

The era of the housewife?

The construction of 'work' and the 'active' population in the Belgian population census (1947, 1961 & 1970)

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The 1950s in Western Europe are considered the zenith of the male breadwinner and the female homemaker as both a practice and an ideology. Before, families had relied on pooling the income of several family members to make ends meet whilst after, married women again entered the official labour market in larger numbers. However, during the 'long' 1950s, from the end of the Second World War until the mid 1960s, in many families men were the sole income providers, and married women were mostly full-time homemakers. The ideal had already existed earlier in the century, but it was only during this relatively short period after the Second World War, that it became a large scale practical possibility (Janssens, 1997, 1-23; Vanhaute, 1998, 55-70).

The available statistics seem to support this account. In 1947, according to the Dutch census, 98% of married women in the Netherlands were housewives (Pott-Buter & Tijdens, 1998, 136). Belgium was not far behind: according to the first Belgian postwar census only 15.4% of married women worked. Historians and sociologists have called attention to several factors contributing to this low female labour market participation rate. In the agricultural sector the number of unpaid family workers dropped dramatically. The increasing mechanisation supposedly led to a lower involvement of farmer's wives in agricultural tasks and in exchange they spent more of their time on domestic tasks. In the more well off layers of society, paid domestic aid became hard to find – young women no longer cared for jobs as servants – and too expensive. Therefore, assisted by new domestic electrical appliances, former ladies of leisure started to do their own cleaning and ironing. In working class families the husband, thanks to higher wages and postwar social security, was finally able to really be the sole breadwinner. His wife

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was no longer a working woman, but became a working class woman, in other words, a housewife (*Ibid.*, 136-138).

According to public memory, general historical overviews, contemporary moralistic sources, and the population censuses, never before had so many married women, from all layers of society, been effectively and exclusively full-time housewives. They did not 'work'. This suited well contemporary gender ideology (Vandebroek, 2002, 453-462). But how do we interpret the concept of 'work'? In today's society 'work' is tremendously important. Our job gives us our identity and is central to how society views us and how we see ourselves. This has not always been the case. In Hebrew, Greek and Roman society, and during a large part of the Middle Ages, working was seen as unworthy. Important people did not work, and definitely did not do any manual labour. The importance of work for one's identity and place in society, and the moral imperative to work and to do your work well, is relatively new. Only with the Reformation did manual labour become culturally and morally acceptable.²

Since the Industrial Revolution, paid employment became the dominant form of work. This changed the meaning of 'work', gradually coming to mean only regular, paid employment, within the formal labour market. Unpaid activities such as domestic chores for one's own household, as well as taking care of others (children and the elderly), usually women's work, are not part of the 'modern' concept of work (Vanhaute, 2001, 33-35). These activities have no 'economic' or 'productive' value, and are hence devalued. Household work became invisible as work and became mystified as the natural service of women and a "labour of love" (Simonton, 1998, 1-9). Not only did women's caring activities disappear from the definition of work, but also their (often irregular) paid participation in the labour market. Women were not included in the labour force.

So when faced with the question of the historical labour participation of women, what are historians to do? How many women 'worked'? How many of them 'worked' in agriculture, in factories, in home-based industries? Which women 'worked'? How old were they? Did married women 'work'? Did women 'work' full-time or part-time? Were they white collar workers or blue collar workers, qualified or unqualified? Did any of this change in the decades after the Second World War? The most readily available sources seem to be the general population censuses, so most historical studies do rely on them. However, in this article we would like to argue that historians can in fact say very little about the quantity or quality of women's labour

² For a cultural history of work and the evolution of the Western European work ethos, see Vandenbrande (1995), Meeus (1989) and Mulders (1991).

participation based on the data these postwar population censuses provide. This does not render them completely useless. It does however necessitate careful consideration on what to use them for, and what historical questions they can and cannot answer. Instead of treating them as a source of exact numbers, we suggest employing them instead as a narrative source. The censuses were part of the general discourse of work and reflect the contemporary definition of work, not women's labour market reality. The censuses do tell us how many women were 'working', but only according to a very specific and limited definition of work. They obscure considerable quantities of women's work, both paid and unpaid, because the administrators, the enumerators in the field, as well as the men and women filling out the census forms, used definitions that excluded certain forms of work and chose to interpret questions in ways that reflected contemporary gender and family ideology.

1. STATISTICS AS A NARRATIVE SOURCE

"If the census is a snapshot of the nation at a particular point in time, the commentaries reveal how and why the camera was angled" (Hakim, 1980, 551).

Official data, collected, assembled and analysed by official government agencies – in Belgium the *Nationaal Instituut voor de Statistiek* (National Institute for Statistics, NIS) and its predecessors – claim to present a real, correct, reliable, objective and loyal image of 'reality'. The origin and increasing importance of official statistics can be found in the birth of the modern nation state, a central government, the increasing interference of the state in the social and economic realm, and thus the growing need by the government for information (Den Dulk & van Maarseveen, 1999, 332-333; Tooze, 2001, 19-20; Perrot & Woolf, 1984, 82-100; Patriarca, 1996, 1-2; Bracke, 2004, 6; van Maarseveen, Klep, & Stamhuis, 2008, 11-41). The official statistical institutions collect information for the modern state on demography, economic activity, social stratification, standard of living, housing situation and housing needs, the cultural needs of the population, etc., to ensure politicians base their policies on empirical observations, objective 'facts' and reliable numbers. The more reliable and precise the statistical information, the 'better' the policies based upon it. At least, this is the way the NIS defined its own reason for existing: "a beacon of light for the

government, in its difficult road to a fair, just, effective and judicious policy" (NIS, 1978, 10-13).³

For historians and social scientists alike, it is widely accepted that statistics are far from objective and reliable. They are a social construct rather than a representation of reality. They are especially inadequate as a source of reconstructing the size and structure of women's participation in the labour market. Within gender studies this has become a kind of bromide, disqualifying the use of census data when writing a history of the work of women (Bracke, 1996, 167-168; Van Eijl, 1994, 37-38). However, while most researchers agree that the census data are indeed very flawed, they try to use them anyway, through a lack of other sources. Another approach is to regard the data themselves as a historical fact: after all, these are the numbers collected and used at the time. They were cited in contemporary debates on the work of women, and judgements about women's labour force participation were based upon them. Furthermore, the census' imperfections themselves make them a source with which ideas and opinions can be researched: particularly things that were not seen or counted, may prove to be relevant. So perhaps, although the postwar census data are not an adequate source with which to reconstruct a history of the work of women, they do tell us something about what 'work' meant, according to the people that made and used these statistics.

Yernaux (1964, 1143-1145), Klep (1981, 160-188) and De Brabander (1984, 32-39) have already demonstrated many of the flaws in the Belgian nineteenth and twentieth century census data. The subsequent population censuses, from the nineteenth century onwards, are difficult to compare because the intervals between them are often too long and the different professional categories are ill-defined. Hence, these historical sources need to be used with caution. Definitions and classifications – such as the categorisation of occupations – changed frequently, and make any geographical or chronological comparison hazardous. The 1947 census was especially compromised, as was the 1920 census, because it was held just after a war, in the midst of ongoing confusion and reconstruction.

Whereas Yernaux, Klep and De Brabander outlined the problems of the explicit criteria and definitions that the census collectors used, other researchers have indicated that the implicit principles informing the data also need our attention, as they may have, for example, led to a severe undercounting of women's work participation (Leydesdorff, 1977, 7; Roberts, 1988, 7-12; Conk, 1989, 65; Pott-Buter, 1993, 10-18). Yernaux, Klep and De

³. This is a brochure the NIS published about its own history. With exception of the study of Nele Bracke (2008) of its nineteenth century predecessor, a scientific historical study on the NIS is lacking.

