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The Report on the International conference
New perspectives in feminist labour history: work and activism
in Bologna, 2019 and EHLN Feminist Labour History WG Meeting

On 17-18th January 2019, a two days conference “*New perspectives in feminist labour history: work and activism*” has taken place in the University of Bologna, Italy with support of Department of History and Cultures of the university. The main organizer of the conference was the Feminist Labour History Working Group of the European Labour History Network (ELHN) (see <https://socialhistoryportal.org/news/articles/309415>), while the Italian Society of Labour History, (SISLAV) was co-organizer. The ELHN was established in 2013 and has organized three conferences so far (Turin, 2015; Paris, 2017; Amsterdam, September 2019), during which the Feminist Labour History Working Group has organized and contributed to many panels. The Bologna conferences had six sessions, and was closed with an open meeting of the working group to discuss further plans. Both days of the conference were opened by a keynote speech given by Eileen Boris (University of California, Santa-Barbara) and Susan Zimmermann (Central European University, Budapest) respectively. Around forty scholars were involved in the program and many more attended the conference. This report reflects on the format and the content of the conference, including summaries of two open-day speeches and the sessions of the conference.

The Bologna conference was open for public, and everyone in the city could come, listen to presentations and participate in discussions taking place in a beautiful hall of the University of Bologna. In fact, the conference was a meeting of a new network of researchers called the Feminist labour historians’ network of ELHN and those who are interested in this research field. This is the kind of new branch within labour history research, and it is a new field with enthusiastic people who contribute to framing the field itself right now. The conference was not a large-scale conference, but rather a modest informal workshop. It was a great experience to attend all single paper presentations, which were combined into sessions. Considering there is no parallel (crossing) sections, it is not hard to attend all the papers’ presentations. These six sessions were split between two days, three sessions per each day. Each session was followed by discussion and everybody could hear everybody, and everybody had an opportunity to ask or to comment. The atmosphere was very open and supportive, especially for those who are already part of this network. However, considering the scale of the conference and shared breakfasts and lunches, there was an option to get to know each other. Every section was followed by a comment given by a discussant whose role was not to facilitate a public discussion but rather to provide a response full of details to each paper of a section. The huge work of the discussants was obvious as it had a format of peer-review to each paper, which were three to five per session. Since the response of the discussant obviously took a quite long time and due to the limit of time, there was more space for a discussion between speakers and the discussants at the expense of the discussion with the audience. Nonetheless, fairly enough, if the conference is to be considered as a workshop or a seminar with the aim to establish and build a new field, where people have different methodologies and theoretical frameworks, and very diverse subjects, the discussion amongst the members of each session helps to answer these many questions. The participants of the conference represented very different levels of research and different attitudes to preparations and/or presentations. There was also a great diversity of papers regarding the scale of research. There were papers taking the form of outlines of

what happened in the past, others involved extra multiple level analysis of the field in a region, still others aims at overview of the whole field from a historical perspective and regarding methodological difficulties where the entire horizon was embraced by researchers.

The first day was opened with the speech by Eileen Boris, professor at Department of Feminist Studies at University of California Santa Barbara. Her research interests are home and work, and as she jokes, they are actually the same. The idea challenges the view of seeing work as liberation with its hidden statement of household as not a work, and conversely, the idea that liberation comes when a women gets a job outside of household. Boris' speech, called *Reproduction as Production: Beyond Dichotomy* in fact focused on four main dimensions. First, pregnancy and birth as a form of work in themselves. As you might already think while reading this sentence, not ironically a word *labor* has several meanings, including giving birth. Second, the quotidian activities of daily life performed for oneself and household members, including cooking, maintenance around the domicile, caring, and nurturing, as also work. Third, paid household and carework, such as home health aides and domestic cleaners, as commodified reproductive labor in intimate settings. Finally, fourth, public reproduction through social services and infrastructure, such as clinics, schools, and water systems. The presentation also challenged the applicability of usage a word *unskilled* and *semi-skilled* work at many cases and called for being careful in evaluating whether some kind of labour does not truly need any skills or rather is undervalued due to gender inequality – for instance household keeping needs many years of training and practice. In such a promising way the first day of the conference was opened. The session *Women in typically male occupations and the gendered division of labour in society* (coordinator: Leda Papastefanaki, University of Ioannina) was composed of three presentations devoted to women in different yet mostly by men-occupied work in different time periods: female workers in Sardinian mining communities in the second half of 19th century to the 1930s of 20th century, technicians and engineers in state-socialist Poland and women workers in the trades in the Australian and British workplace in the 20th century. The session *Building Women's Networks – Action repertoires and Ideas Circulation* (coordinator: Raffaella Baritono, University of Bologna) was strongly devoted to the connection between so-called global principles, initiated by international organizations such as the UN, the ILO, EU initiatives, etc., and local implementations or consequences on nation-state level. However, there were other themes also addressed such as usage of French TV series in the sixties as vocational training for women's (return to) work and the link between early feminists and female workers in Italy in the beginning of 20th century. The last session of the first day *Women's movements and women workers' rights* (coordinator: Marica Tolomelli, University of Bologna) explored women solidarity movements and collective action on cases of Yugoslavia, Hungary and Italy in the 20th century. Within this session, one paper addressed the paradox between increasing public awareness of dangers in the workplace, especially for women workers, and the diminished institutional capacity and political will of the State to provide workplace protections.

