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Female social mobility in an impartible inheritance society at the end of the pre-industrial era (north-eastern Catalonia, 1750-1805)

1. Introduction

Social mobility has been a central phenomenon in the organisation of human societies throughout history. Since ancient times, the ability of individuals to move up or down the social ladder has been a crucial issue. Indeed, as forms of inequality and social stratification have existed for millennia (perhaps millions of years) (Scheidel 2017), the degree of social mobility is a determinant of progress, stagnation or regression in the hierarchy of a given human group. Particularly, social mobility has traditionally attracted the attention of scholars, in order to understand certain political attitudes in contemporary societies. In this regard, there is a certain consensus around the idea, pioneered by Tocqueville (1835), that greater social mobility induces political attitudes that are less favourable to welfare and distributive policies, as individuals perceive greater equality of opportunity (Piketty 1995). This would make social mobility a key element in understanding political development in the contemporary world.

With regard to pre-industrial societies, characterised by the predominance of agrarian economic systems and hierarchical social structures, social mobility has historically received less attention. With power dynamics, class relations and status inheritance playing a prominent role in shaping people's lives, destiny tended to be seen as predetermined and, therefore, social mobility might be a phenomenon of limited scope. However, in recent years, as knowledge of economic inequality in the pre-industrial era has consolidated (Jackson 2022; Alfani 2021), a considerable literature has also emerged on the opportunities (or not) that individuals had to move up or down in the unequal distribution of economic resources. Thus, using mainly records of vital events (births, marriages, deaths), studies have been carried out on the evolution of social mobility in the long run and in different countries, such as England (Boberg-Fazlic and Sharp 2018; Clark and Cummins 2014), France (Van Leeuwen et al., 2016) or Spain (Brea-Martínez and Pujadas-Mora 2022), among others.

Theoretically, scholars distinguish between two types of social mobility: absolute and relative. The former measures the number of people who change social class during their lifetime, either upwards or downwards, while the latter compares the social class of parents with that of children and/or successive generations (Schifano 2022, 7-8). Whether absolute or relative, it should be noted that most studies have focused on male social mobility, not because of a scientific gender bias, but because

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Josep Mas-Ferrer, *Female social mobility in an impartible inheritance society at the end of the pre-industrial era (north-eastern Catalonia, 1750-1825)*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0667-9.26, in Angela Orlandi (edited by), *La mobilità sociale nelle società preindustriali: tendenze, cause ed effetti (secc. XIII-XVIII) / Social mobility in pre-industrial societies: tendencies, causes and effects (13th-18th centuries)*, pp. 523-538, 2025, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0667-9, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0667-9

the sources are already biased. Indeed, historical sources very often attribute a job only to adult men, although it is well known that women (and even infants) worked and contributed to the domestic economy, both inside and outside the home (Humphries and Sarasúa 2012).

Moreover, social mobility in pre-industrial societies had a strong female accent, especially where the inheritance system was based on male primogeniture. In this inheritance model, the first-born son usually receives full inheritance and status from his parents and then they usually remain together in the family household. By marrying a woman who gives a dowry commensurate with the inherited patrimony, the heir forms an extended family with his parents, wife, future children and perhaps another relatives. In this way, the woman's mobility is twofold: literally, by moving into her husband's home, and social, by integrating into her new family unit.

Bearing the latter in mind, this paper presents a case study of social mobility from the point of view of women and, more specifically, brides, since it will focus on marriage, during the second half of the eighteenth century, that is, in the late pre-industrial era. Indeed, it will be used a database of marriage contracts, which, as will be explained later, are the notarial deed in which the act of inheritance from parents to sons was recorded, as well as the dowry to be paid by the bride. Thus, by comparing the occupation of both the groom and the father of the bride, we can assess the sense of mobility experienced by the bride (upward, horizontal or downward). In addition, the value of the dowry, paid by the bride to the groom, provides an element to situate their specific socio-economic status, which should bring a deeper understanding of the social mobility experienced in each case. Specifically, this case study focuses on a rural sector from north-eastern Spain, within the geographical scope of what is known as Old Catalonia, where male primogeniture was still strongly predominant in those times, as will be explained in the next section.

Thus and from here onwards, the paper is structured as follows: section 2 presents the characteristics and reasons for the prevalence of male primogeniture in Old Catalonia, as well as for the payment of dowries. Then, section 3 presents in detail the database we have worked with, as well as some aspects and methodological choices made in order to measure social mobility. Section 4 presents the evolution of social mobility and controls for some factors that could explain it. In section 5, the mobility data are crossed with the value of dowries, allowing a more in-depth discussion of the results obtained. Lastly, the paper ends with some brief conclusions in section 6.

