Overleven na de dood. Weduwen in Leiden in de Gouden Eeuw.
Schmidt, A.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Summary

Widows constituted an important minority in early modern urban society. High mortality rates increased the incidence of widowhood. When they survived childbirth, life expectancy for women was probably higher than for men. The chance that women would remain widows for a long period of time was even more likely. According to the census of the Hoofdgeld, held in Leiden in 1622, thirteen percent of the households in the city were headed by widows. This study focuses on the question: what was the implication of widowhood for the legal, social and economic status of women in seventeenth century Leiden?

Two stereotypes emerge in plays and farces about widows, as well as in moralistic literature written for them. The 'bad' widow refused to mourn, squandered her late husband's capital, sought to satisfy her sexual appetite and therefore wanted to remarry as soon as possible. When she did so shortly after the death of her husband and became pregnant, this could lead to the extreme disgrace of uncertain paternity for her child. The bad widow was criticised and ridiculed in farces and figured in prescriptive literature as a warning. Her counterpart, the 'good' widow, represented the opposite values. She was faithful, chaste and dedicated her life to religion and education. Her behaviour was held up as an example. It can be noted that the representation of widows lacks the diversity of experiences in widowhood experienced by flesh and blood women.

Whereas widowhood caused significant changes in individual women's lives from the point of view of the nuclear family, which lay at the basis of social relations in seventeenth century society, the level of continuity is remarkable. The survival of the family, though broken, was paramount. This is indicated by the choices widows made while reorganising their lives as well as by the opportunities that were left for them to do so.

Widowhood changed a woman's socio-economic position. According to the tax registers, widows were over-represented in the highest class as well as in the lowest classes of the urban population. The percentage of widows in the middle classes was relatively low. This unequal distribution of widows over the urban
population can be attributed to different causes.

Many women were confronted with impoverishment following the death of their husbands. Those who had barely been able to make ends meet during their husband’s lifetimes were almost inevitably condemned to poor relief during widowhood. But for the better-to-do as well, the loss of a spouse implied the risk of impoverishment and hence a loss of reputation. Social stratification based upon occupation, as is usually applied to indicate one’s place within society, cannot be used to determine the socio-economic status of widows, for their status cannot be derived from the status they had previously enjoyed in married life. The way in which the work performed by her husband or by the couple together was organised, rather than the occupation itself, determined the change of socio-economic status women were confronted with during widowhood.

Women who had been dependent on their husband’s income, as well as women who had formerly earned their own income (through wage work), often lost more than half of the family’s previous income. Women who had not previously worked sought an appropriate and honourable occupation, preferably within the social and occupational environment within which her husband had moved. Following the loss of their husbands, women with their own occupation, like midwives, second-hand clothes dealers, appraisers and market women, tried to increase their income by co-operating with other widows or unmarried female relatives, by applying for better paid functions, by combining several different jobs or by taking up the job they had quit previously. Women did not always succeed in compensating for the loss of income with an income of their own. Especially as far as low-paid women’s work was concerned, wages were insufficient to sustain them independently. 25 Percent of the widow-headed households in the census of 1622 were registered as poor.

The medieval categorisation of widows as *persona miseriales*, still prevalent after the reorganisation of the poor relief in the late sixteenth century, afforded widows special protection by city authorities. Although this protection did not guarantee direct aid, the status of *persona miseriales* made them likely recipients of municipal poor relief, and probably increased their chances at becoming inmates in hospitals or in one of the numerous almshouses (hofjes) in the city. Despite this more or less privileged status, groups from different social backgrounds began to express the wish to take care of their own widows during the seventeenth century. Several (trade-based) mutual aid funds tried to relieve the poverty of the widows of their members with occasional subsidies. Through the benefits of the widow funds established in the eighteenth century, one tried to prevent the loss of social position. However, both forms of social care were extremely expensive, and limited financial means prevented their success. In the seventeenth century, the inability to compensate for loss of income equalised women from different social backgrounds during widowhood.

