

## Call for Papers of the Working Group Labour and Family Economy

### Family work and the Early Modern illicit economy

ELHN conference 2026

June 16-19, 2026, Barcelona.

**Deadline: June 30th, 2025**

Organizers:

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Over the last thirty years, social and economic historians have demonstrated that uncertainty was an integral part of the lives of many individuals and families in early modern Europe. In the context of recurrent economic crises and irregular and insufficient wages, the labouring poor often had to engage in multiple activities to make ends meet. All family members, including women and children, contributed to this ‘economy of makeshifts’ (Olwen Hufton), but they did not necessarily engage in the same occupations. By piecing together different activities and sources of income according to their age or gender, household members developed a highly flexible ‘adaptive family economy’ (Richard Wall).

Informal or illegal practices were a major resource among the strategies deployed by and within households in their struggle for subsistence, introducing flexibility into highly regulated economies. For women, who were often excluded from guilds and official businesses, the underground economy provided opportunities to earn a living and participate in the market. Working illegally outside the guild framework, smuggling, the black market, theft of waste products from workshops, factories and naval shipyards, financial delinquency have all been the focus of stimulating research in recent years. However, scholars have paid little attention to the unofficial and shadowy areas of the preindustrial economy from a gender perspective, even though early studies on the role of women in contemporary criminal markets have encouraged us to challenge stereotypes about gendered economic practices. The absence or fragmentation of documentation, derived from normative sources and court documents, often hinders the reconstruction of the familial contexts in which these activities occurred. Illegal practices were not limited to a marginalised group alone but were developed into a resource for a wide range of people from all levels of society, depending on their circumstances. The involvement of merchants, consuls, officials and other wealthy members of the ruling classes in

trafficking, and the wide networks of complicity were significant in as far as they overlapped with working-class makeshift strategies, regarding the family dimension and gender roles.

The aim of this session is to overcome the obstacle of invisibility by taking a micro-analytical approach that considers both rural and urban households, as well as those in mountainous and coastal areas and in the colonies. In analysing specific familial, historical and geographical contexts, we will be seeking to uncover the ways in which men, women and children could benefit from additional resources and opportunities provided by illicit trades.

Our hypothesis is that focusing on illicit activities and their links to legal forms of trade or work may also shed light on family dynamics and changing relationships. What kind of cooperation could be observed among family members (married couples, siblings or entire families)? Did changes in household composition (e.g. the death of a spouse) impact decisions to engage in illicit activities? Could involvement in illicit trading (on a small or large scale) help redefine gender roles or the use of child labour within the family? In what ways did illegal exchange reflect or impact on mobility and the use of space by men and women?

These are just a few of the questions that this session will address, plus any others that will be put forward.

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.