2. Male primogeniture and dowry payments in Old Catalonia

From the tenth century onwards, in north-eastern Spain, in the area known as Old Catalonia, the rural landscape was structured around a type of holdings, made up of a house, some land and often livestock, with dimensions and characteristics that were essentially family-run and that have survived to the present day: the *masos*. Some of them would simply replace the old Carolingian villas, while others would be created in the process of expansion and colonisation. From the very beginning, there were larger and smaller *masos*, in the mountains and on the plains, on dry and irrigated

land. What they all had in common, however, was that they were holdings designed to be worked by family labour. In other words, they were not vast extensions designed to incorporate large amounts of salaried labour, but they were big enough to allow the subsistence of the families that lived and worked on them (Lluch and Mallorquí 2015).¹

This predominance of medium-sized holdings, combined with the fact that families were servilely tied to the *masos*, required the search of a mechanism that would guarantee the viability of the family holding and prevent it from disintegrating from one generation to the next. This particular context explains why, between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, a series of fundamental changes took place in the organisation of the family and in the transmission of wealth. Visigothic inheritance practices, which were more egalitarian, were gradually abandoned in favour of a model in which one son was privileged over the others, usually the first-born male (To 1997). In addition, the act of inheritance from parents to son did not take place at the death of the parents, but through the marriage of the son, often with the agreement of a common residence and the joint use of the property for as long as the two generations were alive.

All this, made marriage a key institution in the intergenerational transmission of wealth. From the perspective of the sources, it could be said that the instrument that regulated the transmission of wealth was not so much the will, but another type of notarial deed known as the ‘marriage contract’, which was usually drawn up some time before the wedding. Moreover, since marriage was the chessboard for the transmission of wealth, it created some kind of a ‘competitive marriage market’ in which heirs (and their parents) sought a bride from the best possible family and, at the same time, brides and their families sought to join the heir of the best patrimony within their reach. The mechanism that regulated this market was the dowry, which was negotiated between families and tended to be related to family wealth and/or social status (Congost and Ros 2013, 276-7). It should also be noted that the dowry was mostly paid in cash (in addition to the bride’s trousseau of clothes and jewellery), so that dowries constitute a quantifiable indicator of social status and, with appropriate precautions, can be used as a proxy of family wealth, and therefore, also to measure inequality and other economic indicators (Mas-Ferrer 2023a).

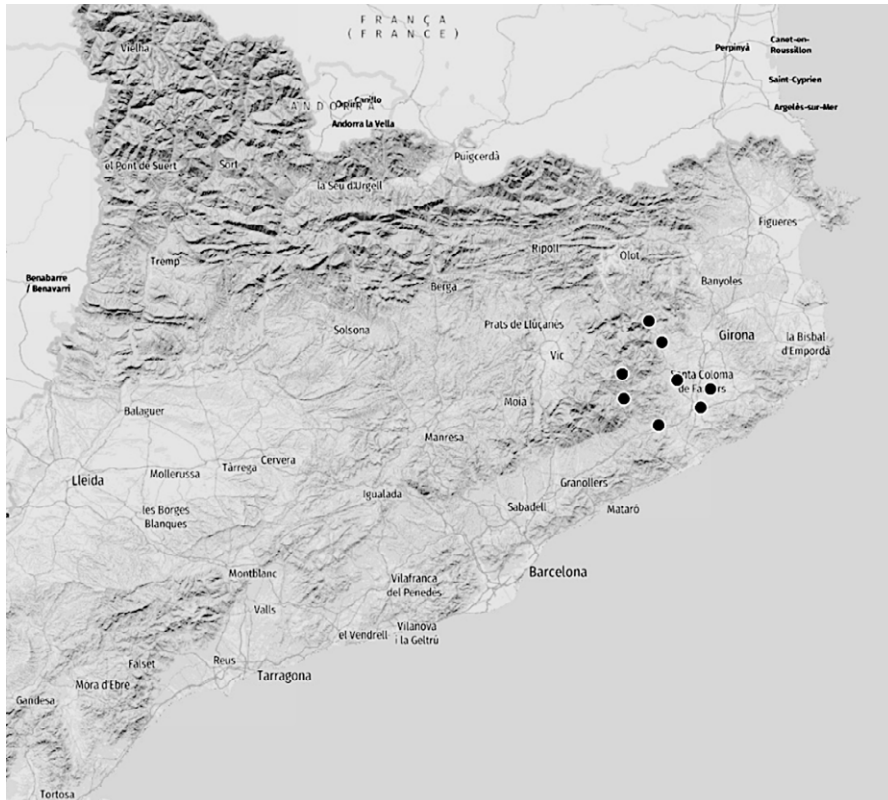
3. Data and methodology

For this case study, we worked with the notarial records of eight municipalities that make up a rural sector in north-eastern Spain (Fig. 1). We collected all the marriage contracts registered in three chronological periods, namely 1750-1755, 1775-1780 and 1800-1805. As can be seen in Table 1, this involved the collection of a total of 819 marriage contracts. Among these, 83.27%, or 682 marriage contracts, contain a dowry in cash given by the bride to the groom. The remaining 16.73% are either marriage contracts where the dowry is paid in movable property, or marriage

