

Call for Papers of the Working Group Labour and Family Economy

Counting and understanding care work and domestic work in the societies of the past

ELHN conference 2026

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Organizers:

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One of the most frequently recurring themes in contemporary debate identifies western societies of liberal capitalism with widespread phenomena of commodification of care, domestic and reproductive labour. This means that Western women are considered to have given up or strongly reduced their commitment to these tasks. The problem is that this work is actually absolutely indispensable for the survival of the societies and, as a consequence, the demand of labour force is always very high. This is why, as shown by research, despite the hardness of the work and the low wages, this economic sector is very attractive – and actually one of the few employment opportunities - for migrant women and men coming to Western Europe from the world's poor countries.

Although crucial, the ongoing debate about care work, domestic work and reproductive labour in contemporary societies is not exhaustive and does not tell the whole story. When we analyse the problem from a labour history perspective, we have to acknowledge that these tasks and activities were crucial also for preindustrial societies and that, even in the past, there was a large and ever-growing demand for this kind of jobs. Classical economic and social history has always emphasised the work dynamics of the craft and the manufacturing sector (i.e. studies about guilds, industrialization etc..) while, on the contrary, it has taken the existence of the service sector for granted, neglecting a detailed analysis of it. As a consequence, the nature and the economic and social value of this range of jobs is still quite opaque and need further in-depth investigation.

The present panel aims to bring together research and papers discussing the extent and the content of the care work, domestic work and reproductive work in a gender perspective, across different social, economic, cultural and political contexts. The main goal is to increase our knowledge about these services and activities in the societies of the past.

We encourage submission of abstracts from every region and chronological framework. We are interested in bringing together research which adopts a micro-analytical approach and discuss case studies from different economic, social and political European and non-European contexts. We invite possible speakers to consider the great variety of care activities and domestic works, from nursing and healing ill people or disabled people, babies, children and elderly, to shopping and supplying goods to the house, preparing and cooking food and meals, from sewing and mending clothes and linen, to doing the laundry and the cleaning-up of the house, describing when possible, the materiality of these tasks, the workplaces, the time allocated for each task.

Papers should address one (or more) of the following questions:

- 1) In what did consist care work and domestic work for the societies of the past?
- 2) What were the differences between women and men working into this specific segment of the labour market?
- 3) What were the tasks/ activities performed? How can we count and quantify these tasks?
- 4) What kind of equipment or tools were used? And where did the work was performed (in the home, in a hospital, in the street...)?
- 5) What kind of knowledge was required? And how this knowledge was acquired, and then transmitted to peers and to the youngers?
- 6) How can we estimate the economic value of domestic and care jobs? Did workers were paid or unpaid?
- 7) What was the social acknowledgement/reward for women and men performing care and domestic work?
- 8) To what extent did specific models of femininity and masculinity influence the tasks performed by women and men?
- 9) What was the social and economic profile of women and men working in this sector? Did workers experienced some kind of social (upward or downward) mobility?

How to apply

Please send a 500-word abstract and a short academic CV to beatrice.zucca@unito. 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 organizer.