Brabander are still searching for reliability, and comprehensiveness. They want to improve the statistics: wrong numbers need to be corrected. In other words, their critique stays within the framework of traditional historical source evaluation (Bracke, 2004, 7). How many women 'really' worked? The questions gender historians are posing are of a different nature. Maybe the population censuses can be a reliable source, in a different fashion, as they offer an insight into how contemporaries gave the concept of work meaning. Looking at the labels and concepts behind the data, lays bare part of the normative dimension of work. Exactly those elements that disqualify the census data for any reconstruction of the 'truth', also offer the most information about the ways in which contemporaries observed and structured social reality.

Nele Bracke (2004, 7) entreats us to pay more attention to the producers of statistics and the history of the statistical agencies. Celia Davies encourages us to read censuses as a narrative source. Not only the numbers but also the language used to collect, analyse and present data are deeply historical, produced by specific historical agents, in a specific historical context (Davies, 1980, 581-582). They are a source of information on the definitions and methods of classifications, on opinions, worries and contemporary concepts. The concepts and distinctions that were used to measure and structure postwar society, say a lot about how these government agencies interpreted their social reality. The history of such categories and the long-term changes therein form a history of social change (Hakim, 1980, 551-554).

2. A MAN'S WORLD

Since the seventies, social scientists have demonstrated that statistics are a social construct: numbers are not merely collected, but produced, created, and presented in a specific framework, with specific goals. They show a filtered reality and are built on mostly non-explicit assumptions (Irvine, Miles, & Evans, 1979, 51; Tooze, 2001, 3). This means that what the Belgian postwar census data did or did not define as work, was informed by the image society had about 'work'. Which kind of work was considered a fully-fledged professional occupation? Changes in the definitions and classifications used, mirror the changed social perception and organisation of work. Hence, the census data are part of the dominant discourse on work. Statistics are based on the same conceptual framework as the common sense views of the world. This common sense is hardly more than a rationalisation for the prevailing

(bourgeois) ideology (Irvine, Miles, & Evans, 1979, 51). Subsequently, those statistics can be used to boost this ideology. Statistics are not only made within a specific political, economic, social and cultural context, they in turn 'create' the society, the world, and the people they describe, count and categorise (Hacking, 2002, 49, 82, 100; Bracke, 2004, 6). The census data reflect not just the meaning of work, but re-construct this meaning. They repeat and thus reinforce the meaning(s) of work. The definition of work as it was used in the censuses influenced what society defined and appreciated as work.

A gender analysis of statistical sources is not new. In 1980, Catherine Hakim already argued that population censuses were sexist. Their focus on the predominant male pattern of economic activity provides only a distorted image and inadequate coverage of the economic activity of women. Allin and Hunt concluded in 1987 that twentieth century "official statistics usually describe a man's world rather than fully reflecting modern society". Most historical census data are based on the male life-style of constant economic activity. The ideal type of work role is a single full-time gainful occupation outside the home throughout one's life. More men than women fit this definition, making it difficult to register the different work patterns of women. Because of this, women's productive activities are underestimated, and hence most data are deficient in describing women's lives (Hakim, 1980, 561-562; Allin & Hunt, 1987, 340-349). Women's more irregular labour market participation is not seen, nor is it recorded as work. Only regular productive paid work in the formal labour market and public domain 'counts'. Household production, child care, and the care for the sick and the elderly, informal, unpaid work in the private sphere, goes unrecorded. Housework and reproductive work are not considered economic activities.⁴ In addition, the way in which the results of the censuses are presented, reinforces this division of the population into breadwinners and dependants, and the different hierarchical appreciation of different types of work. Because of this, women's work is identified as less important, and less productive, because it is done by women (Burman, 1979, 9; Van Eijl, 1994, 41).

⁴ For a discussion on how unpaid work could be included in labour statistics, see Greenwood (1999, 273-286).

3. WOMEN'S WORK AND THE BELGIAN POSTWAR CENSUSES

Do we find similar indications of a male and normative definition of work in the Belgian postwar censuses? Did the censuses reinforce the male breadwinner/female housekeeper model and how did they do this? In 1946, the Belgian prewar *Centrale Dienst voor de Statistiek* (Central Statistical Service) was renamed the *Nationaal Instituut voor de Statistiek* (National Institute for Statistics, NIS) and the *Centrale Commissie voor de Statistiek* (Central Commission for Statistics) became the *Hoge Raad voor de Statistiek* (High Council for Statistics). These new names had to emphasise the scientific character of the agency. From 1940, the NIS was part of the department of economic affairs, with social and economic data collection as its main task.⁵ In theory there was to be a general population census every 10 years on the 31st of December, although this periodicity was not always maintained. The 1950 census was moved forward and took place in 1947, as the Belgian postwar government needed more recent data. The previous census dated from 1930 and the reconstruction efforts after the Second World War urgently required more recent demographic, economic and social information (De Brabander, 1984, 157).⁶ The next census was a year late, and was held in 1961 because of the fierce political debate on whether or not the census should also enquire into which languages families used at home (Blampain, 1997, 440; Van Doninck, 2003, 66, Luykx, 1985, 496-497). This leaves us with three censuses: 1947, 1961 and 1970 to draw information from. The results were published by the NIS about a year later.

The sources used for this article are the blank census forms and their accompanying explanatory notes – explaining to the public filling out the forms how to do so correctly –, the instructions for the enumerators and the published results. The 1947 census forms that were filled out by the public have been destroyed, but the State Archive (*Algemeen Rijksarchief*) in Brussels does have some documents relating to the processing of the results (Devolder & Preneel, 2006, 9). These archives do not contain any documents on the internal working procedures of the NIS, such as debates about the

⁵ Before 1940 the statistical service was part of the department of internal affairs. In 2003 the NIS had another name change, and today is called the Federal Public Service Economy, Directorate-General Statistics Belgium (*Federale Overheidsdienst Economie, afdeling Statistiek*).

⁶ *Belgisch Staatsblad*, 27 November 1947, p. 10972; NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handeltelling op 31 december 1947. Deel I*, pp. 48, 133.

questions and language used in the censuses.⁷ The archives of the 1961 and 1970 censuses, including the 1961 individual census forms, are also preserved at the State Archives, however these are not yet accessible and there is no inventory.⁸

The publications of the results are either bilingual or have separate French and Dutch editions. The results of the 1930 census were published in a bilingual publication. Before 1930 only French publications were available. Since 1947, all the publications of the NIS have both a French and a Dutch edition. As this research has just as much, if not more, to do with the words of the census, as with the mere numbers, both versions have been used and compared, when available. For this article mainly the Dutch edition has been used, with references to the French text and vocabulary, if relevant. This linguistic situation might have made the translation of our analysis into English less than elegant at times. Because of the specific characteristics of French and Dutch compared to English (for example the use of gendered nouns) we frequently need to refer to the original Dutch and French words (always in italics) to clarify an argument. In a first paragraph, the numeric results of the censuses with regards to the labour market will be presented, the following paragraphs offer a gender analysis of several concepts behind those numbers, such as the "active population", the "household", the "head of the household", "unemployment", etc.

3.1. The numbers

Although the aim of this article is to convince its readers not to take the results of the census at face value, for those not familiar with Belgian postwar history, a quick look at the numbers the censuses provide might be useful. The following table shows the total population, the total active population and the percentage of the economically active population by gender and age according to the 1930, 1947, 1961 and 1970 censuses. "Active population" refers to those that had a gainful profession: employers, the self-employed, administrative workers and wage earners, but also some categories of

⁷ The publication of the 1947 census results does summarise some of the discussions of the High Council for Statistics in preparation of the census.

⁸ Such an inventory is currently being prepared by the State Archive and the Department of Modern History at the University of Gent.

unemployed, and the draftees.⁹ This definition and its implications are discussed at length in the next paragraph (see 3.2).