¹ For a comparative analysis of the organisation of rural space in the Mediterranean world, see Congost, Jover and Biagioli (2003).

contracts that correspond to other family casuistry.² Thus, there are 682 marriage contracts in which the occupation of the groom and the father of the bride are indicated and a dowry in cash is given, which is supposed to reflect the value of the groom's inherited wealth and social status. These contracts form the basis of our study, the results of which are presented in the following sections.

Fig. 1. Notarial offices included in the study³



² Basically, these other casuistries respond to three cases. Firstly, there are marriages in which both spouses are heirs (in the case of the bride, presumably because she has no male sibling), in which case there is a merger of both estates. Secondly, there is the opposite case, when neither of the two spouses is an heir and they also pool any assets they may have. The third casuistry would respond to those cases where the roles are reversed and it is an heiress bride who receives a dowry from a non-heir groom. In any case, it should be noted that all of them represent a very low share of all marriage contracts.

³ The eight notarial offices with which we worked correspond to the current municipalities of Anglès, Amer, Arbúcies, Caldes de Malavella, Hostalric, Sant Hilari Sacalm, Santa Coloma de Farners and Vidreres. Most of the records are kept in the Historical Archive of Girona (AHG), except for a few that are deposited in the Regional Archive of Santa Coloma de Farners (ACSE).

Tab. 1. Marriage contracts analysed

	Marriage contracts	With monetary dowry from bride to groom	% With monetary dowry from bride to groom
1750-1755	306	268	85.62%
1775-1780	265	218	82.26%
1800-1805	248	202	81.45%
Total	819	682	83.27%

Nonetheless, before going into the actual analysis of the results, a major methodological challenge has to be faced, which is the classification of the different occupations in order to assign an upward, horizontal or downward sense of social mobility to each marriage. In order to standardise methods and facilitate comparability with other works, the Hisclass classification (van Leeuwen and Maas, 2011) has been used. However, some modifications have been made to adapt to the type of information provided by marriage contracts, as well as to the socio-professional structure of the region under study (Congost, Ros and Sagner 2016). Indeed, as can be seen in table 2, the classical 12-class model has been adapted to a 5-class one, which, in our opinion, better reflects the social organisation and hierarchical relations in the rural world under analysis. Thus, as far as the agricultural professions are concerned, the first class would include all the large landowners, both those with titles of nobility or distinction and those without. The second group concerns medium-sized landowners (families owning *masos*), while the grain millers are in the third group. Then, the fourth level includes both the tenant farmers and the smallholders of land parcels that do not reach the category of *masos*. Finally, the fifth level would be for landless labourers, although this is a label that very rarely appears in marriage contracts.

Tab. 2. The relation between Hisclass and the classification used in this paper

Hisclass 12	5 class model	Most common trades
1. Higher managers	1	Noble, prestige title landowner, major landowner, notary, doctor, apothecary
2. Higher professionals		
3. Lower managers	2	medium landowner, surgeon, scribe, druggist, salesperson
4. Lower professionals, clericals and sales personnel		
5. Lower clerical and sales personnel		
6. Foremen	3	Artisan, carrier, grain miller
7. Medium-skilled workers		
8. Farmers and fishermen	4	Smallholder, tenant
9. Lower-skilled workers		
10. Lower-skilled farmworkers		
11. Unskilled workers	5	Day-labourer
12. Unskilled farmworkers		

Regarding the non-agricultural professions, these marriage contracts never referred to individuals as workers or apprentices, so essentially a three-class classification has been established. Thus, class 1 includes the three most prestigious professions of the rural world (notary, doctor and apothecary); class 2 comprises the three 'ancillary' professions of these (scribe, surgeon and druggist) as well as merchants; and finally class 3 covers all the artisan and carrier professions.

