – Ochanda de Çamudio and Elvira de Exaraçu – used similar arguments to legitimize their work. In the end, all these women, except Toda de Larrea (who had also led the *cojedoras* during the first court case in 1525), received reduced fines. Although the judges in Valladolid did not explicitly state that they were responding to the women's claims of poverty, the circumstances under which they had begun working at the forbidden occupation might have played a role in the judges' decision to lower the fines.

It seems that the need for an income, even by irregular work, was a powerful, advantageous legal argument in court. However, recognised economic institutions in Brabantine towns, as well as irregular traders, could put forward the poverty argument. Guilds often cited economic need when pleading to town councils for new regulations. In 1492 the Antwerp gardeners complained about the presence of single women in the guild. They claimed that 'the number of women would multiply so that they would hurt not only the guild members but also the whole town, as the guild could not work anymore and they would all drown.'¹⁰¹ Similarly, in the 1545 conflict between the Mechelen fishmongers guild and citizens who were selling herring but were not guild members, the fishmongers argued that the guild brought prosperity to the town. If the town allowed citizens to continue irregular trade, the guild would suffer and the whole town with it.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5, 27 June 1536.

¹⁰⁰ '[...] e estaba casada e se le fue su marido e aqy por la mucha necesidad se fue a la plaça a cojer trigo [...]' ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5, 27 June 1536.

¹⁰¹ 'Dat se soe souden vermenichfuldigen in sulcker vuegen dat zij niet alleene de goede kneepen van den selven ambachte dit in allen lasten van der stad moedt gelden ende contribueren werken niet brecken ende zij liede niet met allen verdrinken en souden, maer oic mede de gemeyne porteren ende ingesetene belasten ende beswaeren.' SAA, GA#4001, fol. 64v, 30 July 1492.

¹⁰² SAM, Visverkopers 670, 1545.

In Brabant, guilds were not the only association that deployed the poverty argument successfully. Other recognised associations spoke about their economic situation to legitimise informal trade activities. In Antwerp, the mistress of the Third Order of the Franciscans, a lay female religious group similar to beguines, clashed with the linen weavers guild in 1461. The guild accused the women of illicitly doing guild work. The Third Order could rely on an old privilege that supported their defence. The privilege gave members of the order the right to work to earn a living 'because they had limited resources, and they thought that they could do this to lessen their need, without anyone hindering them.'¹⁰³ While the pre-existing privilege may have been the decisive factor in the conflict between the linen weavers and the Third Order, as I will discuss below, the privilege was originally given to this recognised community to answer their economic needs.

Since the Bilbao town council intervened in women's irregular activities when – according to the councillors – these activities damaged the town economy, it is not surprising that this was also a frequent argument in the court cases about council ordinances. In the case against Mayora de Iturribalçaga, the council argued that they made the ordinance 'because of the great disorder and many fraudulent practices from the contrary party and the great damage and harm to the citizens of the foresaid town and to the foreigners that came to it', an argument the council repeated against the *cojedoras* and the hosts of the *plumeras*.¹⁰⁴ As the council had designed the ordinances with these motives in mind, repeating the same argument might have emphasised its sincerity to the judges in the Chancellery. The council was deploying a counterargument, based on similar economic motives, to the claims of poverty used by Bilbao's female traders.

In both Brabant and Biscay, individuals, associations, and authorities put forward economic arguments in defence of and against irregular trade.

¹⁰³ Pierre Génard, "Register van den dachvaerden," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 19a (1882): 145–46, 21 October 1461.

¹⁰⁴ '[...] e lo otro porque visto la mucha deshorden e muchos fraudes que la dicha parte contraria hazia e el gran dagno e perjuyzio a los vecinos de la dicha villa e otros estrajeros que alla venían rescebían [...]'. AFB, Municipal, 0304/001/0011.

Individuals were probably motivated by the desire to win favour or advantage for themselves, while associations or authorities claimed concern for the common good. The effectiveness of the argument varied from case to case, sometimes failing completely. For example, in Bilbao, the hosts of the linen buyers argued that they needed the extra income from brokerage to finance the buyers' lodging, which was costly.¹⁰⁵ This argument had no effect because the *plumeras* had already paid their hosts for lodging. The judges ruled that the hosts had no legitimate need for extra income by brokerage.¹⁰⁶ In other words, the judges did not value the hosts' argument. If the judges had accepted the argument, the outcome of the case might have been different.

3.4 *Licenses, illegality, and community privileges*

One factor that had a favourable impact in the Brabantine and Biscayan court cases about irregular trade was membership in a recognised community. Throughout this study, I have shown that guilds limited women's labour opportunities in the Brabantine towns. These masculine institutions tried to exclude women who were not part of a guild household production unit. Guilds and other communities created social capital – the advantage that a group of peers gained by operating in a community – for their members, who all benefitted from the well-being of the institution.¹⁰⁷ However, the small group of women who did manage to acquire guild membership could rely on a recognised institution's privileges and rights.¹⁰⁸ While in Brabant, a select group of women could use their membership in a recognised guild or community in court cases challenging their labour activities, in Biscayan court cases, women had to depend more on

¹⁰⁵ '[...] que costando por año quinze e veynte ducados de alquileres de casa y teniendo sienpre dos otras criadas para en servicio dellas y vente e treynta camas guarnedas y gastando cada año cinquenta y sesenta carretadas de leña e cada uno dellos y todo ello para el servicio de las dichas mercaderas y en su utilidad y provecho y en sus alimentos [...]'. AFB, Municipal 0031/002/010, fol. 19r-19v.

¹⁰⁶ AFB, Municipal 0031/002/010, fol. 20v-21r.

¹⁰⁷ Ogilvie, "How Does Social Capital Affect Women? Guilds and Communities in Early Modern Germany," 327.

¹⁰⁸ Daryl M. Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 294.

individual arguments because these communities were conspicuously absent.