The death of a spouse had different consequences for those women who had assisted their husbands within their artisanal occupations. This difference can
partly be explained by their husband's source of income. Professionals and city
officials, for example, generated income through knowledge, from which wo-
men were excluded in general. The source of income for artisans, on the other
hand, was composed to a large degree of capital that could also be exploited by
women. In many crafts a widow had the right to carry on her husband's busi-
ness after his death. Continuing with the work was not always easy however.
Widows sometimes came into conflict with their journeyman, who refused to
accept female authority. Moreover, the widow was subjected to several restric-
tions. The presence of a journeyman was usually required. He had to guarantee
the quality of the goods produced in the widow's workshop because the widow
herself had never had the opportunity to provide evidence of her craftsmanship.
The right to keep the workshop open was limited to the period of widowhood.
Whether widows themselves did the actual work depended upon the occupation
concerned. The 'widow's right' nevertheless gave these women the opportunity
to sustain the business and earn a living for themselves and their children. But
their status as 'master's widows' was also crucial to their family's interest in a
broader sense. By continuing the business, widows were able to hand down eco-
nomic resources to the next generation. In this position, the widow was not just
the intermediary between the death of her spouse and the coming into adult-
hood of her sons. She often sustained the workshop long after her children
reached adulthood, sometimes even until her death. Their economic indepen-
dence as well as their social prestige made widows of craftsmen likely candidates
for remarriage. They remarried more often than did widows from other occupa-
tional backgrounds, although not necessarily with their journeymen as is often
supposed. By remarrying, they disappeared as important representatives of
widows in the urban middle class, in which few widows were found anyway
due to the impoverishment of so many.

No woman could enrich herself through the death of her husband. In most
cases, the widow acquired the management of the estate which had previously
been under her husband's control. Living expenses could decrease. But neither
of these factors caused a substantial improvement in a widow's standard of li-
ving. The presence of some capital offered women a relatively comfortable posi-
tion. Although this conclusion may seem banal, it is important to emphasise
that income from capital was, contrary to income from (wage) work, not gen-
der specific. However, the explanation for the large number of widows among
the highest class of the urban population must be sought in remarriage rates.
Just like poor widows, these rich women were less likely to remarry.

The severity of the changes in the social and economic status of women caused
by widowhood depended upon her occupation, the way in which her hus-
band's work was organised, the source of his income, the availability of capital,
and the social care available to individual women. For all women though, wi-
dowhood meant a change in their legal status. Just like adult unmarried wo-
men, widows had the right to administer their own property, to carry out legal
transactions, to enter into contracts and to appear before a court. In the latter case, they usually did so in the presence of a guardian. But this guardianship was temporary and cannot be compared to the gender-based guardianship of married women. The role of the guardian accompanying a widow in court seems to have been limited solely to his physical presence, and even this was not obligatory according to seventeenth century Dutch jurists. They legitimated the independent status of widows by calling up the old patriotic and celebrated virtue of freedom, a commonplace in the representation of the Dutch. It would not be in accordance with the typical freedom-loving nature of the Dutch people to place unmarried adult women and widows under guardianship. This independent legal status offered a widow possibilities she had not known as a married woman. However, from the point of view of the household which had lost its male head, this change in the legal status must be interpreted as an adaptation which suited the widow in her new role as head of household and guaranteed the continued existence of the nuclear family unit.

As widows, women were allowed to manage the family. To do so, they were offered not only the necessary legal instruments, but also, as far as feasible, the material means. The way in which widows were enabled to organise their lives after the loss of their spouses indicates the importance of the nuclear family and the relatively subordinate role of the extended family.

As historians have pointed out, the nuclear family was the dominant form of household in seventeenth century Holland. Although several characteristics of the nuclear family were to be found elsewhere in the Republic as well, the emergence of the nuclear family was the most prominent in the heavily urbanised provinces in the north-west. Historians have related the existence of the nuclear family to the existence of the market economy in these provinces. The advanced specialisation of the market economy facilitated the loosening of ties and relatively independent operation from the extended family. This, together with the accompanying individualistic mentality, contributed to the relatively independent position of the nuclear family. The conclusions drawn from research on the broken family must be interpreted within this context of an urbanised society in which the nuclear family had a prominent place. One was committed to the continuity of this nuclear family, even if it was broken.

Following the death of a spouse, the nuclear family would not split up. Widows did not return to the home of their parents, nor did they reside in their children’s households. Most of the women headed their own independent households, usually living with their under-aged children. Whenever widows shared board and lodging they did so more often with unmarried female friends or relatives than with their married children. Three-generation households were also an exception amongst both poor and well-to-do widows.