4. Trends in social mobility

Table 3 shows the weight of each of the five levels in the sample, both for the grooms (panel A) and for the brides' fathers (panel B). First of all, it should be noted that there are no cases in the fifth level (day-labourers) because, as mentioned above, landless labourers rarely appear in this type of source. It must be said that, the predominance of small and medium holdings implies that the number of landless labourers should not have been excessively high and, moreover, those that were very poor, probably did not draw up marriage contracts when they married. Indeed, in Mas-Ferrer (2023a, 29), it was estimated that, in this region under study, approximately 20% of adult men could be landless labourers and that they rarely participated in the marriage market, which makes sense, since if dowry is a way of valuing patrimony, in the absence of patrimony there would be no dowry either. Considering this, we must assume that this work has a certain class bias, because if, roughly, the poorest 20% are excluded (because they did not make marriage contracts), this implies that we are studying mobility among the remaining 80%. Then, this fifth class in our model was created in order to have a more standardised and comparable model that could also be used in other contexts, but the results shown below are in fact a comparison of mobility at four levels, while assuming the aforementioned class bias.

Either way, it is worth noting from the table that, from the point of view of both the grooms and the fathers of the bride, classes 2 and 4 are the most represented, closely followed by 3, while class 1 concerns only a small elite. These results should not be surprising, considering that groups 2 and 4 include the three most common occupations in a rural region with a predominance of smallholdings: the owner of *masos* on the one hand (class 2) and tenants and smallholders on the other (class 4).

The data in Table 3 also show that the percentage of people in class 2 decreases while the other classes increase over time. Certainly, the occupations that make up class 2 are not very elastic in terms of numbers, as they are specific professionals and owners of *masos*, whose numbers do not change. Therefore, the strong demographic growth experienced in the eighteenth century (Ferrer 2007) might explain why a fewer percentage of individuals are owners of *masos*. So, the reduction of class 2 is in fact the reduction of medium-sized owners, to the detriment of tenants, smallholders, artisans, etc. Moreover, thanks to the economic growth characteristic of the eighteenth century (which was also a growth in inequality), it is possible that some of these medium-sized landowners became richer, and moved into class 1, being classified by the notaries as large landowners or even acquiring a distinction title.

Tab. 3. Share of each class within the grooms and the bride's fathers sample

Panel A: Grooms

	1750-1755	1775-1780	1800-1805
1	1.15%	2.75%	2.97%
2	43.13%	25.69%	21.29%
3	27.10%	33.03%	36.63%
4	28.63%	38.53%	39.11%
5	0%	0%	0%

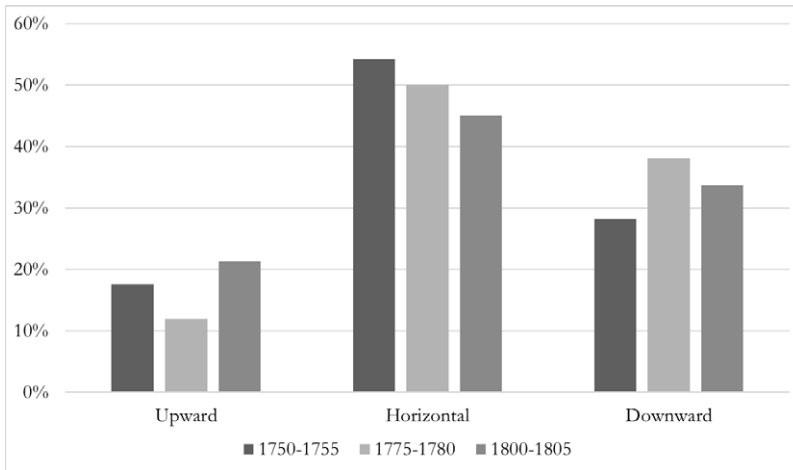
Panel B: Bride's fathers

	1750-1755	1775-1780	1800-1805
1	1.91%	6.88%	4.46%
2	54.58%	38.99%	31.19%
3	18.32%	32.57%	33.17%
4	25.19%	21.56%	31.19%
5	0%	0%	0%