The relatively few surviving Brabant court cases against guild women emphasise the strong position of those women who had managed to secure membership in a closed patriarchal community. In 1435, for example, the Antwerp old clothes sellers tried to expel Liesbet Maes from the guild (see also Chapter 4). After her marriage to the tanner Jan Godens, the guild members argued that 'she could not work in the guild anymore since she had married a man from another guild.' In her defence, Liesbet countered that 'she had bought and received the guild membership herself and that she was a free member'. The aldermen of Antwerp decided in her favour.¹⁰⁹ The conflict between the Mechelen mercers guild and Liesbet Coolputs and her husband, which also appeared in Chapter 4, produced the same conclusion. The aldermen of Mechelen did not expel Liesbet Coolputs from the mercers guild because of her marriage but instead paid attention to the privileges she had as a guild member.¹¹⁰ As Peter Stabel has argued, guild membership 'was no guarantee of equal social and economic perspectives.'¹¹¹ The guilds were trying to exclude these women from their ranks because of their gender. By contrast, the town councils regarded them as persons privileged with the status that came with guild membership. Women's membership in a recognised institution with privileges provided women the opportunity to utilise their membership as an argument in court. Despite the guilds' wishes, the women's membership gave them a stronger position compared to that of women without guild affiliation.¹¹² The female

¹⁰⁹ '[...] de voirscreven oudecleercoepers meynden dat zy haere ambacht niet meer hanteren en soude mids dat zy eenen man van eenen anderen ambachte genomen hadde; daerop dat deselve Lysbet ver- antwoerde, dat zy dambacht van den oudencleercoepers selve gecocht ende gecregen hadde ende vry daerin waere [...]' L. Bisschops, "Oudt register, mette berderen, 1336-1439 (Vervolg)," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 28 (1891): 1-472, 220r, 27 January 1435.

¹¹⁰ SAM, Kramersambacht 90, 19 August 1489.

¹¹¹ Stabel, "From the Market to the Shop," 81.

¹¹² Susan Broomhall, "Women, Work, and Power in the Female Guilds of Rouen," in *Practices of Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Megan Cassidy-Welch and Peter Sherlock (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2008), 206; Anna C. Fridrich, "Women Working in Guild Crafts. Female Strategies in Early Modern

defendants might have advanced this argument merely as a legal strategy. The councils might have been mainly concerned about urban residents' economic independence and therefore judged these women's cases individually without considering the guilds' bylaws. Nevertheless, the women's guild memberships gave them an argument that councils would seriously consider.

To enjoy treatment as a member of a privileged group, women had to belong to such a group. Furthermore, the work they did within this group's purview had to be recognised in order for them to call upon that membership in court. They did not have to be in a craft guild. For example, the Antwerp Third Order of the Franciscans used their community privileges in a conflict against the linen weavers guild. Not only were the women part of a recognised group, but their mistress could also present a privilege that allowed them to work informally.¹¹³ The same mechanism operated in a conflict between the tailors guild and the beguines of Leuven in 1452. Just as the Antwerp linen weavers had, the Leuven tailors complained to the town council that a female lay religious community was informally conducting guild work. The town council decided that the beguines could continue working, though they were not allowed to take children of Leuven residents as apprentices in the tailor's craft.¹¹⁴ Not only did the council recognise the legitimacy of these female communities, but the women involved also knew how to use this to their advantage.¹¹⁵

The absence of guilds in Bilbao resulted in a different organisation of (women's) labour. Groups of saleswomen dominated certain market sectors, especially food and small-scale trade. Nevertheless, these women had more difficulty proving that they were members of privileged communities, which gave legitimacy to their trade activities. They were, of

Urban Economies," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 145–46.

¹¹³ Pierre Génard, "Register van den dachvaerden," *Antwerpsch Archievenblad* 19a (1882): 145–46, 21 October 1461.

¹¹⁴ SAL, 4648, fol. 459r-459v, 10 June 1452.

¹¹⁵ W. Mark Ormrod, *Women and Parliament in Later Medieval England* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 64.

course, part of the urban community, but exactly the same institution that led this community – the town government – ensured good conduct in the trades that encompassed the women's irregular trade (see Chapter 3). In this situation, women logically relied on individual defensive strategies, such as appealing to their poverty when defending their businesses in court. The lack of community gave the saleswomen no protection as a group, just as other scholars have also found.¹¹⁶

Although saleswomen had difficulty obtaining and proving it, recognition of their work seems to have been an important factor in the defence of their work opportunities in Biscay. One way of managing their work was to acquire a trade license that saleswomen had to request from the council. Possessing a license gave a woman leverage and legitimacy. When questioned by the town council, several retailers mentioned their licenses, thus guaranteeing their positions. In 1509, for instance, the town council of Bilbao asked María Ochoa de Guinea who had given her the right to sell fresh fish, salted fish, and fruit in a shop in the town. She had answered that her father had held the license before he died, and the council gave her permission to continue the business.¹¹⁷ Though they were not formally organised, women could use their licenses as a means to claim recognition for their work. Their licenses provided a response to the doubts of Bilbao's town council about the legality of their trade activities.

If they did not have a license, as was the case with Mayora de Iturribalçaga, Bilbao women still tried to show the legitimacy of their work. Mayora argued for her case by citing the custom of women to sell fresh fish, which had been in existence for a long time. She added that the newly appointed officials in the town government did not have the same level of experience as the women had.¹¹⁸ In their statements, the *cojedoras* often referred to other women practising their occupation, as well as to the permission they had asked from the town council of Bilbao. Although the

¹¹⁶ Wiesner, "Gender and the Worlds of Work," 223; Ormrod, *Women and Parliament in Later Medieval England*, 70; Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*, 294.

¹¹⁷ Enríquez Fernández et al., *Libro de acuerdos y decretos municipales de la villa de Bilbao: 1509-1515*, fol. 18r, 9 February 1509.

¹¹⁸ AFB, Municipal, 0304/001/0011, fol. 3r.

judges in Valladolid did prohibit their occupation in the final verdict, among the reasons they gave for the *cojedoras*' reduced fines was that 'it was the first time and it seemed that [Bilbao's] government had been tolerant.'¹¹⁹ Recognition of women's labour was an important factor in the defence of their economic activities.

Whereas the women argued that their positions were legitimate, the council of Bilbao focused precisely on undermining that legitimacy to prove that the groups of saleswomen were operating illegally. This opposition is most visible in the council's dispute with the *cojedoras*. In court, the Bilbao council repeated many times that the women should not have been working in the occupation in the first place. In 1525, in the council's initial response to the women's argument, the council claimed that in all the kingdom, 'there were no similar *cojedoras* nor barraters like the contrary party wanted to be.'¹²⁰ The council was claiming that other local governments did not allow these brokers in the grain trade. Similar occupational niches in other towns would have given the *cojedoras* an argument in their favour. Since the women had no privileges nor recognised membership in a community to support them, it was harder for them to organise a collective defence against the town council's arguments. Whereas in the Brabantine towns, guild membership gave a solid argument to those few women who were insiders to guild life, in Bilbao, women had to depend on individual arguments rather than having the ability to act as a community.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ 'Pero atento que es la primera bes a paresce que habido alguna tolerancia por los del dicho regimiento [...]' ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5, 27 June 1536.

