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In search of the ideal husband. Could inequality in the pre-industrial era be measured through dowries? North-eastern Catalonia, 1750-1825

En busca del marido ideal. ¿Es posible medir la desigualdad en la era preindustrial a través de las dotes? Nordeste de Cataluña, 1750-1825

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ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

This paper aims to explore the potential of the marriage market and dowries as a measurement tool for the study of inequality in pre-industrial societies. The present work is based on the premise that, particularly in rural communities with undivided inheritance (male primogeniture), dowries paid by brides could reflect the economic status of the heir they were going to marry. Therefore, inequality in the distribution of dowries could be reflecting real economic inequality. To test this framework, a case study has been conducted using approximately one hundred dowries from 1750 to 1825, which were drawn up in notarial offices from a rural region in north-eastern Catalonia.

The results of the dowry distribution analysis reveal that inequality significantly increased between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, characterized by stagnation in the nominal value of poor dowries and a significant increase in the rich ones. Meanwhile, both rich and poor dowries grew in representation, while the percentage of dowries with a value close to the median decreased. This resulted in a Gini coefficient that rose from 0.552 to 0.676 over the 75 years studied. Given the politically unstable and economically inflationary context of this time period, these results hint that, when facing adverse situations, the wealthiest families had mechanisms in place to protect (or even yield positively) their capital, which in this case became reflected in the capacity to increase the value of their dowries well above the upward price trend.

The study acknowledges three main limitations of the historical source used. Firstly, it could exclude approximately 20% of the poorest families who did not pay or register dowries. Secondly, there was a tendency to pay dowries in round figures (multiples of ten), which creates clustering indices similar to those from direct taxation sources (around 0.3). Finally, it is impossible to determine the level of importance placed on good marriages by all the families and, consequently, make a greater or lesser effort to pay a suitable dowry. It is worth noting that the latter can only be inferred, while the first two limitations can be measured.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the potential of measuring inequality in pre-industrial societies through dowries. Despite some limitations in the source, the results suggest that inequality increased during the tumultuous last decades of the pre-industrial era, which is consistent with much of the literature on this topic. Additional research could expand on these findings and further explore the relationship between the marriage market and inequality.

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