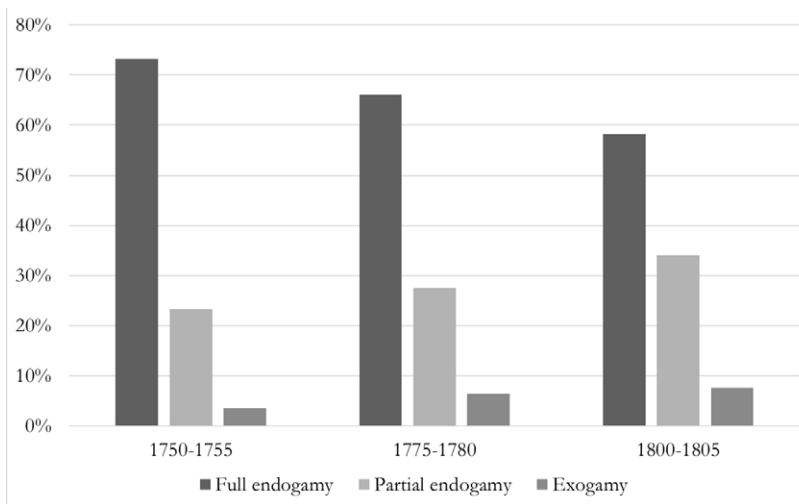
Nevertheless, the key aspect to highlight in Table 3 is that, in all periods, the sum of classes 1 and 2 is higher for fathers of brides than for grooms (and vice versa for the sum of classes 3 and 4). In other words, the top two classes are better represented among fathers of brides than among the grooms. This finding therefore implies that downward social mobility should be more common among brides than upward social mobility, because there are more brides from the higher groups than grooms. Indeed, this is exactly what happens when we measure their social mobility trends (Graph 1): downward mobility exceeds upward mobility in all three periods and by more than ten percentage points. The most striking difference is for marriages in the period 1775-1780, where the downward rate surpasses the upward one by about 20 points. In any case, the long-term trend is similar and the gap is maintained, since between the middle of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, both the upward and downward trends increase moderately, from 17.6% to 21.3% for the former and from 28.2% to 33.7% for the latter.

However, the most common type of mobility was the absence of mobility, i.e. horizontal mobility. Hence, horizontal mobility exceeded the 50% threshold in the middle of the eighteenth century and, despite a downward trend, was still above 40% half a century later. Within horizontal mobility, a distinction should be made between absolute endogamy, which would be the case if the groom and the bride's father had exactly the same occupation; partial endogamy, when they had different occupations but in the same economic sector; and finally exogamy, when they belonged to different economic sectors. As can be seen in Graph 2, in the mid-eighteenth century more than 70% of cases of horizontal mobility corresponded to marriages of full endogamy. This proportion tended to fall to just under 60% at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, it can be said that throughout the period under study, the most common type of social mobility was horizontal, and within this, absolute endogamy was hegemonic, i.e. those types of marriages where the groom and the bride's father had exactly the same socio-professional label, according to the notarial deed.

Graph 1. Trend in social mobility experienced by brides



Graph 2. Trend of each type of horizontal mobility



Whether they were more or less endogamous, it is interesting to highlight that these rates of horizontal mobility are similar to those found by Brea-Martínez and Pujadas-Mora (2022, 24) for the neighbouring geographical area of Barcelona, since in the period they refer to as proto-industrial (1750-1829), the lack of social mobility affected around 45% of marriages. However, according to the same study, upward and downward mobility showed very similar results. Thus, their findings show a somewhat more favourable context for ascending the ladder compared to our context, where downward mobility outweighs upward one. Indeed, the opportunities offered by the economic development of Barcelona and its surroundings at the end

of the eighteenth century (proto-industry, commerce, etc.) could be an explanatory factor for this difference.

At this point, it should be noted that finding greater downward social mobility than upward is also fully consistent with those thesis which suggest that impartible inheritance systems favoured greater inequality and downward mobility. Indeed, for both contemporary (Piketty 2014) and pre-industrial societies (Borgerhoff et al 2009; Bowles, Smith and Borgerhoff 2010), the degree of inheritability of wealth has been hypothesised to be a determinant and explanatory factor of inequality (Alfani 2021, 31). Therefore, in single heir societies, where many individuals have a very low degree of inheritability, the forces pushing towards increasing inequality and downward social mobility would appear to be stronger. Moreover, this phenomenon would have a strong gender bias, as it only takes one male child to reduce the inheritability degree of all daughters to almost zero. Women are thus the main candidates to bear the burden of downward social mobility (Marfany 2020, 145). This phenomenon is also particularly relevant during periods of population growth (such as the period under study), when the number of non-inherited daughters (and sons) increases.

Given that the results obtained, as well as the literature on impartible inheritance systems, suggest that this form of social organisation favours downward rather than upward social mobility for women, we wondered whether the latter might be benefited by some factors that leaves a trace in the marriage contract itself. We then controlled upward social mobility by means of three elements that we can find out from the marriage contracts: geographical mobility, widowhood of the groom, and whether the bride had done any salaried work prior to the marriage. Indeed, since the marriage contracts indicate the village of residence of both spouses, we can find out whether the bride moved from one village to another when she got married. Then, by also indicating the marital status of the spouses, it is possible to assess whether the 'remarriage grooms market' had an effect on brides social mobility. Finally, it was also recorded whether at the time of the marriage the bride brought, as dowry, something that she had earned through some form of waged labour, whether in the form of money or in household goods. Marriage contracts thus provide information, albeit indirectly, on women's pre-marriage work, and for this study case, make it possible to assess its impact on social mobility.