¹²⁰ '[...] que en todos los nuestros reynos ni en las comarcas no abia semejantes cogedoras ni barateras como las dichas partes contrarias quería ser [...]'. ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 3467, 5, fol. 4r.

¹²¹ The collective court case of the *cojedoras* suggests that they did have a type of collective or occupational identity and/or network. Nevertheless, the lack of recognition by the town council of Bilbao prevented them from using this in court. See also: Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton, "Afterword," in *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640 - 1830*, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 247; Ormrod, *Women and Parliament in Later Medieval England*.

3.5 *Private uses of law*

Occupational communities were not the only entities that provided protection to women in disputes over their work. Local communities, families, and access to financial resources could also provide solutions.¹²²

In Bilbao, María Ibañez de Mendieta, a linen seller, was able to depend on these means of protection. In 1561, María – still a minor less than twenty-five years old – became the owner of a linen store in a house owned by Juan de Recalde, another citizen of Bilbao. The shop had previously belonged to the three (minor) De Escalante sisters: Ana, Catalina, and Antonia. According to the sisters, María plotted with Juan de Recalde to take over the shop. She urged him to increase the rent of the premises, thus forcing the sisters out of their store. The affair went to court when María blamed the sisters for spreading gossip about her in town.¹²³ Furthermore, she claimed that the sisters came to her shop, shouted, and assaulted her. The sisters testified that María was threatening them by saying 'that she should cut their mouth from one ear to the other'. However, the sisters were sent to prison until the case was resolved.¹²⁴ Although they won one of the appeals, they eventually lost the case in Valladolid and were fined one thousand *maravedís* and the costs of the court case. Most of María's witnesses were married or widowed citizens, some of them partners of clerks and some influential citizens of Bilbao. Moreover, records of María's commercial transactions – involving large sums of money – can be found until the 1590s¹²⁵. While the de Escalante sisters might have had reason to blame María for swindling them out of their shop, it seems that she had a network of support that helped to extend her economic activities and defend her transgressions.

¹²² Kamp and Schmidt, "Getting Justice: A Comparative Perspective on Illegitimacy and the Use of Justice in Holland and Germany, 1600–1800," 682; Collinge, "Guilds, Authority and the Individual," 292–93.

¹²³ According to Ibañez, the de Escalante sisters had spread the rumour that she and her father used to sell stolen fish in Bilbao.

¹²⁴ '[...] que yo hos aga cortar la boca desde la una oreja hasta la otra [...]'. ARChV, Sala de Vizcaya, Caja 561, 2.

¹²⁵ AFB, Judicial 1004/067, 2 June 1562; AFB, Judicial, 0087/291, 22 May 1591.

In the Brabantine towns, guilds not only prosecuted women's irregular work but were also institutions that settled conflicts.¹²⁶ When guild members perceptively used the guilds' juridical structures, they were not necessarily contradicting the guild's wishes. Citizens could also use the guild courts to settle internal conflicts. In the sentence books of the Antwerp mercers, for instance, it was common for guild members to resolve their conflicts voluntarily to avoid further conflict. Cornelis de Moleneer, Jan Hendricks, and the two craft members' wives swore an oath in 1533 not to verbally assault each other. The conflict between the two couples had been brought before the guild authorities by Cornelis. As Jan denied slandering him and there was no evidence of Cornelis' claims, the two parties agreed to end the conflict.¹²⁷ A similar settlement happened between the widow Bax and Willem de Blauwverver. Willem had accused the widow of falsifying the weights she used in her tin store,¹²⁸ but no evidence had been found. Willem had to ask the widow for forgiveness and swear not to defame her anymore.¹²⁹ Settlement of conflicts such as these was advantageous to the litigants, as well as to the guild itself. As reputation was of immense importance, both for individuals and guilds, gossip and slander could be extremely damaging.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Ariadne Schmidt has found this as well for the early modern Northern Low Countries. See: Schmidt, *Prosecuting Women*, 49.

¹²⁷ SAA, GA#4212, fol. 44r, 1533.

¹²⁸ Interestingly enough, Willem was not the only one accusing the widow of falsifying the weights. The wife of Jan de Bruyne had done the same. SAA, GA#4212, fol. 36v-37r, 1531.

¹²⁹ SAA, GA#4212, fol. 39r-39v, 1531.

¹³⁰ Garthine Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England*, Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 102; Peter Stabel, "Workplace Cultures," in *A Cultural History of Work in the Medieval Age*, by Valerie L. Garver (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 98.

CONCLUSION

Part II analysed women's agency in economic activities in Mechelen, Antwerp, and Bilbao. As discussed in the chapters, the ability of women to influence or expand their labour opportunities exceeded the limits placed on them in ordinances made by town governments, sometimes at the request of the craft guilds. Under certain circumstances, women could directly ask town authorities for changes in regulations. Using their vital function in the town economy as leverage, they forced the town government to heed some of their complaints. However, it was much more common for urban men and women to violate regulations by working and trading illicitly.

In both Brabant and Biscay, there was clearly a thin line between informality and irregularity, or even between regular and irregular trade. Local governments considered women's and men's trade activities problematic – and thus irregular – when they caused economic damage or (social) disorder. The councils probably had little control over urban residents' informal work done on a small scale. Moreover, after regulations were established or punishments assigned, many men and women repeated the same transgressions, a pattern that emphasises how difficult it was for institutions to establish prescribed norms. Nevertheless, we also see that town councils, as well as craft guilds, tried to prevent irregular trade activities that would reduce the size of the revenue from sources of income such as taxes and guild entrance fees. Clearly aware of this, urban residents attempted to litigate against complaints.

Bargaining with the town council was not always fruitful. It was harder for women if they did not cooperate as a group or were not recognised as a legitimate community. The success or failure of petitions and complaints about regulations show this pattern. When groups of saleswomen were recognised as necessary for the town economy, or when they had managed to obtain privileges and recognition as a group, women had leverage they could deploy in a petition or an oral argument to the town council. When the small number of women in Brabant who were guild members were involved in individual conflicts or court cases, their membership in a recognised

association could lead to a more favourable outcome. Guild women had an effective protection against their own guild's prosecution of their labour activities. In Biscay, most saleswomen could not invoke (group) recognition. Aside from showing a license, most women in Bilbao used individual arguments in their efforts to gain favourable decisions in conflicts about irregular work.