Kinship lay at the basis of the social network one could address for support, and widows did receive financial, material and immaterial assistance from relatives. But despite the legal obligation to help relatives once or twice removed, in
practice even poor widows did not often reside with relatives who were better off. Assistance from family members was considered supplementary to the (institutional) social care, offered by the city to its inhabitants. Moreover, the assistance of relatives was neither self-evident nor unconditional. One did not allow an old and poor mother to become a threat to the continued existence of the independent households of her married children.

Widows in seventeenth century Leiden lived independently from their adult children and other kin. At the same time, they were recognised as heads of independently operating households as long as possible, and often until old age. A widow remained the authority in the household. Her individual interests were not subordinate to the interests of the extended family or to the next generation. When her children approached adulthood, she did not withdraw from public life for their benefit. And no one seems to have expected her to do so.

The strong and independent position of the nuclear family was expressed in the Leiden's marital property law and inheritance law. Marriage had significant implications for the transmission of property. All property brought by the bride and groom into marriage and the goods a couple acquired during marriage, was considered as part of a 'community of goods'. Following the death of a spouse, the property was divided equally between the surviving spouse and the kin of the deceased, taking no notice of its origins. Leiden couples could of course stipulate separate property in a marriage contract, but even then most of them considered the goods acquired during the marriage as common property.

The inheritance law applied to Leiden, the 'plakkaatrecht van 1599', was strongly attached to the conjugal family. It did not guarantee that property would be kept within the lineage. In dividing the inheritance, one took no notice of the origins of the property, and therefore goods could be distributed in unexpected ways. The 'plakkaatrecht van 1599' favoured the heir's closest kin above collateral descendants, and property was held within the conjugal family as long as possible.

This commitment to the nuclear family, embodied in the marital property and inheritance laws, was furthermore strengthened by wills. Spouses did not inherit from each other, but the majority of men nominated their widows as the principal heir in their, usually mutual, wills. The inheritance rights of children, carefully protected through the city by-laws, were of prime interest for testators as well. But as long as the children were provided for, spouses tried above all to secure the future of their widows. This practice shows the prevalence of the widow's interests above the interests of blood relatives, who would have been the heirs in case there was no will. Husbands granted their future widows with some authority as well. The appointment of their wives as guardians of their children and the fact that husbands barely imposed any limitations for their wives in their wills and did not spell out every detail of their future widow's life, reveals their confidence in their wives competence to manage the family after their deaths.
The situation of widows in other European countries was occasionally discussed. Although it is difficult to make a systematic comparison, it is fair to say that Holland distinguished itself from several other regions in Europe in the way that the transmission of property was thought about. This undeniably affected the situation of widows, at least that of women with some property. In Holland, property was very much associated with the conjugal pair, and less with lineage. Compared to those regions in Europe where the maintenance of property within the lineage was of prime importance, where one (male) heir was appointed as the principle heir to keep the family property intact, or where women were the main transmitters of movable goods, the egalitarian nature of Dutch inheritance law is remarkable.

According to the law, sons and daughters received equal portions of their parent’s estate. Parents left boys and girls an equal share in their wills, not only in the value, but also in the kind of property. Movable and immovable goods were inherited by females as well as by males. This equal distribution had important implications for women, at least for women with some property. Sons and daughters were given the same opportunity to establish independent households. Moreover, with their marriage gifts, women provided an important contribution to the economics of the new established household, as historians have pointed out, for a husband also had had to share his parent’s property with his brothers and sisters. Finally, this equal distribution had important implications for the period of widowhood. The widow, who got back her own property — comprising of the goods she had brought into marriage and supplemented with goods acquired later and sometimes a dower, or represented by half of the community of goods — was left with a substantial part of the estate previously available to her and her husband. In this respect the situation in which a widower found himself was exactly the same. The goods women regained during widowhood provided the material basis for the continuity of the household after the death of the spouse.

It was within the framework of the nuclear family that widows sought to reorganise their ‘new’ lives, that they tried to cope with the changes widowhood brought forth, and to which they adapted the choices they made. Widows were able to limit the discontinuity with their previous existence as wives to a considerable extent, not despite of, but because of the importance of the nuclear family in seventeenth century Holland.