Table 4 shows the results of the possible correlation between these three variables and upward social mobility. As can be seen, both geographical mobility and premarital salaried work do not seem to have an impact on upward social mobility. The case of salaried work is particularly relevant in our opinion, as its practice and diffusion are usually interpreted as something positive, in the sense of being an engine of empowerment, independence and disengagement from the parental rule. Without questioning this theoretical framework, this does not mean that it is conducive to upward social mobility. All the more so in a society such as the one we are analysing, where medium-sized agricultural holdings were still predominant. Hence, for a girl or adolescent to leave the family holding to go and work on another holding is basically an indication of the precariousness of her family of origin. However, it could be argued that, once in this precarious situation, premarital salaried work provided them with a certain financial endowment, allowing, for instance, to improve their dowry, or even simply to have something to constitute as a dowry, and thus to participate in

the marriage market. In this case, salaried work might have spared them from social demolition or even from having to join the ranks of permanent celibacy. In a nutshell, it is worth noting that salaried work is apparently not correlated with upward social mobility, maybe because in an agrarian society with a predominance of small and medium holdings, it was probably carried out by young girls in a precarious situation.

Finally, marrying a widowed groom seems to be positively correlated with upward social mobility, although not very robust, with p-values below 0.1 but above 0.05. Certainly, turning to the 'market' of second and subsequent marriages might have been a somewhat easier way to climb the social ladder compared to the market of first marriages, i.e. of single grooms. In these cases, and leaving aside elite families, it could be said that precariousness changes sides. Indeed, for families operating small or medium holdings, the premature dissolution of the family unit (due to the death of one of the spouses) must have been a very critical moment in the life cycle, as it took away a significant part of the available labour force (perhaps 50% of it). Moreover, in the case of families who were running *masos* under tenancy contracts, these always included a clause whereby the tenants undertook to improve the land and cultivate it properly, at the risk of being evicted if they failed to do so.⁴ In the light of this clause, it was important to overcome the situation of widowhood as soon as possible by bringing a new adult into the family unit. It could therefore be that this favoured opportunities for upward mobility, as less chrematistic elements became more relevant. Thus, it would not be so much the exact dowry that the bride could pay, or the status of her family, but rather that she had some experience in the management of such a holding, and/or had the best skills to help overcome the situation in the shortest and most satisfactory possible way.

Tab. 4. **Effect of geographical mobility, widowhood of the groom, and premarital salaried work, on female upward mobility**

	1750-1755	1775-1780	1800-1805
Geographical mobility	-0.061 (0.198)	0.045 (0.317)	-0.090 (0.131)
Widow groom	0.079 (0.257)	0.107 (0.084)*	0.121 (0.071)*
Premarital salaried work	0.023 (0.801)	0.002 (0.968)	-0.015 (0.830)
Constant	0.196 (<0.001)***	0.076 (0.041)**	0.240 (<0.001)***
Observations	262	218	203
Observations with geographical mobility	141	130	120
Observations with widow groom	34	32	52
Observations with premarital salaried work	19	39	43
R ²	0.012	0.019	0.025

Note: p-values are given in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

⁴ The clause was known as «a ús i costum de bon pages» («by the use and practice of a good farmer»). See Congost (1991, 153).

5. Dowries and social mobility

Having observed the general trend of mobility and discussed some possible causal factors, this section will try to assess whether the sense of mobility and the dowry given by the bride are in line with each other. For each marriage contract, we have analysed whether the dowry paid was above or below the average dowry paid by the bride's social class, and also whether it was above or below the average dowry received by the groom's social class. It is important to note that we distinguish between the dowries paid by brides from that received by grooms. Certainly, since there is no social homogamy at all, the average values of dowries paid and received are different in each social echelon. Indeed, table 5 shows the average value of dowries paid and received for each social class. It is not the aim of this paper to assess the movement of dowries and their evolution,⁵ but it is worth noting that in all periods the average dowry received by class 1 grooms are higher than the average dowry paid by class 1 brides. In our view, this supports one of the theoretical underpinnings of this paper: that dowries are a way of valuing family wealth that is passed on through marriage from father to (eldest) son. Therefore, class one grooms, who are always heirs from distinguished families with considerable wealth, tend to attract the largest dowries.

Either way, by crossing the social class of the bride and the groom with the value of the dowry in relation to the average dowry of each class, the three possible directions of mobility (upward, horizontal, downward) have been converted into nine types of mobility, ranging from absolute upward mobility to absolute downward mobility, as can be seen in table 6. Thus, in cases of upward or downward mobility, these have been classified as absolute, relative or doubtful, depending on whether the value of the dowry points in the same direction as the mobility, is somewhat ambiguous or points in the opposite direction. For horizontal mobility cases, they have been classified as positive (above average), neutral (above paid, but below received or viceversa), or negative (below average).