The most frequent individual strategy of women was to offer evidence of their need to continue their activities in order to earn a living. The need for an income was an effective argument to make to judicial authorities because the town governments – which often held this judicial authority – would otherwise have to provide a means of support to the unemployed urban resident. However, when litigants of either region put forth the poverty argument, we learn nothing about their actual financial condition. In premodern Europe, individuals, town governments, and guilds all appealed to economic need when litigating and petitioning in court. It was a strategy wielded because it was effective. In the case of women's irregular trade activities, the usual results of the argument were lenience or lighter punishment.

Even if women's court strategies and petitions did not always have the intended effect, evidence of women's (and men's) use of these strategies shows their awareness of their agency. In Biscay, documents give evidence of saleswomen deploying effective strategies not only for their own benefit but also with awareness of the leverage they could have as a group. In Brabant, women's initiative was less visible in the historical records than it was in Biscay, but the women who belonged to a privileged association or guild were just as aware of their advantage as male members were.

General conclusion

This study advances a fresh perspective on the north-south thesis that is based on broad generalisations about the differences in women's economic activities in northern and southern Europe. While earlier studies have often advanced general conclusions about north-south dichotomies, I intended to discover a more nuanced explanatory framework for geographical variations in women's economic positions through a comparison of women's labour opportunities in Brabant and Biscay. By involving the local contexts, particularly the institutions responsible for the organisation of (women's) work, of the towns chosen for this study from each region, I hope to encourage new approaches and perspectives on regional differences in women's labour opportunities.

According to earlier studies, north-south differences can be explained by distinct family structures and the use of restrictive Roman law versus customary law. Following the logic of this argument, Brabant and Biscay technically fit into the north-south framework. Brabantine urban economic and social structures revolved around the nuclear couple and their household. Urban customary law in Brabant provided the couple and the surviving spouse with extensive and lucrative property rights, as well as maintaining equal inheritance rights for sons and daughters. Biscayan customary law, by contrast, with its lengthy clauses protecting property from spreading outside of the lineage, was in theory more beneficial to the extended family. Furthermore, inheritance rights in Biscay favoured a single – usually male – heir rather than the division of immovable property among all the sons and daughters. In theory, the comparative approach of this study should find that any distinct characteristics were based on these structural differences in Biscayan and Brabantine urban societies. However, the comparison reveals other factors that caused variations in women's labour opportunities between the two regions.

Mechelen, Antwerp, and Bilbao – the three towns investigated in this study – were similar in the sense that their economies were fuelled by expanding commercial activity. At the beginning of the period covered by

this research, the greatest profit-making business in Mechelen and – to a smaller extent – Antwerp was still an industry, production of wool cloth, often known as the drapery. Bilbao enjoyed profits from its maritime industries and mineral mining in the surrounding hills. However, by the early sixteenth century, the economic prosperity of all three towns was fuelled primarily by trade.

This study has concentrated on women's roles in occupations concerned with daily provisioning of a town and its residents. Analysis of comparable historical records about these occupations has revealed the impact of the institutions responsible for organising work on women's labour opportunities. In the Brabantine towns, most commercial and productive sectors were organised (partially) in guilds. The guilds attempted to monopolise the occupations in their sectors and gain the formal right to participate in the government of the town. Although most market sectors considered in this study were traditionally female, not all women's activities were compatible with the guilds' patriarchal and masculine values. In Bilbao, the majority of trades supplying necessities were solely in the hands of women. Although these retailers were licenced and worked full-time, they were not formally organised in an occupational institution such as a guild.

The financial status of women who worked in these occupations differed in the two regions. In the Brabantine towns, many of the women appearing in the sources worked in guilds, generally through a husband or other household member. Although social diversity within guilds was great, most guild members belonged to middling groups. Consequentially, many of the women in the Brabantine records might have belonged to these groups. In Bilbao, by contrast, an analysis of the 1470 taxation register showed that many saleswomen in the specified occupations belonged to the lower classes. Women from middling groups rarely appear in the available Bilbao records.

The influence of guilds on women's work is highlighted in the records of Mechelen and Antwerp. Both normative sources and judicial documents reveal the guilds' influence. Often new regulations were made at the request of one of the corporations. Gendered language in guild regulations in

Mechelen and Antwerp often distinguished between male guild members and their families, and female (and male) guild outsiders. Most ordinances regulating guild work did not mention women and instead focussed on men's work. When women were mentioned or feminine language was used, guild regulations were rarely referring to all women. Usually, the regulation made distinctions based on a woman's relationship to a guild member or her work in accordance with the guilds' privileges.

The first group of women addressed in the Brabantine ordinances were informal traders and women working without guild membership. Some women possessed licenses or (guild) permission, such as the *uitdraagsters* of Antwerp and the *haringvrouwen* of Mechelen. Usually, however, the guilds tried to limit competition from guild outsiders, as this meant loss of income for the corporation. Women who were on the outside of guild life and trying to earn a living by informal or irregular sales activities were, therefore, outsiders and easy targets. In addition to the normative ordinances that record the guilds' efforts to impede informal trade (by women), Brabantine sources of daily practice show the guilds' concern for loss of income. As a measure against this, the corporations prosecuted non-guild competitors and restricted irregular trade activities. Guilds often had authority to do this themselves.

The second group of women mentioned in guild regulations were guild masters' family members. Regulations usually declared wives of masters – as well as other family members in some cases – exempt from regulations excluding informal competitors. Nevertheless, while guild ordinances emphasised the corporations' lenience towards guild masters' wives and other female family members, an analysis of the sentence book of the Mechelen fishmongers guild revealed ambivalence towards the household production unit. The fishmongers guild prosecuted fishmongers and their wives when spousal cooperation assumed a form the guild disliked. Wives were allowed to work at tasks that were complementary to tasks performed by their husbands. When, in the sixteenth century, Mechelen fishmongers' wives began to perform the same sales work as their husbands, the guild regarded the wives as (unwelcome) competition.

Some guilds did not exclude all women. For example, masters' widows were generally accepted in the guilds because they were substituting for their deceased husbands as household heads. Female wagedworkers were not guild members, but the corporations allowed them to do specific tasks and benefitted from this group's participation. Furthermore, membership lists of a few guilds reveal a group of female members. In some corporations, such as the Antwerp and Mechelen mercers, membership was not limited to men, but the number of male members exceeded the number of female members. There were probably more barriers than financial expenses that prevented women from joining even those guilds that were accessible. A substantial group of women did not work under their own names but were instead invested in household workshops. Notwithstanding, the masculinity at the basis of guild life might have also hindered women from joining corporations in their own names. In patriarchal premodern urban societies, women had to find an accepted avenue to conform to the norms of the guild and society as a whole.