The second day of the International conference was opened with a speech by Susan Zimmermann, a professor at the Department of History and the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University, Budapest. Zimmermann brought the historiographical overview of global labour history and highlighted the recent transnational turn. There is, she underlined, two conceptual issues of the historiography of women workers' and female trade unionists' organizing and activism. One is around the many-layered relationship between gender and class, another one is between women-only as opposed to mixed-sex organizing. The transnational dimension in the historiography of labor and women's movements should be considered as an opportunity to rethink the above-mentioned issues, as Zimmermann argued. Thus, the paper elaborated on possible solutions which can be found thanks to the new transnational dimension, and which help the researchers to go beyond the origins of the research field since some of these origins, such as, for instance, the agency/bias already limit the current research. The first session of second day of the conference *Productive and reproductive labour between austerity, precarity and migration* (coordinator: Paola Rudan, University of Bologna) was composed of five papers which explored female labour in European

countries and India under the biopolitical neoliberal capitalist order. The next session *Women and Trade Unions* analyzed women and trade unions across 19th and 20th centuries and included papers on Italian, French, Portuguese and colonial Indian history. Shobhana Warrier (Delhi University) discussed the historical cases of working-class women standing up together against sexual predation, with spontaneous protests and their subsequent consolidation into action and framing their demands against those on a higher level of the workplace hierarchy was brought by. This research paper was devoted to the experience of women workers in the cotton textile industry of early 20th century colonial South India to dispute the common proposition that there was a negative correlation of women's presence in the workforce and militancy of the workers' movement. Finally, the last session focused on *Varieties of women's work-related activism*. The five papers of this section, discovering very diverse forms of resistance in India, Bangladesh, France and Greece, led to a lively discussion about many countries governed by neoliberalism, with the consequent attacks on trade unions and the question of the role of international organizations in this context. These issues need to be explored further in future conferences.

The discussion about the future of the Feminist Labour History Working Group followed the last session of the Conference. I summarize below the main topics discussed:

- The next conference should do more to overcome the dichotomy of the local and the global; what is needed are trans-local perspectives as well as discussions on methodological and theoretical issues which are strongly integrated in feminist labour history
- The brought on the current conference point on how methodologically to intersect women's resources and invisibility of women's work as well as the emphasized intensions to overcome lack of references on women's activisms and resources
- Network meeting during the next EHLN conference (Amsterdam 2019)
- The opportunity to go to Washington in April 2019 for a conference (Eileen Boris to be contacted in case of any questions) <https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/how-the-ilo-works/departments-and-offices/jur/law-for-social-justice/lang--en/index.htm>
- Reminder to send to Eloisa Betti and Leda Papastefanaki information about any events / call for papers / book launches, etc. related research from any location of the world, so that the quarterly newsletter to be as full and up-to-date regarding local news as possible (in case of any news in a local, non-English language research or event, a brief translation in English should be provided)
- The offer about possible publications based on the Bologna- presentations will be sent via e-mail soon by the WG

As you might know already, the EHLN Working Group on Feminist Labour History, created in October 2013, aims to build and develop existing, more or less formal and informal contacts and networks of scholars with an interest in gendered labour history in Europe and around the world. It aims to bring together, and support research related to a broad range of themes and concepts in feminist labour history including but not limited to the following:

- the intersection of class, race, gender, global inequality, etc. in all thematic areas of labour history
- the global gendered division of labour
- the historical engendering of various types and forms of labour
- the historical evolvement of the relationship between paid and unpaid or subsistence-oriented work

- commodification and decommodification of domestic and care work
- the role gender has played in shaping labour law and practice of regulating labour and the impact of labour law and labour practices on gender and gender relations
- trade unions and gender locally, nationally and internationally
- the politics of “women’s work” and “men’s work”
- the exchange of knowledge about primary sources, archives, and literature related to the history of gender and labour.

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