

Call for Papers of the Working Group Labour and Family Economy

Care Externalities: Historical Perspectives on Care Work Beyond the Home in the Long Term

ELHN conference 2026

June 16-19, 2026, Barcelona.

Deadline: June 30th, 2025

Organizers:

Cristina Borderías Universitat de Barcelona cborderiasm@ub.edu

Raffaella Sarti Università di Urbino raffaella.sarti@uniurb.it

This session invites contributions from historians working on the history of care work that was performed outside of the home and beyond the traditional figure of the housewife. While care is often assumed to be a private, domestic responsibility historically carried out by women within the household, this panel seeks to explore a broader and more complex landscape of care practices in preindustrial societies and in the long nineteenth century, including the early decades of the twentieth century.

We are particularly interested in how care was provided by individuals and institutions beyond the nuclear family, how these arrangements were organized socially and economically, and how they evolved over time. Our focus is on what we term “care externalities”: the diffusion of care responsibilities across a wider community or institutional framework, including paid, unpaid, or reciprocally arranged labor that supported dependents such as the elderly, children, the ill, or the disabled.

In many urban and rural communities across Europe, neighbors would routinely provide care—sometimes for small sums or in return for other services—suggesting a rich history of informal care networks operating beyond household boundaries. Similarly, when mothers were unable to care for their children, they often turned to charitable or religious institutions, which acted as early forms of organized care providers.

Over time, especially from the nineteenth century onward, the expectation that families should bear full responsibility for their dependent members began to grow. This shift was reflected in emerging civil codes, constitutions, and family laws that increasingly formalized caregiving as a familial obligation. The state’s role in regulating, supporting, or replacing familial care also expanded, creating new forms of public and institutional care, often influenced by gendered and class-based assumptions about caregiving roles.

This session welcomes papers that address these and related questions from a variety of historical contexts. We are especially interested in contributions that examine:

- Informal care networks within communities, neighborhoods, and extended kinship groups
- The role of religious, charitable, or proto-state institutions in providing care
- Gendered dimensions of care work outside the home
- Legal and policy frameworks that shaped care responsibilities over time
- The socio-economic logics underpinning non-domestic caregiving arrangements
- Continuities and ruptures in care practices across different regions and periods

We aim to foster dialogue across geographic and chronological boundaries, bringing together scholars who can illuminate how care was externalized, shared, institutionalized, and negotiated in various historical settings.

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.