The Bilbao case study presents interesting contrasts to the conclusions drawn from Brabant, precisely because of the absence of powerful corporations dominating the town's occupations. Bilbao was one of the main distribution points of (northern) foreign products to the rest of the Castilian kingdom. Maritime commerce and seafaring in general were the foundation of the town's economy. However, occupations that provided this commercial town with basic commodities and food were not formally organised. Instead, women played important roles in many retail food and small-scale trades. It seems that a few occupations, such as fishmongering, bread baking and sales, and fruit and candle sales, were practised almost exclusively by women. Most of them were not wholesale merchants but bought small quantities of products to sell them again. Although their individual incomes were likely meagre, these saleswomen were directly responsible for the distribution of food and basic commodities in Bilbao.

The town council of Bilbao was responsible for regulating the saleswomen's economic activities. There were many ordinances to regulate food and small-scale trades, which therefore specifically addressed women. The town council of Bilbao fixed the prices that the saleswomen charged for

their products. The council dictated the locations and times for legal sales, and promulgated regulations prohibiting tricks, fraud and other illicit practices. While Bilbao's town ordinances concentrated more often on regulating women's work than did the ordinances of Antwerp and Mechelen, gender was not the given motive for their extensive regulation of working women. The town council of Bilbao promulgated ordinances because of their economic concerns about daily practice. As a result, the council addressed women because they were economic actors in certain market sectors. In 'defence of the customer', the town council meticulously regulated the saleswomen's trade practices, although the council was also concerned about avoiding the loss of tax and excise revenue. Bilbao's urban government rarely differentiated among women based on marital status or parentage, instead directing their attention to the occupational activities of the women addressed in the ordinances.

Women might have been important actors in Bilbao's daily trade, but this did not lead to relaxation of gender norms. Bilbao's society was, after all, just as patriarchal as the societies of other premodern European towns. Although men did not take over women's activities in 'feminine' occupations, there were many occupations and positions not accessible to women. There were several additional factors that limited women's choice of work. More lucrative occupations and positions requiring authority were dominated by men. Most of the women visible in Bilbao's records worked at jobs that did not pay enough to be attractive to men. A group of merchant women – mostly wealthy widows – managed to buy and sell textiles and other wholesale products on a large scale. Their labour resembles the activities of the Brabantine *femmes soles*, who were sometimes engaged in extensive trade networks. Although this topic is beyond the scope of this study, future comparative research on the economic opportunities of these groups of women in the two regions could further deepen our understanding of regional differences.

The normative ordinances of Brabant and Biscay illuminate the ways in which authorities impacted women's work opportunities but give little insight into daily practise or the flexibility women had in complying with

the regulations. In premodern towns, many urban residents, both guild members and others, were involved in informal and illicit trade networks. The historical records lead me to conclude that men and women in both regions often evaded regulations as they sought (increased) income. The evasion only became a problem for urban and guild authorities when the loss of revenue was excessive. When confronted with their violations, these irregular traders deployed a set of arguments that were often common to both regions.

When governing institutions prosecuted them for irregular labour activities, some women from both regions applied similar strategies to deal with the charges. One important similarity in the regulation and prosecution of women's work between premodern Brabant and Biscay is the recurring importance of economic motives – to the authorities and to the accused salespersons. In both regions, the possible loss of income for individuals, guilds, or the town, could influence the decisions of judicial authorities in court cases. The guilds and individual saleswomen used the economic impact of restrictions, fees, and commercial activities in general as an argument. Individual women – especially in Bilbao – deployed the poverty argument to win exceptions and profits. Institutions, associations, and informal groupings of saleswomen also invoked their economic importance to the town's wealth and financial prosperity as an argument against illicit traders.

A second factor that influenced court cases in both regions was the recognition of an association by urban authorities. Group recognition allowed for direct influence on the organisation of the occupation, and formal privileges provided a defence against legal prosecution of the involved actors in general. In Mechelen and Antwerp, craft guilds were the most prominent of such associations. Not only were they recognised by town authorities, but they even were part of the authorities. Women played little or no role in the high offices of the craft guilds, which means that there is little evidence of women's influence on urban policies and regulations. However, on a lower level, guild membership or a recognised affiliation to a guild provided women with an individual defence against prosecution, both from the urban government and from the guilds themselves.

In Bilbao, no female occupational groups enjoyed formal recognition. On the one hand, the framework of women's work was less stable as a result. Unless they had been granted a license by the town council, Bilbao saleswomen had no privileges, such as those held by guilds and guild members in Antwerp and Mechelen, to invoke in their disputes with authorities. On the other hand, the significance of women's roles in food distribution in Bilbao gave some of the groups, especially the fishmongers and bread bakers/sellers, leverage that resembled the clout of the Brabantine guilds over the town council. The women in these occupations cooperated with each other to secure changes in the council's regulations or argue with the council before a higher court. Even though they were not recognised formally, they operated with a sense of group identity.

While some of the systems involved in women's work were similar in Brabant and Biscay, this study has also revealed a sharp difference in the labour conditions for women in each town. The reason for these differences in the visibility of women in the sources, women's interactions with town government, and women's labour opportunities was the existence of two distinct structures of work organisation in Brabant and Biscay. In Mechelen and Antwerp, the specific factors that had the greatest influence on women's labour opportunities were the strong position of guilds and the prevalence of the household economy. The gaping absence of these institutions in Bilbao created the space for women to choose to work at 'low status, low pay' occupations, such as retail, which were formally dominated by men in the Brabantine towns.

The policies of guilds towards working women varied for distinct groups of women performing specific work activities. Some craft guilds explicitly excluded women as guild members. Other guilds created space for guild members' wives and children but then largely ignored female activities and focussed on men's labour. Whichever policy individual corporations held, they considered women easily excluded outsiders. Some occupations organised by guilds in Brabant were largely the province of women in Bilbao, where corporations had not claimed these tasks. Whereas the origins of these institutional differences between the two regions might be

investigated by future research, the effects of these differences are visible in women's labour opportunities, their interaction with authorities, and their uses of law.