		1930	1947	1961	1970
Total population	Men	4,007,418	4,199,728	4,496,860	4,721,866
	Women	4,084,586	4,312,467	4,692,881	4,929,078
	Total	8,092,004	8,512,195	9,189,741	9,650,944
Active population	Men	2,757,955	2,685,068	2,579,638	2,559,731
	Women	992,330	820,916	932,825	1,078,087
	Total	3,750,285	3,505,984	3,512,463	3,637,818
% of the economically active population	Men	68.8	63.9	57.4	54.2
	Women	24.3	19.0	19.9	21.9
	Total	46.4	41.2	38.2	37.7

TABLE I: POPULATION, ACTIVE POPULATION AND PERCENTAGE OF THE ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE POPULATION, 1930-1947-1961-1970¹⁰

In 1930 the Central Statistic Service recorded a diminishment of women's labour market participation compared to the 1920 census. They attributed this to the changed compulsory school age, the ageing of the population, the protective legislation with regards to women's work and the

"general improvement of the material situation of manual workers, making it possible for the wives to remain at the hearth".¹¹

The 1947 census results suggest a further decrease of women's labour market participation, leading to an historical low in the 1950s, the era of the housewife. Only one in five women of all ages worked, whereas 64% of the men did. According to the census only 15.4%, or one in six married women worked in 1947 (20.5% in 1961 and 26.4% in 1970), whereas more than 80% of married men did (79.8% in 1961 and 78.1% in 1970). Contemporaries and present day scholars alike have attributed this evolution to the economic

⁹ In 1930 it was unclear whether or not the draftees and the unemployed were included or not. This makes the comparison with later censuses difficult. The NIS itself in 1961 and 1970 no longer compared the new results with the prewar data and only provided an evolution from 1947 onwards.

¹⁰ Centrale Dienst voor de Statistiek, *Bevolking. Algemeene telling op 31 december 1930*, Brussel, 1937; NIS, *31 december 1970. Volkstelling. Deel 8. Beroepsbevolking*, p. 9.

¹¹ Centrale Dienst voor de Statistiek, *Bevolking. Algemeene telling op 31 december 1930*, p. 11.

crisis of the 1930s, the increased legal protection barring women from certain jobs during the 1930s, and the more subtle discouragement stemming from the 1950s' social security policies. Economic factors combined with ideological ones kept women at home. After the Second World War, returning male soldiers, prisoners of war, forced labourers and refugees supposedly pushed women out of their jobs as well. At the very least, society's desire for a return to normality reinforced the image of married women as mothers and housewives, whose place was at home taking care of the children and the husband, and not in the world of work (Lambrechts, 1979; Vanhaute, 2001, 38-45; Yernaux, 1964; Pott-Buter & Tijdens, 1998, 134-138; Dumont & Walgrave, 1980, 69; Plantenga, 1993; Thébaud, 1998, 247-248).

Some contemporaries claimed there was a short term abnormal and problematic increase in women's labour market participation immediately following the war, due to the high need of workers and the high wages the allied forces offered. The high need for qualified workers (who obtained their qualifications before the war), brought older, married women back to the work force and the needs of families trying to re-establish households and buying the necessary home goods – purchases that had been stalled due to shortages during the war – forced families to supplement the husbands wage with a second income.¹²

	Men			Women			Total		
	1947	1961	1970	1947	1961	1970	1947	1961	1970
Unmarried	40.3	26.7	24.0	23.4	20.1	17.8	32.2	23.5	21.1
Married	85.3	79.8	78.1	15.4	20.5	26.4	50.5	50.2	52.2
Widow(er)	39.2	23.8	30.1	16.4	8.9	10.8	23.1	12.6	15.7
Divorced	82.9	73.9		48.3	48.6		63.1	59.3	
Total	63.3	54.8	52.5	19.0	19.4	21.2	40.9	36.7	36.5

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE OF ACTIVE POPULATION ACCORDING TO MARRIAGE STATUS AND SEX, 1947-1961-1970¹³

¹² Nagels (M.), "Heeft het werkloosheidsverschijnsel bij de vrouwen een speciale betekenis?", *Tijdschrift voor Politiek*, IV, 1954, no. 3, p. 243; Frantzen (B.), "L'évolution du chômage en Belgique depuis la libération", *Revue Belge de Sécurité Sociale*, III, 1956, nos. 9-10, p. 338.

¹³ These do not include the draftees and the officially unemployed, hence they are different from the numbers in Table 2. NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handeltelling op 31 december 1947. Deel 8*, p. 20; NIS, *31 december 1961. Volkstelling. Deel 8*, p. 32; NIS, *31 december 1970. Volkstelling. Deel 8*, p. 33.

3.2. The active population

In the 1947, 1961, and 1970 census, the definition used for "active population" remained the same, and immediately excluded a considerable number of women. "Active" according to the censuses referred to those that had a gainful profession: employers, the self-employed, administrative workers (*bedienden*) and wage earners (*loontrekkenden*). Included were also some categories of the unemployed, and the draftees. Excluded by definition were students, "women who only worked in their own household", pensioners, and people 'dependent' on others for their livelihood.¹⁴

In other words, the definition the NIS used was individual, monetary, and market oriented. Work was paid work, by an individual. Dividing the population into an active and a non-active part was not based on the nature of people's occupation, but on whether or not that occupation was gainful. "Professional work" (*beroepsarbeid*) was only done by those whose work had a monetary value on the labour market, by selling goods or services (employers, the self employed and the professions) or by receiving a wage or salary (administrative and manual workers). Housewives were not part of the active population, housekeepers who performed household work for somebody else in exchange for wages, were. Activities such as cooking and making clothes were not productive when done for one's own family, but they were productive when performed in someone else's home and sold on the market.

This connotation of work is relatively modern and not the only one possible. For example, in 1881 the British census did regard unpaid work in the household as an economic activity, and housewives together with paid domestic staff were called the "domestic class" and part of the active population. When in the nineteenth century the notion of an individual occupation replaced the previous notion of an occupation or profession per family unit, the concept of a non active part of the population was born (Vanderstraeten, 2005, 209-217). Present day alternative suggestions to include non paid non market work – a concern when gathering information on developing countries – are mostly based on time use studies.

Contemporaries did not – a few exceptions withstanding – observe this exclusion of household work from the concept of work, or at least they did not view the exclusion as problematic. Catholic intellectual Marcel Laloire exceptionally remarked in 1955 that the statistic terminology was faulty, and

¹⁴. Mertens, "Enkele vooruitzichten inzake bevolkingsontwikkeling", *De Gids op Maatschappelijk Gebied*, XL, 1949, p. 526.

that the distinction that was being made between "active" and "non active" did not do justice to the many hours of hard work the average housewife performed, nor the importance of these activities for the economy of the country.

"Dire des épouses et des mères de familles, qui ne limitent pas à huit heures par jour ni à quarante-huit heures par semaine le temps qu'elles consacrent à leurs foyers, qu'elles ne font pas partie de la population active, c'est, de la part des hommes, faire preuve de beaucoup de prétention et d'une noire ingratitude".¹⁵

However, it is unclear whether this critique was just about the choice of vocabulary, which he felt was deprecatory, or whether his intention was to redefine the concept of work.

Other sections of the population too, according to the definition of active population, would have to be excluded, namely the *helpers* (unpaid family assistants) and the unemployed. However, the NIS did want to include these categories as part of the labour market. Family assistants were defined as those who helped another member of their family in the execution of his professional duties, without receiving direct pay for doing so. Their work nevertheless was remunerative indirectly, as they did contribute to the income their family member obtained. Hence, they were counted as part of the active population. Before the Second World War, the position of the unemployed was unclear in the statistics. In 1945, the NIS wanted to rectify this, and decided to consider an unemployed person as part of the active population, just like a family assistant, but only if the individual chose to describe himself as such (see below). In all three censuses under consideration, family assistants, the unemployed, as well as those conscripted for military service, were considered part of the 'active population' (*actieve bevolking* or *beroepsbevolking*).

