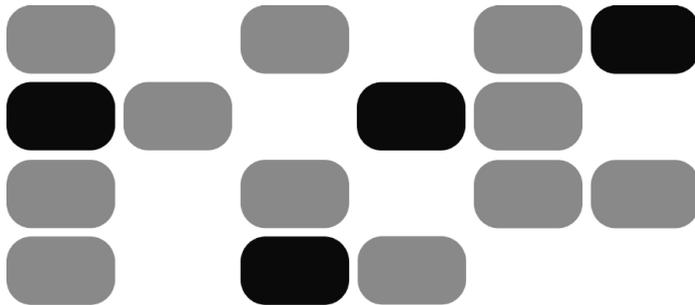


Extended abstract

*Female Widowhood
and Old Age on Catalan Masoveria
in the First Third of the 20th Century:
an Anomalous Absence*



Enric Saguer Hom
Universitat de Girona, Spain

DOI: 10.4422/ager.2022.04

ager

Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural
Journal of Depopulation and Rural Development Studies

Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and background

In rural Catalonia, where historically there existed a stem-family model associated with a non-egalitarian hereditary regime, it has generally been considered that the widow's co-residence with the first-born, his partner and their offspring was the normal way to resolve problems deriving from the old woman's widowhood. The stem household identified with this pattern has been specifically associated with those families that resided on *masos*, the predominant type of farm, and this has been verified to be the case for farmers who owned the property. However, what of farm tenants or sharecroppers? Although *masovers*, as these sharecroppers or tenants were called, did not own the farm on which they worked and where they resided, they did apparently practice the same hereditary system as owners, preferring to name the first-born male the sole heir. This suggests that the dominant family structure was also a stem-family type, with an abundance of multiple family and extended family households in various phases of the family life cycle. This family structure was the one that was to provide sustenance for the elderly generation and, more specifically, for the mother when she was widowed. However, as we shall explain in this article, at least in the first third of the 20th century, *masover* families registered a much lower presence of widowed women than that found in the rest of the population, when the stem model would lead us to think otherwise.

2. Objectives, methodology and sources

The present research uses a series of municipal censuses from 1936 -thus allowing for the reliable identification of *masover* families- to examine the structure of *masover* households in the historical region of Empordà (NE Catalonia). These were observed to present a notable absence of widowed women compared to other social groups. A total of 49 nominative relationships were used, which provided a sample of 44,990 individuals and 11,487 households, of which 820 (7.1 %) were identified as *masover* households. In order to establish a pattern of contrast that highlights the specific characteristics of the group comprising *masovers*, all other Empordà

households were grouped into two different categories: urban households and rural households (without *masovers*).

3. Results

The first indicator that highlights the existence of a peculiar behaviour among *masover* households is the widowhood rate, that is, the quotient, for each population group, between the number of widowers and the corresponding total of individuals. Most surprising is the low proportion of widowed women in *masover* households. While the county as a whole registers a rate of 11.1 % of widowed women, the percentage among *masovers* falls to 5.2 %. This anomaly is confirmed with the estimation of odds ratios corresponding to the different population groups considered. The chances of being a widow for a woman who did not live in a *masover* household were 2.5 times higher than if she were a *masovera*. On the other hand, if we examine the female widowhood rate by age group, we observe that the differences between the rate for *masover* women and that of the other groups used as a pattern for comparison are especially amplified for women aged between 50 and 70, when their fertile life was over.

4. Discussion

The lower presence of widowed women confers some singular characteristics on the structure of *masover* households. Firstly, there is an almost complete absence of single widows (type 1b, according to Laslett's classification), which may be explained by conditions imposed upon granting access to farms, these entailing the obligation of the whole family to live on the farm with their working animals. Secondly, we find a considerable weight of simple family households (65.2 %), noticeably greater than in the comparison groups. And, finally, there is a balance between extended family households (type 4) and multiple family households (type 5), clearly in favour of the latter. In other words, there is a lesser weight of extended family households, where widowed tenants might be found in their old age.

In view of the results, it is worth enquiring as to whether widowed women only left *masover* households or whether the phenomenon was more widespread. An analysis of the rate of males by age group reveals the existence of other reasons for

women leaving *masover* households, since these present considerably higher levels of men than urban households and other rural households after the age of 20.

Given that there is no evidence of female overmortality in *masover* households to explain the registered rates of males, the existence of a migratory flow can be inferred. Where, then, did these widows who left *masover* households go? Although an exploration was carried out based on the data contained in the same population censuses from 1936, they cannot provide a fully satisfactory answer to the question. We have observed that the urban centres of the region registered a higher concentration of widowed women, as might be expected, but that the mountainous areas (Empordà Pyrenees and Gavarres) also had high rates of female widowhood and that a greater proportion of rural women who were displaced after the age of 40 -the age after which the probability of being widowed increased significantly- could be found in other rural locations.

5. Conclusions

The main finding of this work is the observation of an unexpectedly low frequency of widowed women in the *masover* households of the region during the period analysed: 1936 Empordà. This fact contradicts the image we have of the Catalan rural world, where there existed a stem-family model associated with a non-egalitarian hereditary regime, which also applied to *masovers*. However, this migration of widowed women did not undermine the idea of the stem family, as this persisted, although with a structure displaying a higher proportion of the multiple household type.

6. Future research lines

The main question left open by the article refers to the causes of the low presence of widowed women in *masover* households. This should not be considered a coincidence and neither does it seem to be due to circumstantial factors such as the abandonment of the practice of entering into marriage contracts, or the general increase in widows in the population as a whole. Therefore, future research should explore the conditions imposed by the contractual regime in greater depth, especially those referring to the endowment of labour, as well as the effects of *masovers'* mobility on changes in the composition of their household. Furthermore, the

historical evolution of female widowhood on *masover* farms must also be reconstructed by carrying out a similar exercise for several previous periods in order to determine whether it was a recent phenomenon or displayed a structural nature inherent to the *masoveria* regime.

Highlights:

1. In the 1930s, masoveria had a notable absence of widowed women.
2. The widowhood rate was especially low among 50–70 year-old masoveres (female masovers).
3. The structure of masover households displays differential characteristics with respect to other households.
4. It is likely that many widowed masoveres were integrated into other rural households.
5. The over-representation of men on sharecropper farms cannot be explained solely by the migration of widowed women.

Abstract: The article investigates whether the conditions of the masoveria regime influenced the structure of family units and, especially, the weight of widowed women in this. To this end, a sample of nominative lists has been analysed from the census carried out by the Government of Catalonia in 1936, pertaining to the Catalan counties of Upper and Lower Empordà, and the structure of all households reconstructed and grouped into three categories (masovers, rural households and urban households). The results indicate a pattern of men being over-represented and migration among widowed women that is contradictory to the image we have of the Catalan rural world of the time. Said image depicts a stem-family model associated with a non-egalitarian hereditary regime that, a priori, was to respond to the situations of old age and widowhood. The article also investigates the fate of widowed women, arguing that only some moved to urban centres, while most joined other non-masover rural households.

Keywords: Social history, rural history, masoveria, widows, Catalonia.