The effects of disparate institutions charged with organising labour went beyond the ways that certain market sectors were gendered. It impacted which women could perform which type of work. In Brabant, women's work depended on their parentage, social status, and marital status. In general, access to guilds was often the result of a woman's relationship with a guild master. In Antwerp and Mechelen, some guilds did grant women membership, but even these 'accessible' guilds had few female members. In Bilbao, there was little that prevented women from participating in food trades and retail. Rather, it seems that a woman's initiative to start an independent (small-scale) business was a response to financial need. For this reason, Bilbao's highly visible saleswomen might not have enjoyed the same degree of wealth as the women appearing in the Brabantine guild records. However, their labour opportunities were not dependent on the claim of male institutions over small-scale trade.

Although guilds obstructed the labour opportunities of some women, at the same time, they provided a favourable, stable position to certain privileged groups of women that the guilds had included, either through household cooperation or, for some, as female members. These women could rely on the guilds' formal privileges. In Bilbao, there might have been a similar group of married women who were active in their husbands' occupations. Yet, it is striking that there are no surviving sources with records of this group. Likewise, in Mechelen and Antwerp, a group of informal saleswomen probably operated in parallel to the craft guilds, but there is little information about this lower social group, who were probably similar to the Bilbao saleswomen. Research on similar towns with records on these groups could provide insight to fill the gap in the Brabantine and Biscayan sources.

The focus on Brabant and its guild work has extended and nuanced the explanatory framework for regional differences in women's labour opportunities. However, the use of multiple types of Brabantine sources also

deepened our understanding of the attitude of guilds towards women's work. Negotiations to fit women into the patriarchal guild framework were complex and varied because not all women were subject to the same policies. In addition, some negotiations about women's work opportunities were implied rather than clearly stated. While the sources do display the problematic nature of women's work in the patriarchal guilds, many more implications of gender remain concealed. The consultation of various types of sources helps to reveal additional layers of negotiation.

The selection of Bilbao as the southern case study shows the limitations of explaining women's economic activities in a region by its legal system. Even though Bilbao's customary law was closely linked to Roman law, the impact of Roman law on women's labour opportunities in the Biscayan harbour towns seems negligible. In lower social groups, other factors influenced women's labour opportunities, even though property and inheritance rights might have affected other aspects of their lives. The Bilbao case study stresses the need for research that contrasts legal norms and practices and includes all social groups.

The Biscayan and Brabantine women studied in this book were active economic players, even though the system influencing their labour opportunities differed. In Bilbao, most food and retail trades were largely staffed by women, who were thus responsible for the distribution of food supplies in the town. In Antwerp and Mechelen, these commodities were also sold informally, but their sale was controlled by the guilds. Although they included certain groups of women in this process, these corporations maintained a heavily masculine guild culture. Rather than confirming or rejecting the north-south thesis, I chose and advise dismantling the borders and including a broader institutional framework in comparative empirical research.

Appendices

1. Deciles tables of men and women from the taxation registers of Mechelen, Antwerp, and Bilbao

Appendix Tables 1 through 3 provide an overview of the male and female taxpayers in the taxation registers of Mechelen, Antwerp, and Bilbao per decile. As discussed in Chapter 1, Section 3, I divided the taxpayers into ten equal groups according to their registered tax amount. In the 1544 housing rent levy of Mechelen, there were ten groups of 456 or 457 taxpayers. In Antwerp's 1537 housing rent levy, each group counted 124 or 125 taxpayers. In the 1470 Bilbao tax register, the taxpayers were divided into groups of 207 or 208. These groups include the majority of taxpayers, but composite taxpayers' entries such as 'widows and heirs' were not included. Therefore, this visualisation of the deciles stresses the comparison between men and women taxpayers in the three towns.

Appendix Table 1. Decile division of women and men taxpayers in the 1544 taxation register of Mechelen according to the paid amount (in stuivers).

Decile	Mechelen							
	Minimum taxation amount		Maximum taxation amount		Women		Men	
	Stuivers		Stuivers		#	%	#	%
1	0		8		158	34.6	288	63
2	8		11		119	26	333	72.9
3	11		14		96	21	356	77.9
4	14		18		102	22.3	353	77.2
5	18		21		82	18	371	81.4
6	21		28		83	18.2	372	81.6
7	28		36		61	13.4	393	86.2
8	36		48		62	13.6	390	85.5
9	48		76		60	13.2	389	85.3
10	77		589		46	10.1	394	86.4

Source: SAM, K. Geldwezen, IV. Belastingen op de huizen, Serie I, Nr. 1, 1544.

Appendix Table 2. Decile division of women and men taxpayers in the 1537 taxation register of Antwerp according to the paid amount (in stuivers).

Decile	Antwerp					
	Minimum taxation amount		Maximum taxation amount		Total of taxpayers	
	Stuivers		Stuivers			#
1	54		150	37	29.6	86
2	150		225	24	19.2	101
3	225		300	18	14.5	106
4	300		480	9	7.3	115
5	480		660	10	8.1	113
6	660		900	9	7.3	115
7	900		1200	8	6.5	115
8	1200		1590	14	11.3	109
9	1596		2400	10	8.1	114
10	2400		19200	12	9.7	110
						88.7

Source: SAA, HN#103, Belastingsscohiere van 1537. Huizentelling: 4de en 6de wijk, buitenrijen (PK 2559 en 2566).

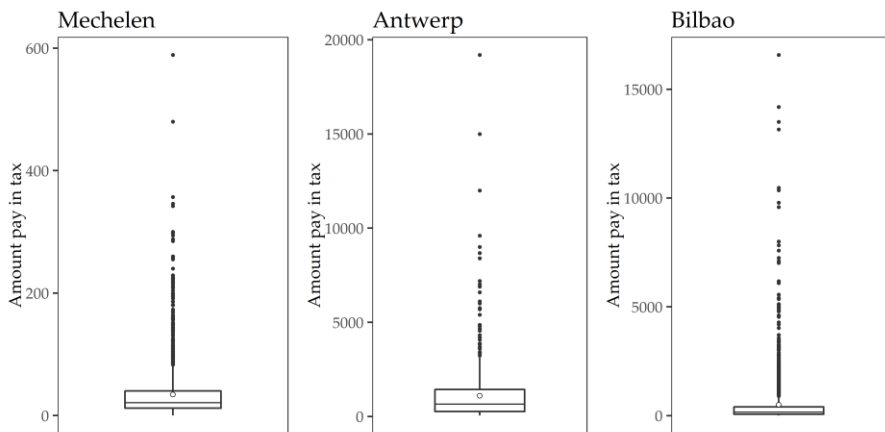
Appendix Table 3. Decile division of women and men taxpayers in the 1470 taxation register of Bilbao according to the paid amount (in maravedís).