In 1970, a new term was introduced: the 'working active population' (*werkende beroepsbevolking*), excluding the unemployed and the conscripted. This term, used for the classification of the 'working active population' according to marital status, suggested that both the unemployed and the conscripted, although part of the active population, were not really 'working'.¹⁶

¹⁵ Laloire (M.), "Le travail féminin", *Revue Nouvelle*, XXI, 1955, no. 5, pp. 509-509.

¹⁶ NIS, 31 december 1970. *Volkstelling. Deel 8. Beroepsbevolking*, p. 7.

3.3. The household and the head of the household

For the censuses, it was the household, unjustly called 'the family' (*gezin* in Dutch, *famille* in French) and not the individual that was the central unit of information gathering.¹⁷ Such a 'family' (meaning household not relatives) could be formed by a single person, or by two or more persons living under the same roof. Also those living together, though not related by blood or marriage, were considered a family/household. The explanatory notes (every census included a few pages of these, explaining to the population how to fill out the census forms) give the example of two friends sharing a house, or of a convent. The factual situation, and not the legal situation had to be filled out.¹⁸

The counting forms, consisting of a family form as well as individual forms, were handed out to each household (Devolder & Preneel, 2006, 10-11). The head of the household had to fill out the family form, his or her own form, and the individual forms of his or her underage children.¹⁹ The head of the family was the central person of the census, the rest of the population was defined according to their relationship with him (or her), as parent, daughter, son or spouse. In 1947, the head of the household was described as "he who exercised the greatest authority within the family" and in 1961 and 1970 as "the family member who in practice was in charge of all family affairs".²⁰ This change of definition was more a modernisation of the choice of vocabulary than any real change of how the concept was interpreted. The examples from the explanatory notes make clear that the husband/breadwinner was almost always automatically identified as the head of the household. Both being a man and being the breadwinner were implicit criteria meaning "authority" and "independence". If an unmarried adult was

¹⁷. This choice of words has a certain tradition. Also in the nineteenth century, censuses defined the "family" as a household, those living under one roof, or having a "common cooking pot" (Hakim, 1980, 576).

¹⁸. In all three censuses "family" is defined the same way. NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handelstelling op 31 december 1947. Deel I*, p. 50; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1961. Handleiding van de teller*, p. 7; NIS, *31 december 1970. Deel 6. Gezinnen en familiekeren*, p. 5.

¹⁹. The family forms (model A) were not send back to the NIS. The census results are based on the individual forms (model A bis); the family forms were kept at the local council level and were supposed to serve as a means of cross-checking and correcting the population registry.

²⁰. NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handelstelling op 31 december 1947. Deel I*, p. 83; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1961. Handleiding van de teller*, p. 8; NIS, *31 december 1970. Deel 6. Gezinnen en familiekeren*, p. 5.

"sharing a house with his older mother", he was considered head of the household, and the mother was assumed to have "given up her authority" and to be "dependent on her child". The idea of a head of the household, somebody in charge of the family unit, though not explicitly sexist, in practice was equated with male authority and independence.²¹ It has an inherent element of inequality as it assumes an asymmetrical family structure, where not all members of the household have an equal status (Oakley & Oakley, 1979, 177-180).

3.4. Occupation: "none (housewife)"

Both the family cards and the individual cards (question number 9 in 1947, part B in 1961 and part C in 1970) enquired about the employment of every individual member of the household. The questions on the individual cards were more extensive, the family card was more like a synopsis. In all three censuses, the questions themselves seem rather neutral, although the individual is always a he/male. In the first question, the individual was asked about his "profession, trade or gainful activity". The explanatory notes in the 1947 census elaborated that those without gainful occupation, those "not working", and those with "no personal source of income" had to answer the first question with "none". Between brackets, one had to specify whether one was a child, disabled, a student, or "a woman working in her own household".

Housewives hence had to answer the question about their employment with "none (works in her own home)", or with "without profession". The possibility of a househusband was non-existent. In 1961, the number of options was enlarged and allowed individuals without gainful occupation to identify themselves as a "pensioner", "retired", "a widow, receiving a widowers' pension", "a non-active property owner", "unemployed", or "non-working in some other fashion" such as a conscript, a student, or "working in her own household". Again the guidelines specified that that last option was only for women.²²

In 1970, the layout of the questionnaire and the order of the questions was revised. Now the individual also had to fill out a first general section where he was asked to describe his main source of livelihood: did he have a

²¹ NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handelstelling op 31 december 1947. Deel I*, p. 51.

²² NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handelstelling op 31 december 1947. Deel I*, pp. 100-101; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1961. Handleiding van de teller*, pp. 31-39; INS, *Recensement Général de la Population, de l'Industrie et du Commerce*, p. 93.

"profession, trade, income from property, pension, unemployment or other social benefits" or did he live from "the income of another member of the household". Further, in the questionnaire the profession or the lack thereof had to be explained in more detail, repeating the choices from the 1961 census, including the option "only works in her own household". The extra clarification "only for women" had disappeared.²³

The explanatory notes in 1947 and 1961 explicitly and extensively explain the difference between a housekeeper (*huishoudster* in Dutch and *ménagère* in French), working for wages in the household of someone else, and a housewife, working in her own home. Especially in French, the difference posed a problem as *ménagère* can mean both the one or the other. In 1910, 1920, and 1930, the census notes contained the same clarification (Piette & Gubin, 2001, 647-648).²⁴ Apparently the NIS feared that housewives (or their husbands filling out the census for them) would report themselves as *ménagères* (housekeepers), when they were really 'only' housewives. Why did this explanation disappear in the 1970 census? Did the NIS now assume people had understood the difference?²⁵

During the 1940 and 1950s, being a "housewife" in a sense was still regarded as a 'profession'; it was the quintessential female occupation, the expected life purpose for most women, and something you needed to be prepared and educated for. "Housewife" was not an official profession, it did not make you part of the active population, however being a housewife did have the social meaning or connotation of being "your job". The critique mentioned earlier, that some contemporaries were against the denigrating use of the term "non active" can also be understood in this context. Paid work outside the home for women was problematic, and socially quite invisible (women after all were not supposed to work), being a housewife however was very visible and very legitimate. In that sense, it might have been normal that "housewife" had some place in the census, as part of the answer to the question on one's profession or job, even if it was only between brackets – occupation: "none (housewife)". Being a housewife was not quite the same as being a pensioner or a student and somehow had to be counted separately.

In popular literature (women's magazines, journals of the organisations for working class women and adolescents), the revered image of the devoted mother and housewife was omnipresent during the 1940s and 1950s.

²³. NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1970. Handleiding van de teller*, pp. 42-45.

²⁴. According to Piette and Gubin the confusion about the terminology resulted in an unusually high number of *ménagères* (housekeepers) in the interwar censuses.

²⁵. Centrale Dienst voor de Statistiek. *Bevolking. Algemeene telling op 31 december 1930*, p. 7.

