



Women, Wealth and Property: Montpellier, 1760s-1780s



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Abstract

The role of women in Ancien Régime France is generally assumed to be one relegated to servitude, unable to participate in broader society without the permission of a male guardian or husband.

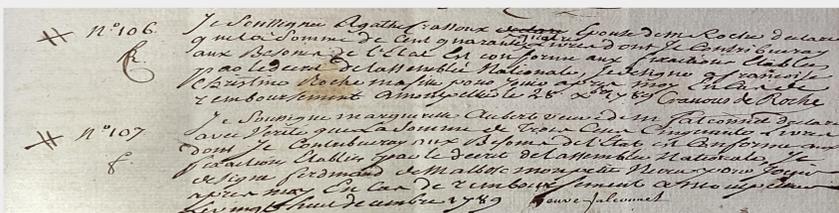
However, Roman law governed the cultural practices of southern France, which allowed for more liberal policies regarding female ownership of land compared to the customary law that dominated Parisian gender politics. This project aims to dispel claims that women exercised little to no socio political rights in Ancien Régime France. Instead, through the analysis of tax records and property sales in Languedoc between 1760-1790, the extent of female impact in the region will be quantified, demonstrating the vast rights women exercised.

This project pulled a random sample of property sales in Languedoc from a larger pool of records, and calculated the average profits women versus men were making in property sales. Another facet of the project analyzed tax registers from the city of Montpellier from 1789-90. To find the prevalence of women who paid taxes, every woman on the register was recorded, along with her social and marital status and amount of tax paid.

Overall, our research revealed that the average sum value of property sales between men to women versus women to men was around 200 livres greater for the latter. On the tax register, we discovered around 19% of the names listed on the roll were women, composed of a variety of social and marital statuses.

Methods

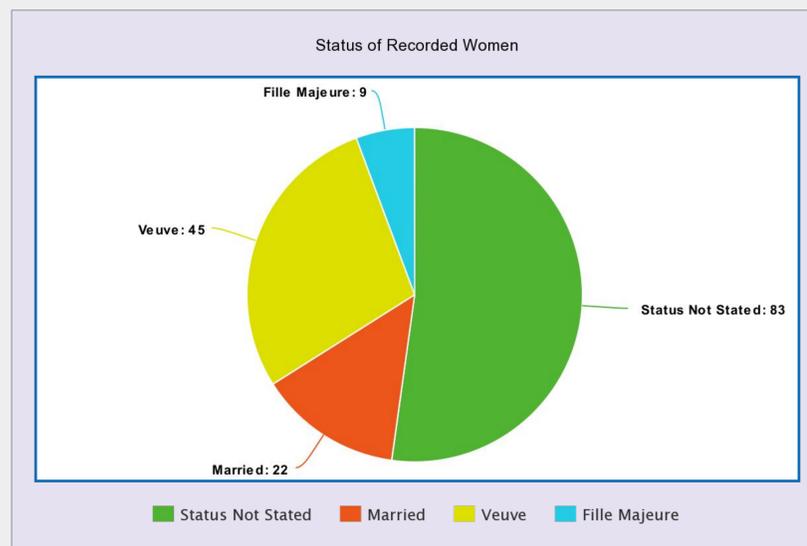
To ascertain broader female participation in society in Southern France during the 18th century, we analyzed tax registers and property sales from the city of Montpellier from 1760-1790. To find the prevalence of women who paid taxes, every woman on the register was recorded, along with her social and marital status and amount of tax paid. This information will then be used to identify the percentage of men versus women paying taxes, as other factors. With the property sales, a random sample of sales was pulled from a larger pool of records, calculating the average profits women versus men were making in property sales. This was done using Microsoft Excel data analysis and graphing functions.



Background

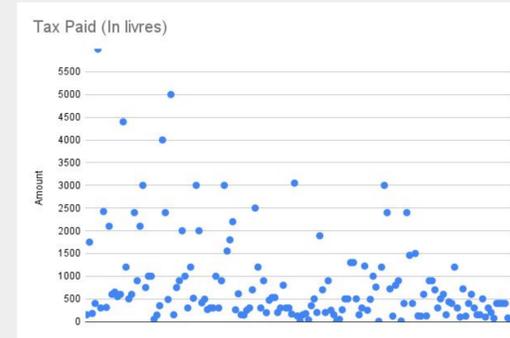
In the French region of Occitania, groups marginalized by broader European society, such as women and religious minorities were afforded more rights and protections, evidenced by the Cathar and Huguenot heresies which historically took root in the region and Occitania's adherence to Roman law, in contrast to the Customary law of Northern France.

In this project, we analyzed tax rolls for the Offrande Patriotique from Montpellier. The Offrande Patriotique (Patriotic Contribution) was a tax set in place to fund the new government in the wake of the French Revolution. Those whose incomes exceeded 400 livres were forced to pay a quarter of their earnings, while those exempt from the tax could voluntarily contribute. By analyzing these tax rolls, we aim to prove that customary law in Southern France empowered women in comparison to their northern counterparts, allowing for a degree of freedom to participate in society and own and sell property with their own agency.



Discussion

This project demonstrates that through the dominance of Roman law in Southern France, women exercised a significant amount of socio-political rights, more than most people believed considering the time period and location. The prevalence of women (19%) recorded within the register shows that women in Montpellier wielded enough autonomy to buy and sell their own property, as well as contribute taxes without the need for a male guardian. Although a case study from Northern France must be completed to adequately compare the rates of female participation in the local economy, the findings from this study show active economic participation by women in Montpellier's economy.



Results

We discovered that approximately 19% of the tax register consisted of women, or men signing off for women. 28.3% of the women on the register were widows, with around 13.8% married and around 5.7% fille majeures. The average amount in taxes paid for women on the tax register ranged from six livres to 6000 livres. The mean amount was about 830 livres, the median amount 490 livres, and the most common value occurring being 300 livres. For property sales records, we discovered that compared to men selling to women versus women selling to men, the amount of livres on average was 200 more with the latter. When men were selling their properties to women, they averaged 515 livres in property sales. On the other hand, women averaged 803 livres value per sale.

Acknowledgements

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