Decile	Bilbao							
	Minimum taxation amount		Maximum taxation amount		Women		Men	
	Maravedís		Maravedís		#	%	#	%
1	4		31		124	59.6	62	29.8
2	31		42		153	73.6	40	19.2
3	44		62		56	26.9	124	59.6
4	62		125		52	25	119	57.2
5	125		161		20	9.6	166	79.8
6	162		200		10	4.8	168	81.2
7	203		312		14	6.8	145	70
8	312		581		9	4.3	159	76.8
9	583		1250		7	3.4	165	79.7
10	1250		16581		1	0.5	172	83.1

Source: Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., *Repartimientos y Foguera-Vecindario de Bilbao (1464-1492)*, Fuentes Documentales Médievals Del País Vasco 71 (Donostia, 1996).

2. Boxplot display of the taxation registers of Mechelen, Antwerp, and Bilbao

Appendix Figure 1 visualises the distribution of taxpayers for the taxation registers from Bilbao, Antwerp, and Mechelen, as referred to in Chapter 1, Section 3. The visualisation of this distribution immediately reveals the enormous inequality in the three societies. Especially in Bilbao, the difference between the tax amounts paid by the upper quartile of the population and paid by the taxpayers in the first three quartiles is striking. In Bilbao, 65 per cent of women taxpayers figured in the lowest quartile versus a mere 13 per cent of male taxpayers. In Antwerp, 45 per cent of the women taxpayers can be found in the lowest quartile (in contrast to 22 per cent of male taxpayers), while in Mechelen, this number was 39 per cent, compared to 19 per cent of male taxpayers.



Appendix Figure 1. Boxplots for the taxation registers of Mechelen (1544), Antwerp (1537), and Bilbao (1470).

Source: SAM, K. Geldwezen, IV. Belastingen op de huizen, Serie I, Nr. 1, 1544; SAA, HN#103, Belastingsohieren van 1537. Huizentelling: 4de en 6de wijk, buitenijen (PK 2559 en 2566); Javier Enríquez Fernández et al., Repartimientos y Foguera-Vecindario de Bilbao (1464-1492), Fuentes Documentales Médiévalas Del País Vasco 71 (Donostia, 1996).

3. Apprentices list of the Antwerp mercers guild

Appendix Table 4 shows the list of apprentices entering the Antwerp mercers guild in 1516 and 1517 as referred to in Chapter 2, Section 2. Within the mercers guild, apprenticeships were only necessary for certain occupations, mainly those requiring hands-on skills to produce goods. While women figure as members in the Antwerp mercers' membership lists, especially in retail occupations, only men were registered as apprentices in this less extensive list.

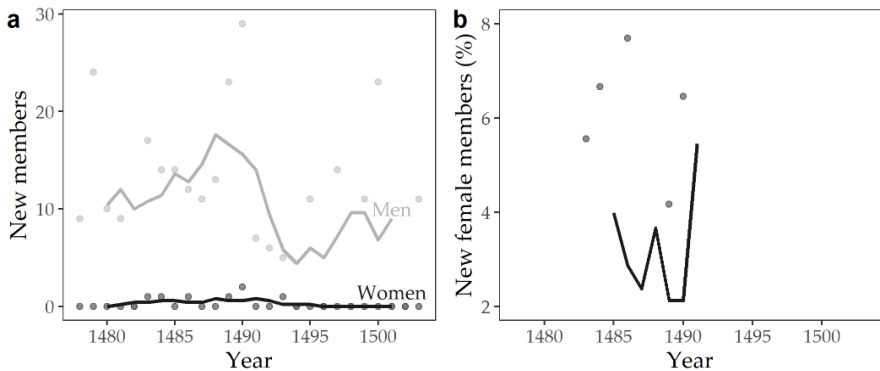
Appendix Table 4. Apprentices entering in the Antwerp mercers guild in 1516-1517.

Apprentices	#
Purse maker	9
Tin smith	8
Twine dyer	8
Hatter	7
Grease maker	7
Drape dyer	3
Belt buckle maker	2
Shoelace maker	2
Belt maker	2
Glove maker	1
Potter	1
Game maker	1
Total	51

Source: SAA, FA#22, Rekeningen van het Meerseniersambacht, 1515-1538.

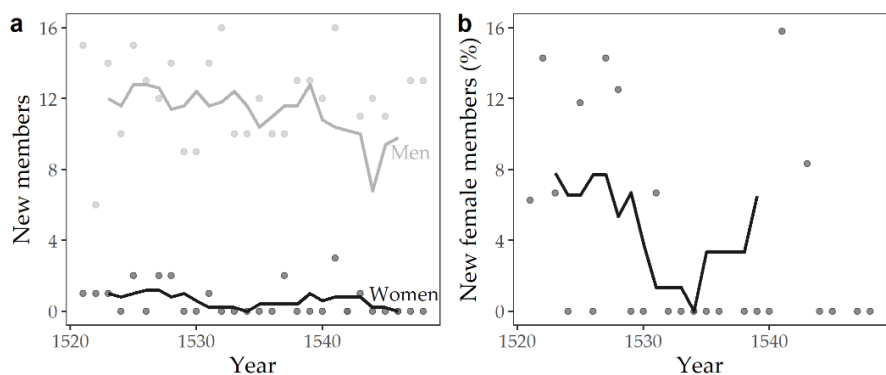
4. Moving average of the Mechelen gardeners guild's and the Mechelen shopkeepers guild's membership lists

Appendix Figures 2 through 4 show the five-years moving average of new members in the Mechelen gardeners guild (1478-1503 and 1521-1549) and the Mechelen shopkeepers' guild (1404-1510), similar to Figure 6 for the Antwerp mercers guild (see Chapter 2, page 111). Because of the smaller number of yearly new members and, consequentially, the irregular percentage of women entering the guild, it is harder to make claims about changes in the number of women joining these guilds. In some years, the absence of women entering results in the irregularity of the percentage of new women members on the figures. No linear increase or decrease in women's access in the guilds can be observed from the three lists.