However, during the 1960s this changed slowly, and the ubiquitous housewife started to lose her social visibility and even legitimacy. Maybe this is the reason she disappeared from the 1970 census? In 2001, when the decennial census was replaced by the Socio-Economical Survey, women's rights groups demanded the re-introduction of the "housewife" as a possible profession for women to fill out, instead of the denigrating – such was the complaint – "none".²⁶

3.5. Labelling professions

During the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s the language of work was decisively male. In both Dutch and French, words such as 'labourer' and 'worker' had an implicit and sometimes even explicit male connotation.²⁷ The vocabulary used in the census betrays the same association of work and 'male'. All three censuses, when referring to a wage earner either on the forms or in the explanatory notes, use the term *werkman* meaning 'working man'. In Dutch, the word *man* is decisively male and is not used as a synonym for 'human', as it can be in English. In the French version *ouvrier* was used, which can be both a man or a woman, though the explicitly female gendered word would be *ouvrière*.²⁸

In 1947, the examples of professions used in the explanatory notes, were either neutral or explicitly male, such as engineer, accountant, merchant, car dealer, shoemaker, etc. Several professions in Dutch carry a suffix that identifies them as male. Today we use these words with care and add female variations, during the 1950s the male version was often used without further ado. In 1947, an official "list of occupations" was compiled, which was used for the classification of the population based on the census results, narrowing down all the possible answers used by the public to a more workable amount of different occupations. This list contains several specifically female occupations (with a female suffix), mostly in the service sector and the textile and clothing industry, next to many neutral or specifically male functions. We can assume that the occupations that were listed in their female form

²⁶ Belgische Senaat, *Verslag namens het adviescomité voor gelijke kansen voor vrouwen en mannen, Wetgevingsstuk nr 2-944/1*. Although called the *Algemene Socio-Economische Enquête*, the 2001 survey in fact was another census of the entire population.

²⁷ A chapter of the forthcoming dissertation of Hannelore Vandebroek deals with this issue in depth.

²⁸ INS, *Recensement Général de la population 1947*, p. 103.

were jobs that were done by women almost exclusively. Only very few jobs were listed with both a male and a female suffix.²⁹

In the 1961 census, *werkster* (cleaning lady) was added to the list of examples of professions. In the same census, the questions on education and degrees were feminised. Now the professions of *kindergarten* teacher (in Dutch, only the female form of this word was used), and primary school teacher (in Dutch *onderwijzer* (male) or *onderwijzeres* (female)) were added. This was probably caused by the perceived femaleness of these professions and not by the desire to give women a place in the census. In 1947, employers were still called *meester* (Dutch)/*maître* (French) meaning 'master', or *patroon* (Dutch)/*patron* (French), all male words. In 1961, 'master' had disappeared, and in 1970 only the neutral terminology of 'head of the company' (*bedrijfshoofd*) or 'entrepreneur' remained. So, all in all, over the years the census' choice of vocabulary became slightly more gender neutral and inclusive and less hierarchical, but not much. There also does not seem to be any conscious debate preceding these changes. Mostly, it was a limited modernisation of the vocabulary.³⁰

3.6. How (not) to count irregular work

The census was influenced by current opinions on what a normal family was: a male breadwinner/head of the household, a female homemaker and several children. A person's situation was forced into this mould and could only be counted this way. After the war, all married women, whatever their factual status on the labour market, were first and foremost considered as dependent housewives and mothers. This would affect how people understood the questions of the census and how they chose to answer them.

In 1947, the question about what exactly one's occupation was, was explained as having to be interpreted as the occupation an individual performed during the "major part of one's time". In 1961, this was the occupation that "brought in one's primary means of existence". In 1970, the census returned to a time-based definition and the answer to the question had to be the occupation one had during "the larger part of the working week".³¹

²⁹. NIS, *Naamlijst der beroepen. Alfabetische en systematische rangschikking, 1947.*

³⁰. NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handelstelling op 31 december 1947. Deel I*, p. 99; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1961. Handleiding van de teller*, p. 39; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1970. Handleiding van de teller*, p.60.

³¹. NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handelstelling op 31 december 1947. Deel VIII*, p. 11; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1961. Handleiding van de teller*, p. 39; NIS, *Algemene*

It is realistic to assume that most married women, even if they had some paid work, defined themselves in the first place as housewives, and hence answered this question, asking about their primary occupation as such. It is also feasible that even women who devoted a considerable part of their time to paid work, chose to depict themselves (to themselves and to the outside world) as housewives. The husband, in charge of filling in the census as head of the census, probably preferred to consider his wife as a housewife as well, as this was the norm even if she worked.

Thus, though the censuses are probably reliable where a full-time paid occupation outside of the home was concerned (this was harder to think away), it might be less reliable where other types of work are concerned. Women who had some kind of income, from part-time jobs and odd jobs, could easily choose not to fully disclose this in the census, and the census makers either did not foresee this problem, or simply did not mind. Van Eijl in her study on women's work in the Netherlands, assumes the data about women working as teachers, nurses, social workers and clerks as the most reliable, and the statistics on women working in small trades at home, as domestic staff, self-employed and family assistants much less so. The numbers on women working in agriculture, commerce and non-factory based industrial work are probably the most inaccurate (Van Eijl, 1994, 42-45).

To distribute the census forms and to help people fill out the questionnaires, the NIS sent out 'enumerators'. They were appointed by the local major, and preferably they were city hall employees or policemen, as these were considered to be both reliable and neutral. The enumerators distributed the forms to the population in the middle of December and went to collect them in January. They were supposed to check whether the forms had been filled out properly (literacy was not yet as close to 100% as it is today), and if not, help fill in the gaps and make corrections.³² So the way in which these enumerators interpreted the questions and the explanatory notes also had an influence on the outcome of the census.³³ So, if they perceived married women as primarily housewives, would they notice, let alone enquire

Volkstelling 1970. Handleiding van de teller, p. 60; INS, *Recensement Général de la Population, de l'Industrie et du Commerce au 31 décembre 1947*, p. 103.

³² NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handelstelling op 31 december 1947. Deel I*, pp. 78-82, 97; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1970. Handleiding van de teller*, p. 7.

³³ Nele Bracke in her study of Belgian nineteenth century statistics remarks similarly that, when filling out the forms in illiterate households, the enumerators possibly answered the questions based on their own middle class perceptions and judgements, leading to simplifications of for example local occupational diversity (Bracke, 2008, 313). During the debates on whether or not a language poll should still be included in the 1960 census, the possible lack of objectivity of the enumerators was also an issue (Luykx, 1985, 496).

into possible paid employment by the wife, if not expressly instructed to do so?

In 1961 and 1970, the attention paid to part-time employment did increase. This was probably related to the increasing awareness of the social security issues raised by such employment. In 1961, the census was still hesitant and rather unclear in its formulation. One of the questions now enquired whether the individual worked "more than half the normal working hours". According to the explanatory notes, you had to answer "no" if you worked part-time. In 1970, the NIS noticed that this question was somewhat obscure, and hence changed and extended it. Now the first question asked for "all paid employment", and it was also explicitly specified that if this work was not one's "primary source of livelihood" the question should be answered with yes. Further on in the questionnaire, more detailed questions enquired whether this work was part-time or full-time, and how many hours a week one worked. The margin between full-time and part-time was not indicated. However, the NIS did have an opinion on the subject of how many hours of work constituted a 'real' job. The self-employed and employers were asked if and, if so, how many people worked for them. The explanatory notes stated that personnel working less than 15 hours per week did not have to be counted.³⁴

In 1947 there was no question about part-time work, and there were no guidelines on how to answer the first work related question (what is your occupation during the major part of your time). The NIS wanted the 'main' profession to be filled out, but this could be understood as full-time work only. A woman with a part-time job and who perhaps regarded herself as mostly occupied with her household, may have answered "without (housewife)". During the next 20 years, part-time work slowly became the centre of social awareness, and this new – or at least perceived as new – labour market phenomenon, having become the centre of social debate, made its way into the census.

In 1947 and 1961, married men were asked to fill out on their own individual form whether or not their wife worked, what her profession was, and whether or not she worked outside the home. In 1961, the census also inquired about whether she worked more than 'half the time'.³⁵ In 1970 these questions disappeared. Neither the explanatory notes, nor the published

³⁴. NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1961. Handleiding van de teller*, p. 39; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1970. Handleiding van de teller*, pp. 44, 60. This was probably inspired by the ILO-norm (see below).

