

Call for Papers of the Working Group
Labour and Family Economy
Women, work, and family in early modern Italian cities

ELHN conference 2026

June 16-19, 2026, Barcelona.

Deadline: June 30th, 2025

Organizers:

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Since the 1970s, economic historians have placed great emphasis on the 'ruralization' of manufacturing activities in the early modern period, in the context of proto-industrialization and on the role of small towns in this process. This approach remains partial and does not take into account the possibilities that the urban environment could offer. We propose to refocus the analysis on women's economic activities in cities with complex economies and which constitute the destination of important migratory flows, particularly in periods of crisis. Cities were sources of support and work for women and women were a necessary resource to adapt urban economies in the context of the first globalisation.

Research on artisan families has highlighted the important economic function of the dowry as a contribution at the time of marriage that could be invested in the family workshop, thus directly entering into the construction of a common patrimony between spouses who often worked together to the point of overcoming, in fact, the separation of property, a characteristic of Roman law. Moreover, in the artisan classes, the obligation for the bride to bring a dowry to the wedding could only constitute an incentive to invest in a work activity, in the absence of a family inheritance. Far from being a disincentive on paid work, the dowry was a source of investment and a resource at key moments in the family history. By reconstructing the economic activities of women, we wish to see how paid work could be a form of accumulation for some of them with a view to building up their dowries. During marriage, we wish to examine the economic uses they could make of their dowries, for example to start up or invest in family activities, or to carry out loan operations.

How women's work made it possible to cope with crises both in the family and in the urban economy? What consequences did the relative marginalisation of the Italian economy during the early modern age have on female employment? What activities were abandoned and what new possibilities arose?

Our hypothesis is that, contrary to what has sometimes been assumed, women are not expelled from economic activities or relegated to unpaid domestic tasks, but on the

contrary constitute essential elements in helping the economies of their families and cities to overcome crises. Data collected on women's activities, agency and wages in the Italian towns will constitute new elements of criticism against the model of the 'Little divergence' between Northern and Southern Europe. We wish to provide the material necessary to rethink the whole economic and social history of early modern Europe, one that gives due value to the role of women and highlights the complexity of gender relations at work.

How to apply

Please send a 500-word abstract and a short academic CV to the organizers. The proposal should include name, surname, current affiliation and contact details of the proponent. The subject of the email needs to be: "Labour and Family Economy ELHN 2026". If you have any further questions do not hesitate to contact the organizers.