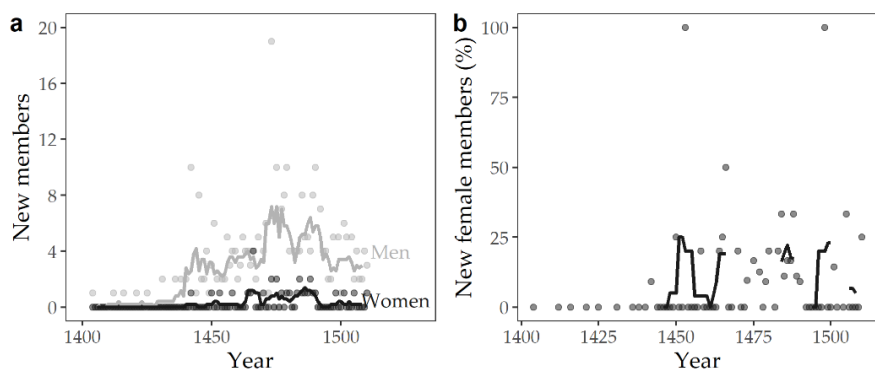
Appendix Figure 2. Five-years moving average of (a) all new members and (b) the percentage of new women members in the gardeners guild of Mechelen (1478-1503).

Source: SAM, Hoveniers-, fruiteniers- en mandenmakersambacht 16, Register met de jaarrekeningen van de gezworenen van het hoveniers-, fruiteniers- en mandenmakersambacht, 1478-1503.



Appendix Figure 3. Five-years moving average of (a) all new members and (b) the percentage of new women members in the gardeners guild of Mechelen (1521-1548).

Source: SAM, Hoveniers-, fruitteniers- en mandenmakersambacht 17, Register met de jaarrekeningen van de gezworenen van het hoveniers-, fruitteniers- en mandenmakersambacht, 1521-1549.



Appendix Figure 4. Five-years moving average of (a) all new members and (b) the percentage of new women members in the shopkeepers guild of Mechelen (1404-1510).

Source: SAM, Kramersambacht 47, Lijst met de nieuwe leden, 1400-1511.

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	16
	17
Kramersambacht	1
	47
	90
Oudkleerkopersambacht	1
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SPANISH ABSTRACT

En las décadas pasadas, las diferencias entre el norte y el sur de Europa respecto a las oportunidades económicas de las mujeres han sido objeto de debate académico. En respuesta a ese debate, esta tesis doctoral analiza las oportunidades de trabajo de las mujeres en Bizkaia, en el norte del reino de Castilla, y en Brabante, una región de los antiguos Países Bajos, en los siglos XV y XVI. Basado en el análisis de los casos de Amberes, Malinas, y Bilbao, en esta tesis, se examinan las similitudes y diferencias existentes con relación a la labor de las mujeres en el sector mercantil a pequeña escala de los productos alimentarios y otras materias primas.

La comparación de las posibilidades económicas de las mujeres en las tres ciudades se ha basado en una investigación empírica de cuatro tipos de fuentes por medio de las cuales se puede analizar la organización del trabajo en Bizkaia y Brabante. En primer lugar, la regulación del trabajo — ordenado por el gobierno urbano y en las ciudades Brabantinas también por los gremios en las ciudades — se ha analizado gracias a las ordenanzas municipales. En segundo lugar, los casos de Amberes y de Malinas, aún se pueden localizar en los archivos diversas listas de los miembros de los gremios. Precisamente, el segundo capítulo contiene un análisis de estos documentos. Igualmente, las fuentes judiciales nos han permitido demostrar cómo el trabajo de las mujeres (y de los hombres) podría diferir del estándar prescrito de las ordenanzas municipales. Finalmente, el análisis de los registros de impuestos de las tres ciudades permite extraer conclusiones sobre el estatus social y financiero de las mujeres estudiadas en esta tesis doctoral.

Hay que reconocer que no nos ha sorprendido que haya abundantes evidencias sobre el trabajo de las mujeres en ciertos sectores de la economía urbana en Bilbao, Amberes, y Malinas. Las mujeres tenían acceso – formal e informal – a las ventas de productos, eran activas en empresas independientes y en el contexto de su trabajo en la familia. El trabajo de las mujeres estaba regulado por las autoridades urbanas, por lo que las labores de las mujeres podían entrar en conflicto con los gobiernos urbanos si transgredían las normas. No obstante, en todas sus interacciones como

actores económicos, había una diferencia importante en la organización del trabajo de las mujeres en ambas regiones.

En Brabante, donde los gremios tenían mucho poder económico y político, las posibilidades laborales de las mujeres estaban determinadas por su estatus civil y la relación con algún miembro (masculino) de un gremio. Los gremios fueron instituciones con un marcado carácter patriarcal. Las mujeres tenían pocas – en algunos gremios ninguna – oportunidades de entrar como miembro. No obstante, las mujeres fueron activas en el trabajo de los gremios. Primero, la importancia de la cooperación laboral de la familia facilitó el acceso al trabajo gremial. Las esposas de los maestros, las hijas, las criadas y las viudas de maestros tenían su papel en las corporaciones de oficio. En segundo lugar, los gremios tenían que contar con la competición informal tanto de las mujeres como de los hombres. Los comerciantes informales se involucraron en el trabajo gremial sin pagar gastos al gremio. En ciertos campos de la economía urbana en Brabante, las mujeres tratantes fueron un grupo competidor para los gremios.

En Bizkaia, donde la mayor parte del comercio a pequeña escala no estaba organizado formalmente, el acceso de las mujeres no estuvo limitado por su relación con un hombre. Ciertos ámbitos del mercado – sobre todo la distribución de productos alimentarios – estuvieron casi enteramente en manos de las mujeres. Aunque no pertenecieran a los grupos privilegiados, estas mujeres participaron en el comercio con sus propios nombres, sin guardar relación con el trabajo de un esposo o un padre. Debido a la ausencia de una corporación gremial de hombres que organizara el trabajo en Bilbao, las mujeres no estuvieron limitadas en el ámbito económico, excepción hecha del concejo de Bilbao, que controlaba el trabajo de las mujeres. Aunque el acceso al trabajo no estuviera limitado en ciertos sectores, las mujeres comerciantes de Bilbao probablemente participaron en estos negocios debido a su posición social baja.

Por último, huelga decir que en la comparación del trabajo de las mujeres en Amberes, Malinas y Bilbao, es necesario tener en cuenta el contexto local de las tres ciudades. En concreto, hemos de concluir que la forma en la cual se organizó el trabajo en estas ciudades, tuvo un gran impacto en las posibilidades laborales de las mujeres.