³⁵. NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handelstelling op 31 december 1947. Deel I*, p. 107; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1961. Handleiding van de teller*, p. 32.

results provide any indication as to why the NIS had added these questions, nor why they were subsequently dropped. The same information being gathered twice (on the husband's and the wife's form) is surprising, as the census typically and deliberately tried to be as concise as possible. It would be interesting to know whether husband and wife did provide the exact same answer or not, however, since the original forms, as filled out by the public, have been destroyed, this can no longer be researched.³⁶ The question does clearly indicate the contemporary concern regarding the "problem" of women's paid work outside the home. Based on this question, statistics could be compiled on the number of married women working outside the home (according to their husbands!), and the archive of the processing of the 1947 census does have such listings of "married men and the profession of their wife", per city, per province, per industry and per employment category.³⁷ This indicates the importance of the question of married women's work at the time, as an exceptional and even abnormal phenomenon, requiring extensive documentation.

How did the censuses treat the occurrence of odd jobs or second jobs? In Dutch the terminology used is *bijberoep*, meaning "additional job". In 1947, one of the questions in the occupation section (Question 9f) asked if you had any job, other than the one indicated in the answer to Question 9a (what is your main occupation during the major part of your time). Oddly, the explanatory notes led to certain housewives not answering this question. They indeed instructed "housewives, housekeepers, service staff and daughters still living at home" to skip question 9b and proceed immediately to question 9f. So, if a woman answered question 9a with "none (housewife)", she was consequently told to ignore the rest of the work related questions (such as where you worked, and what your second or third jobs were if you had any). So, if you chose to describe yourself as a housewife, you were not asked whether you had any other source of income. Does this mean the NIS did not think the combination of being a housewife and having a second source of income very likely?³⁸

³⁶. The 1961 individual forms are conserved at the National Archive in Brussels, however at the time of writing this article, we had not obtained permission to consult these.

³⁷. Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief (ARA), *Archief van het Nationaal Instituut voor de Statistiek. De Algemene Volkstelling van 31 december 1947*, nr. I 378/141. Further research might make a comparison possible between on the one hand the statistics (in the archive) of women's employment based on the husbands answers, and on the other hand the (published) active population statistics per civil status based on (all) the individual forms.

³⁸. NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handelstelling op 31 december 1947. Deel I*, pp. 101-107; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1961. Handleiding van de teller*, pp. 32-41; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1970. Handleiding van de teller*, pp. 43-44.

In 1961 and 1970, the questions about possible additional jobs, next to one's main occupation, became more extensive, but the phrasing was still not very clear. In 1961 the suggestion that certain categories such as housewives could skip these extra questions disappeared and in 1970, the explanatory notes even instructed that if your only profession was a small or second job, you had to put it down as your main occupation in Question 9a. So it seems the NIS had realised that the way the questions were presented previously had resulted in people not recording their profession, when it was not considered their main occupation. The fact that it seemed very difficult to find a way to explain the question to the population, and that the questions changed census after census – something which in principle was avoided because this made it difficult to compare results – indicates that the NIS had difficulties grasping and recording anything other than full-time jobs. The concept of multiple job-holding was equally problematic and hence went unrecorded, for both men and women (Vanhaute, 2003, 148-149).

3.7. The unpaid family assistant

The most problematic category for the NIS was the "family assistant" or "helper". In 1930, 1947, 1961 and 1970, the family assistant was defined as

"someone who regularly assisted another member of their family in the execution of their job, without receiving payment" (Yernaux, 1964, 1153; Pontanus, 1959, 16).³⁹

However, it was not clear what exactly 'regularly' meant, or how many hours one had to help out in order for it to count. The definition employed by the International Labour Organisation draws the line at fifteen hours, "not including unpaid domestic work" (UN, 1999, 8). The Belgian censuses did not specify such a bottom line and left it to the discretion of the people filling out the forms. The census did use the 15 hours-guideline when asking employers to count their workforce, so it might have had some influence on the counting of family assistants as well.

Again, this leads us to question the validity and accuracy of the census' registration of women's labour market participation. Did a woman who described herself as a housewife, and whose family regarded her as such as well, consider herself an assistant in the family business unless her involvement was near full-time? Did this not result in a large amount of a woman's

³⁹. NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handelstelling op 31 december 1947. Deel I*, p. 100; NIS, *31 december 1970. Volkstelling. Deel 8. Beroepsbevolking*, p. 7.

contribution to the family business going unrecorded? Oral history has demonstrated that women who describe themselves to the interviewer as not having worked, when asked in more detail to talk about their daily lives turned out to have done (for example) accounts for the family business or minded the shop for a few hours daily while their husband did deliveries. Yet, they did not 'work'.⁴⁰

As with part-time work and second jobs, the NIS did increasingly realise that the phrasing of the question was not conducive to an extensive recording of family assisted work. Therefore, in 1970 the questionnaire explicitly clarified that family members helping in the family business (*meewerkende gezinsleden*) had to affirmatively answer question 9a on their main occupation.⁴¹

Many family assistants, male and female, probably went unrecorded in all three censuses because people feared that the census would be used for tax purposes. Also, for a family worker, social security payments ought to be made. To avoid these, people often did not declare such work. Actually, the census had a mere documental purpose (Yernaux, 1964, 1145-1146, 1153) and census confidentiality was guaranteed by law.⁴² The information the NIS collected on individuals could only be used to make global, anonymous statistics and could not be shared with the fiscal administration. Other governmental departments could receive information "in confidence", with the explicit exception however of the Inland Revenue Service. The 'enumerators' in the field were also bound by a confidentiality agreement.⁴³ This guarantee of confidentiality was introduced because the government and the NIS rightly assumed people were not answering the census honestly.⁴⁴ We can envisage that many people still did not trust this guarantee, and that many activities that generated income and that were usually not declared for tax purposes and for which no social security payments were made, such as odd jobs, supplementary earnings, and the work of relatives (wives, sons and daughters) continued to go unrecorded (NIS, 1978, 26-31).

Not only the intentional non declaration of family assistants falsified women's participation in family businesses in agriculture, trade and small

⁴⁰ Papers of the 2003-2004 course "Methoden en technieken van de Nieuwste Geschiedenis", Department of History, K.U.Leuven. See also, Van Winckel (1991).

⁴¹ NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1970. Handleiding van de teller*, p. 43. Papers of the Oral History Project of the seminar "Methoden en Technieken" (K.U.Leuven, History Department) 2004.

⁴² Law of July 4th 1962, *Belgisch Staatsblad*, 20th July 1962.

⁴³ NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1970. Handleiding van de teller*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ The same concerns crop up in the twenty-first century, intertwined with the debate about privacy.

commerce, also the timing of the census, in the middle of winter, contributed to its inaccuracy. At precisely that time, many seasonal industries were suspended, and small businesses had less need for family assistance in this period. Therefore, seasonal workers and other temporary employees, who only worked in spring, summer or autumn, among whom were many women, disappeared from the statistics (Bracke, 1996, 166-167; Pott-Buter, 1993, 17-18; Van Eijl, 1994, 41-53).⁴⁵

The fact that many female family assistants were never recorded was already noticed during the 1950s. In 1954, Fernand Hébette, in an article detailing the evolution of the Belgian active population, observed that in Belgium the wives of farmers were either not, or not nearly enough, recorded as part of the active population. He thought this was misguided and tried to correct the statistics based on the French data, assuming that the French proportion of women working in the agricultural sector could not be that different from the Belgian one. Other contemporary research shared this opinion, stemming from a concern to provide better statistics. In 1957, Gustavo Perez, a visiting scholar, wrote:

"L'examen des situations individuelles apprend que le haut pourcentage de femmes sans profession, relevé dans le recensement générale ne correspond pas à la réalité. La plupart des ménagères épouses d'agriculteurs collaborent à l'exploitation, dans une mesure qui permet de les classer parmi les aidantes".⁴⁶

3.8. Unemployment

Not seeing the work of women and the lack of sensitivity for this issue is also clear when looking into how unemployment was approached. The International Labour Organisation at the 8th congress of Labour Statisticians in Genève in 1954 provided a few guidelines on how to categorise people in labour market statistics. According to the ILO, unemployed were those

⁴⁵. Van Eijl remarks that the Dutch census of 1889 only counted women as active if they had a different occupation from their husbands, while in 1909 women working with their husband in the family business were counted as well. In France until 1954, the census assumed that everyone under the age of 70 living in a household with a self-employed worker, was a family assistant and part of the active population, unless he or she specifically declared to work elsewhere or to be in school. This resulted in women making up almost half of the active population in agriculture in the French statistics.