Tab. 5. Average dowry (in *lliures barceloneses*)⁶ paid and received by each social class

Class	1750-1755		1775-1780		1800-1805	
	Bride	Groom	Bride	Groom	Bride	Groom
1	930	1733.3	600.1	770.2	580.6	925
2	203.5	218.2	202.1	296.1	354.4	345.6
3	96	132.8	106.4	125.6	159	203.8
4	95.4	72.4	70.8	81.1	68.2	90.4

⁵ A complete analysis of these dowries, and especially of the inequality that can be deduced from their distribution, can be found in Mas-Ferrer (2023a).

⁶ The *lliures barceloneses* were the coin of account in Catalonia from medieval times until the adoption of the *peseta*. Its value in grams of silver during this period ranged from 13.166 in the mid-18th century to 12.778 in the early 19th century (Feliu 1991).

Tab. 6. **Types of social mobility according to the dowry**

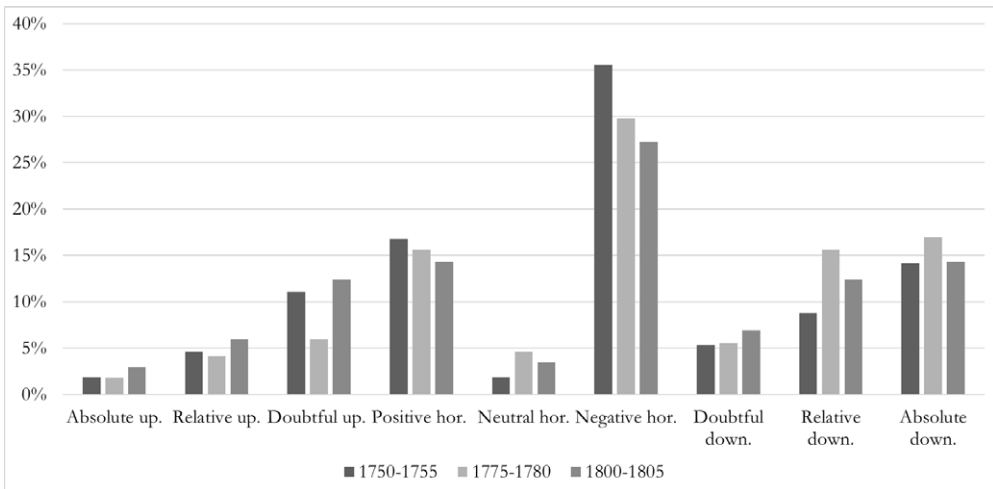
Type of mobility	Description
Absolute upward mobility	The groom belongs to a higher class than the bride. The dowry is above the average of both groom and bride classes
Relative upward mobility	The groom belongs to a higher class than the bride. The dowry is below the average of the groom class and above the average of the bride class
Doubtful upward mobility	The groom belongs to a higher class than the bride. The dowry is below the average of both groom and bride classes
Positive horizontal mobility	The bride and the groom belong to the same class and the dowry is above the average of their class
Neutral horizontal mobility	The bride and the groom belong to the same class and the dowry is above the average of the dowries received by their class and below those paid, or vice versa.
Negative horizontal mobility	The bride and the groom belong to the same class and the dowry is below the average of their class
Doubtful downward mobility	The bride belongs to a higher class than the groom. The dowry is above the average of both groom and bride classes
Relative downward mobility	The bride belongs to a higher class than the groom. The dowry is above the average of the groom class and below the average of the bride class
Absolute downward mobility	The bride belongs to a higher class than the groom. The dowry is below the average of both groom and bride classes

Graph 3 shows the weight and trend of each of the nine possible types of social mobility. The first thing to note is that the most common type is negative horizontal mobility (same social class, below average dowry), which accounted for more than a third of all cases in the mid-eighteenth century, and gradually fell to just over 25% in the early years of the nineteenth century. In cases where there was social mobility, i.e. where the bride and groom belonged to different classes, the most common type was absolute downward mobility, with a share always close to 15%. The second and third most common types, both with a share of 12.4% at the beginning of the nineteenth century, are relative downward and doubtful upward. At the other extreme, we find absolute upward mobility, which shows a slight upward trend but affects a very small proportion of cases (2-3%).

