Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux
Maître de Conférences
Centre de Recherches Historiques,
Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales,
54, Bd. Raspail, 75006 Paris,
France
(pre registered participant)
Tel.: +33-1-01 45 39 64 73;
fax: +33-1-01 45 43 89 27
Fauve@msh-paris.fr

Female property and widowhood during Ancien Regime: From Paris to rural Pyrenees.

Abstract

In rural as well as in urban French preindustrial societies, a couple of spouses could not be constituted without some contribution of the man as well as of the woman when building their domestic entity, both of them maintaining later the household in variable proportions. In Ancien Regime France, the part of women in transmission or devolution of assets as well as their responsibility in the management of their own household was not homogeneous. Differences are seen from one area to another, from one social group to another.

What was the part of women and widows in the transmission of family status and power as well as in the transmission of assets? Examining the inheritance models in the French past, we argue that women were always active parties in devolution of assets. Whatever the priority given to one of the line of descents - usually the male line -, some share of the parents’ assets was always transmitted through women.

Life conditions in the household for the female surviving spouse depended both on types of marriage settlement and inheritance systems. When married in joint estate, a widow could enjoy the prosperity of the family business or be crippled with debts. When married in trust, she could recover her dowry, and maybe a dower, or mourn her disappeared dowry due to the bad management of her husband.

Two systems will be compared. One was prevalent in Northern France, for example in Paris, where it was usual to pool movables and goods acquired during marriage. On the contrary, another system prevailed in Southern France and the Pyrénées where joint estate was excluded.