⁴⁶. Hébette (F.), "La population active en Belgique", *Bulletin de l'Institut de Recherches Économiques et Sociales*, XX, 1954, p. 542; Perez (G.), "L'éclatement d'un isolat agricole", *Bulletin de l'Institut de Recherches Économiques et Sociales*, XXIII, 1957, p. 622.

without paid work, available for work, and actively looking for work. In that case they had to be considered part of the active population (UN, 1999, 8).⁴⁷ In 1947, the census instructed that those without a job but "capable of work and desiring to work" had to provide their previous occupation between brackets, or the occupation their education had prepared them for. Henceforward they were counted as "active".⁴⁸ Again the question can be asked about how women, and their husbands filling out the forms, dealt with this. When a woman, after a short or long absence from the labour market wished to resume paid employment (for example when her children had reached school-going age), the Belgian postwar social security system failed to recognise her as being unemployed and she had no rights to unemployment benefits (Vandebroek, 2002, 277-283).

In 1947, the NIS left things rather vague and left it to the discretion of those filling out the forms on how they chose to describe themselves. There was no referral to the social security system, so even if you were not officially unemployed and did not receive unemployment benefits, for the sake of the census, you could describe yourself as such. In 1961, the phrasing was just as vague ("full-time unemployed or those looking for employment"). Only in 1970 was an explicit reference to unemployment benefits added.⁴⁹ So, the postwar censuses gradually narrowed down the definition of the unemployed from everyone who chose to describe themselves as such, to only those officially recognised as unemployed by the unemployment benefit system.

During the preparation for the 1947 census, the High Council for Statistics made a decision that sheds more light on the way in which the concepts of work and (un)employment and the relationship between them were interpreted. The High Council discussed the questionnaire and possible changes in comparison with the 1930 census. It was decided not to include the proposed question "have you previously worked?" as this question would have already been answered from asking whether someone was an employer, an administrative or manual worker, or a family assistant.

"When someone indicated he is an administrative or manual worker, this means he has a contract with an employer, or has had such a contract in the past. Hence, this assumes a previous occupation."

⁴⁷. "De actieve bevolking in de wereld", *De Gids op Maatschappelijk Gebied*, XLV, 1954, p. 1213.

⁴⁸. NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handelstelling op 31 december 1947. Deel I*, p. 100.

⁴⁹. NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1961. Handleiding van de teller*, pp. 31-32; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1970. Handleiding van de teller*, p. 42.

In other words, the Council assumed that those who identified themselves as workers, either worked at that time, or had worked in the past, making the question about previous employment redundant. This however implied that those who did not identify themselves as an administrative or manual worker, had never worked. It is debatable whether a married woman, previously employed before her marriage, would describe herself as an employee when asked about her profession after a few years of being a housewife at home. If she did not, according to the council, she had never worked. At the time of the census she was not working and so she never had. Hence, women who wished to re-enter the labour market after a period of absence, were registered as housewives, whereas unemployed men, were still members of the active population.⁵⁰

Presumably the High Council did not mean to exclude women. However, we can assume that the traditional gendered division of paid work and family responsibilities influenced their decisions and how they modelled the questionnaire. The questions were based on a male biography of non-stop, lifelong economic activity, where unemployment was a temporary, accidental interruption. Work that did not fit this mould went unrecorded. Using this same logic in the 1961 census, the unemployed, pensioners and the conscripted were all asked about their previous employment, whereas housewives were not. In 1970, this question disappeared again.⁵¹

4. CONCLUSIONS AND ALTERNATIVES

The quasi-automatic identification of (paid) work with men, and the resulting invisibility of working women, influenced the way in which the active population was measured and allowed itself to be measured. Both the government and the statistical agencies posed certain priorities when gathering data. Normative and gendered opinions on work and women's work by politicians, the civil servants working for the NIS, the enumerators, and the population together ensured that the concept of work in the Belgian censuses of 1947, 1961 and 1970 excluded many women's work, and that some of the work of women that, strictly speaking, did fit the definition, was not noticed as such.

⁵⁰. NIS, *Algemene Volks-, Nijverheids- en Handelstelling op 31 december 1947. Deel I*, pp. 66-69, 106-107.

⁵¹. NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1961. Handleiding van de teller*, p. 32; NIS, *Algemene Volkstelling 1970. Handleiding van de teller*, p. 42.

In 1987, Allin and Hunt (1987, 346-349) concluded that the hidden concepts twentieth century official statistics were based upon – work as lifelong continuous activity, the concept of the head of a household, and the use of the family as the smallest unit of the census – might have been adequate during the 1940s and 1950s, but were totally superseded in the 1980s. Actually, those concepts were just as imaginary during the 1940s and 1950s. Allin and Hunt here succumbed to the myth of the postwar period as the era of the housewife, a myth which was partially created by the censuses, whose normative assumptions hid the work and family circumstances of those whose situation and choices did not match the model.

Can it be done differently? According to the definition of work used in *The World's Women Trends and Statistics*, a UN report on the situation of women in the world in 2000, it can be:

"Work refers to the participation of individuals in productive activities for which they either receive remuneration (in cash or in kind) for their participation, or are unpaid because they contribute to a family business enterprise. It also includes subsistence production of goods for their own households and non-economic activities such as domestic work, family and elderly care, construction or repair of owner-occupied buildings, and volunteer work for which individuals receive no remuneration".

Another UN definition describes work as:

"All productive activities that are performed for another's benefit or one's own benefit, provided that it could be carried out by someone other than the person benefiting from it, while achieving the desired result".

The big difference between these definitions and the ones used by the Belgian statistical agencies as discussed in this article is the fact that here "activity" is central to the determination of what is or is not considered as work, and not the context in which these activities are done (public/private, paid/unpaid; individual/collective, etc).

An important element in the process of industrialisation was the reinforcement of the difference between paid productive work outside of the home and unpaid domestic work. This does not mean that in 1947 (or 2009 for that matter) there was no longer any work in between. The transition between both categories remains fluent. The most important cause of not counting the work of women in many labour market statistics might be the constant use of this artificial demarcation. The activities of women that fall somewhere in between are made invisible. This is not merely a gender issue, as male income generating activities that do not fall within the boundaries of

what the censuses define as "a job" often remain hidden as well (Vanhaute, 2003, 148-149).

The alertness of the NIS towards some issues (part-time work, odd jobs, family assistants) did slowly increase in the postwar period. Interpretational problems were identified and an effort was made to rectify them. The vocabulary was modernised. Words such as "head of the household", "family", "additional job", "family assistant", "unemployed" turned out to need further clarification, or alternatively new words were introduced. None of these changes seem to have been influenced by an increased awareness of gender. The motive behind changes in the way questions were phrased, the words that were used, and the clarifications used in the explanatory notes, was to produce better, more accurate data, and to get rid of possible obscurities. The lens of the camera looking at society was dusted off, not re-angled. This may or may not have led to a more adequate registration of women's labour force participation, but the concept of work and who made up the active population did not change significantly during the first postwar decades.