Looking only at the data on social mobility presented in the previous section, it could be argued that by far the most common form of social mobility was horizontal, and also that the differences between downward and upward mobility were not

particularly exaggerated, since, in both the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was little more than a ten percentage point difference in favour of downward mobility. However, when incorporating the value of dowry, it has been observed that the most promising cases of social demolition (absolute downward mobility) accounted for about 15%, while the most promising cases of having climbed the social ladder (absolute upward mobility) affected only 2-3% of the analysed cases. Moreover, the most common type of horizontal mobility is negative horizontal mobility, i.e. cases in which the value of the dowry is below both the average dowry paid and the average dowry received by that social class. All this seems to confirm what was introduced in the previous section: that the system of impartible inheritance based on male primogeniture pushed many women towards downward social mobility, that is, towards the impossibility of maintaining the family's socio-economic status, which was inherited by a male sibling, usually the eldest one.

Graph 3. Trend in social mobility according to the dowry



However, the latter does not mean that systems of impartible inheritance were insensitive to the effects of downward social mobility affecting their non-heir sons and daughters. In this regard, it is worth noting that in a recent work on this same geographical area, relatively high rates of celibacy were detected by the end of the eighteenth century (Mas-Ferrer 2023b, 225-28). Indeed, based on information from the 1787 Census, and considering singles over the age of 50 as a proxy for definitive singleness (Marfany 2006, 80), the celibacy rate for women was 8.1%, rising to 13.3% for men. These figures are not too far removed from the 10-15% rates considered typical of the north-west European marriage pattern (popularly known as EMP).⁷ Furthermore, when disaggregated at parish level, the highest rates of celibacy were

⁷ A term introduced by the seminal contribution of Hajnal (1965). See also De Moor and Van Zanden (2010).

found in sparsely populated parishes, where almost all families lived in *masos*, that is to say, in impartible medium-sized agricultural family holdings, which constituted the core of the Catalan extended family model. It is difficult not to interpret these levels of singleness as a mechanism for managing family resources in order to take pressure off the marriage market. Thus, while it is clear that the patrilineal family system, based on the single heir, favoured the downward social mobility of women, it also seems that these same families were able to limit this downward mobility through celibacy, i.e. by limiting the number of participants in an atomised and inelastic market such as marriage one.⁸

6. Conclusions

Having presented and discussed the main results of this case study, some brief conclusions can be drawn about female social mobility in a society based on the impartial inheritance system at the end of the pre-industrial era. Firstly, it has been established that about half of the women practised horizontal mobility through marriage, and that the vast majority of them did so through endogamy, i.e. by marrying a groom who, according to the sources, had exactly the same occupational label as their father. However, in the other half of the cases where mobility occurred, it was more likely to be downward than upward. This is in line with the literature on inheritance systems, and in particular with the thesis that in impartible inheritance societies, where many individuals have a very low degree of inheritability, the forces pushing towards downward social mobility appear to be strong, especially for women, whose chances of inheritance virtually disappear if they have only one male sibling who reaches adulthood.

So, given that upward mobility was less common, it was tried to see if there were any elements that might favour it. Since marriage contracts report whether brides bring money or other assets acquired through salaried work, we control for upward mobility in relation to having worked before marriage, but there seems to be no correlation. This is interpreted in the sense that having worked before marriage was, more than anything else, a sign of family precariousness. Conversely, marrying a widowed groom shows some positive correlation. This could be interpreted in the sense that widowhood must be a very critical moment in families with medium or small holdings, as the death of a spouse can mean the loss of half of the usual labour force. Thus, the plight of the widowed grooms may have favoured the social advancement of those brides who took the plunge.

Then, when comparing the direction of mobility with the value of the dowry, the thesis of downward mobility being more common than upward seems to be further strengthened, as the most promising cases of upward social mobility (grooms from a higher social group receiving an above-average dowries) represent only 2-3% of the

⁸ At this point it is worth mentioning works such as those from Dennison and Ogilvie (2014) and Le Bris and Tallec (2023) who have proposed that in southern Europe, characterized by regions of slower economic development and with a predominance of the extended family, some of the mechanisms usually attributed to north-eastern nuclear family models, such as high rates of celibacy, were also present.

cases. In contrast, the clearest candidates for social demolition (cases with a groom from a lower class and a below-average dowry) affected 15% of marriages, that is to say, more than five times the absolute upward mobility. Lastly, it might not be fair to end the paper assuming that impartible inheritance societies were insensitive to the downward social mobility of their non-heir sons and daughters. In the case studied here, the preference for an only son was a decision made on the basis of the agrarian structure derived from the way in which land was colonised in the early Middle Ages. From previous work we know that in the late eighteenth century celibacy rates were relatively similar to those in north-western Europe, and were particularly high among extended families living in *masos*, which is therefore interpreted as an attempt to take pressure off the marriage market.

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