The censuses were part of the general discourse on work, reflected the definitions of work contemporaries use, and reconstructed this definition over and over again. Every historical study reproducing the resulting numbers as statistical facts, such as the percentage of women "working", reaffirms this definition, and contributes to the invisibility of women's experiences, lives and work. So, how many women did work during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s? We do not know and exact numbers are lacking. If you define work as any and all human productive activity adding value to goods or services (Vanhaute, 2001, 33), we can assume they more or less all worked, unless they were too old, too young or too sick. The censuses show us that roughly one in five women worked in a more or less full-time paid occupation in the regular labour market. To know more about the working life of the rest of the female population we need other sources, such as oral testimony. We cannot simply – as too many historians have done – assume that they did not 'work'.

ABBREVIATIONS

ARA	Algemeen Rijksarchief
NIS	National Institute for Statistics

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Het tijdperk van de huisvrouw? De constructie van 'werk' en de 'actieve' bevolking in de Belgische volkstellingen (1947, 1961 & 1970)

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SAMENVATTING

De jaren 1950 worden vaak beschouwd als het tijdperk van de huisvrouw, zowel als een algemeen verspreide praktijk, als op ideologisch vlak. De beschikbare statistieken ondersteunen dat beeld: gehuwde vrouwen werkten niet en de vrouwelijke tewerkstelling steeg pas vanaf de jaren zeventig van de twintigste eeuw. Een doorgedreven genderanalyse van het taalgebruik van de Belgische naoorlogse volkstellingen (1947, 1961 & 1970) toont echter aan dat deze tellingen meer vertellen over de toenmalige definitie van "werk", dan over de vrouwelijke arbeidsparticipatie.

Vanaf de industriële revolutie werd betaalde arbeid de dominantie arbeidsvorm. Dit veranderde de betekenis van wat maatschappelijk als "arbeid" of "werk" beschouwd werd, tot enkel nog reguliere, betaalde tewerkstelling binnen de formele arbeidsmarkt als werk gedefinieerd werd. Onbetaalde activiteiten, zoals huishoudelijk werk en de zorg voor anderen, maken geen deel uit van dit moderne arbeidsconcept. De volkstellingen vertellen ons enkel hoeveel mannen en vrouwen er werkten volgens een specifieke en beperkte definitie van wat werk is. In het naoorlogse België hanteerde het Nationale Instituut voor de Statistiek (NIS) definities die vele vormen van onbetaalde arbeid uitsloten. Arbeid in gezinsbedrijven, werkloosheid en irreguliere arbeid werden vaak niet of onvoldoende geregistreerd. Gehuwde vrouwen zonder voltijdse baan buitenshuis werden geïdentificeerd als huisvrouwen. Hun minder reguliere (soms ook betaalde of anderzijds inkomstgenererende) activiteiten bleven buiten beschouwing.

Door de volkstellingen te analyseren als een narratieve bron, en de gebruikte categorieën zoals "huishouden" en "beroep", te analyseren, onderzoekt dit artikel op welke manier dit proces van inclusie en exclusie plaatsvond. De identificatie van (betaalde) arbeid met mannen en van gehuwde vrouwen en moeders met huisvrouwen, beïnvloedde de manier waarop de actieve bevolking geteld werd en zich liet tellen. Normatieve en genderbeladen

opvattingen van politici, ambtenaren en de bevolking beïnvloedden de manier waarop de vragen gesteld en beantwoord werden. De toenemende alertheid van het NIS met betrekking tot deeltijdse arbeid, werkloosheid, irreguliere arbeid en onbetaalde arbeid in het kader van het gezinsbedrijf, zorgde ervoor dat specifieke interpretatieproblemen werden geïdentificeerd en dat de vraagstelling in de loop van de decennia werd bijgesteld. Het vocabularium werd gemoderniseerd. Die veranderingen waren echter niet ingegeven door een toegenomen aandacht voor de arbeid van vrouwen. Het hoofddoel was de productie van accurate statistieken en het uit de weg ruimen van verouderde of obscure definities. De lens van de camera waarmee men naar de samenleving keek, werd afgestoft. Echter, het gezichtspunt wijzigde niet. Soms leidde dit tot een meer adequate registratie van de deelname van vrouwen aan de arbeidsmarkt. Het basisbegrip van wat al dan niet als arbeid werd beschouwd, en wie er al dan niet tot de actieve bevolking behoorde, evolueerde echter niet significant tijdens de eerste naoorlogse decennia.

L'ère de la femme au foyer? La construction du "Travail" et de la population "Active" dans le recensement de la population belge (1947, 1961 et 1970)

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RÉSUMÉ

Les années 1950 sont souvent considérées comme l'ère de la femme au foyer, aussi bien sur le plan pratique qu'idéologique. Les statistiques disponibles corroborent cette interprétation: d'une part, très peu de femmes mariées travaillaient dans les années 1940 et 1950, et d'autre part, l'emploi des femmes n'a connu une croissance rapide qu'à partir des années 1970. Néanmoins, une *gender analysis* approfondie du langage des recensements belges de l'après-guerre (1947, 1961 et 1970) révèle que ceux-ci nous en disent plus sur la définition du travail à ce moment-là que sur la participation des femmes au marché du travail.

Depuis la révolution industrielle, le travail salarié est devenu la forme de travail dominant. Ce phénomène a changé la signification du terme "travail", qui progressivement n'a plus désigné que le travail régulier et salarié au sein du marché du travail formel. Les activités non rémunérées, telles que le travail domestique et les soins apportés aux autres, n'entrent pas dans le concept moderne de travail. Les recensements se bornent à nous signaler combien d'hommes et de femmes travaillaient selon une définition spécifique et limitée du travail. Dans la Belgique d'après-guerre, l'INS utilisait des définitions qui excluaient la plus grande partie du travail non rémunéré. En outre, le travail dans les entreprises familiales, le chômage, ainsi que le travail à temps partiel et irrégulier étaient insuffisamment pris en compte. Les femmes mariées qui n'avaient pas un travail à temps plein hors de la maison, étaient répertoriées comme femmes au foyer, ce qui occultait toutes les autres activités.

En examinant ces recensements comme une source narrative et en analysant les catégories comme la "femme au foyer" et la "profession", cet article décrit de quelle manière ce processus d'inclusion et d'exclusion s'est opéré. L'identification du travail (salarié) avec les hommes, et des femmes mariées et des mères avec les femmes au foyer, a influencé la manière dont la population active a été recensée et a pu être recensée. Les opinions normatives et liées à l'appartenance sexuelle exprimées par les politiques, les fonctionnaires et la population ont influencé la manière dont les questions ont été posées et les réponses qui y ont été apportées. La vigilance croissante de l'INS à l'égard du travail à temps partiel, du chômage, du travail irrégulier et du travail non rémunéré dans des entreprises familiales durant la période de l'après-guerre a permis d'identifier des problèmes d'interprétation spécifiques, de reformuler les questions et de moderniser le vocabulaire au cours des décennies suivantes. Toutefois, aucune de ces modifications ne semble avoir été influencée par une attention accrue aux différences selon le sexe. Le but principal était de produire des statistiques de meilleure qualité et plus précises, et d'éliminer d'éventuelles définitions abscones. L'objectif de la caméra qui scrute la société a été épousseté, mais l'angle de vue n'a pas été modifié. Cela a pu conduire parfois à une prise en compte plus adéquate de la participation des femmes au marché du travail. Pourtant, le concept fondamental de ce qui était considéré ou non comme du travail et qui faisait partie ou non de la population active n'a pas changé de manière significative au cours des premières décennies de l'après-guerre.