

Report: International Conference and Workshop

“Towards a Global History of Domestic Workers and Caregivers”

Linz, 12 – 15 September 2013

The 49th annual meeting of the *International Conference of Labour and Social History* (ITH) assembled scholars from all over the world to discuss the global history of domestic and caregiving work within the households of others. Domestic workers have long been neglected by labour historians despite their significant contributions to national economies. By concentrating on them and the multiplicity of ways in which domestic and caregiving work was and still is performed throughout the world, the conference aimed to contribute to a more comprehensive history of labour. Its objective was to identify similarities and differences in domestic service between different world regions as well as to track the continuities and changes that have occurred in history.

Given the complexity of the research subject with differences in the socio-political frameworks across regions and differing cultural meanings and structures of households and families, the attempt to construct a global history of domestic workers and caregivers was an ambitious but necessary project. Contributions grappled with conditions in the Global South as well as the Global North between the 17th and 21st centuries, some scholars wrestling with the impact of imperialism as they studied countries with histories of colonisation and those that would be considered postcolonial instead. The intersections of gender, racism, class, and religion were also discussed. This year's annual conference began with a workshop for doctoral candidates on 12 September. A total of 31 papers were presented.

Both workshop and conference were opened with a comprehensive review of the historiography of domestic work in the homes of others starting with the end of the 19th century which was provided by **Raffaella Sarti**. She emphasised the gendering of remunerated domestic and caregiving work and the place of servants in changing kinship ties. The development of the welfare state and its impact on domestic work and workers was noted, as was the place of ethnicity in the colonial context. Sarti stressed newer trends including the recent surge of interest in domestic work, as new concepts such as global care chains are added to the academic lexicon. She suggested that transnational movements or the growing importance of remittances might be behind the closer scrutiny of the phenomenon today.

Migration

Working in the homes of others has often been coupled with migration from rural to urban areas or between countries. Scholarly contributions at the conference considered these myriad migration flows, causalities and the socio-political effects of such mobility. They examined historical links between the regions involved and perceptions of cultural or religious difference.

Majda Hrženjak drew attention to the distinctions between local care deficit and life style servicing as drivers for the employment of migrant domestic workers in her analysis of global care chains and the role of Slovenian domestics in Italian households since the 19th century. **Anna Kordasiewicz** and **Marta Kindler** focused on the provision of childcare in Poland, tracing changes over two centuries. **Dana Cooper** looked at the unintended impact of empire as she offered a historical comparison of Irish and Filipina women's migration to the US looking at the differences in perceptions of religious identity in both cases. **Marina de Regt**, who investigated Ethiopian domestics in Yemen stressed the construction of identity in the patriarchal and highly stratified society and examined the place of race, domestic work and status.

Traude Bollauf focused on migration into domestic service as a possibility for escape. Obtaining a domestic work permit, many Austrian but also German Jewish women succeeded in moving to England in 1938/39 to escape persecution and murder by National Socialists.

State, legislation and domestic workers' struggles

There have been many efforts made to define, codify and regulate domestic work over the years. Domestic workers today still remain largely unregulated and unorganised, the primary difficulties believed to be their placement in the private sphere or pseudo kinship relationships between employers and domestic workers.

Elizabeth Quay Hutchinson's analysis on domestic work in Chile from the 1920s to the 1980s considered the intersection of reproductive work and politics. She highlighted the significance of union organising, unions presenting opportunities for local political alliances. The feminisation of the trade was not found to be a drawback, women workers having an equal voice in their unions. Legislative success and protections for domestic workers were established by the 1970s, these efforts supported by both Church and State.

Magaly Rodriguez Garcia discussed conflicts within the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s over how the 'Mui-Tsai' system (a Chinese custom of transferring girls from poor families into domestic service in affluent homes) should have been dealt with. Noteworthy in her analysis was the Orientalist slant within these international discourses as well as the fact that the 'Mui Tsai' problem was considered under the rubric of the League of Nation's Slavery Convention at the time. By placing domestic work within the family sphere the ILO kept it outside its jurisdiction until recently.

Andrew Urban analysed late 19th-century struggles in the 'White Pacific' where white women domestics sought to replace the Chinese men working as servants, his analysis focusing on the interventions by State and Church as well as the place of race and identity in these discourses.

Many contributions at the conference made clear that one should not overlook domestic workers' constant efforts for improvement of their situation. In 2011, domestic workers' unions and networks as well as affiliated NGOs achieved the ILO-convention 189 concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers. It came into force on September 5, 2013. Ten countries had ratified the convention at last count. **Eileen Boris** and **Jennifer N. Fish** provided the historical framework for this achievement and described the impact of historical legacies of inequalities of gender, race and class. Reorganisation of the global economy and expansion of the informal sector, they argued, are reflected in the transnational networks of influence and today play a part in the ratification process of the new convention.

Vicky Kanyoka, representative of the *International Domestic Workers Network* (IDWN) was a tireless contributor, sharing her experiences as an activist working on behalf of domestic workers worldwide.

Shifts in domestic work arrangements

The nature of domestic and caregiving work in the homes of others has undergone considerable change since the 17th century, but continuities also abound.

R. David Goodman whose work is focused on Morocco suggests that within that postcolonial nation domestic slavery continues today as a social if not a legal condition. **Lisa Krissof Boehm** described the work performed by African-American women migrating from the south to the northern states of the US between 1940 and 1990. Their transition from domestic labour to corporate employee she found to have come with little improvement, the work performed remaining the same but now performed in fast food kitchens.

While domestic service was increasingly more feminised in European countries in the 19th century, domestic work was – particularly in colonial, but also postcolonial contexts

– also assigned to non-white men. **Walter Gam Ngkwi**, for example, whose paper was presented by **Elise van Nederveen Merkeerk**, drew attention to the male indentured domestic workers in Cameroon in the 20th century. Other scholars were focussed on Europe, highlighting changing perceptions of childrearing and motherhood (e.g. **Christa Matthys** on aristocratic women, 1700-1900) or dealt with changing power relationships during the agrarian revolution (**Carolina Uppenberg** on Sweden). According to UPPENBERG, service was declassified in that period; the social distance between servants and employers extended. **Mareike Witkowski** emphasised that the remunerated household worker never became insignificant during the 20th century. Rather work arrangements changed from live-in service to paid live-out work.

For **Sabrina Marchetti** researching migrant domestic workers and caregivers from Eritrea and Suriname in the Netherlands, power dynamics established during colonialism still had strong cultural implications for migrants and their former colonisers.

Relationships, intimacy, and the household

The conference addressed the emotional aspects as a distinctive feature of domestic or caregiving work. Relationships with employers or other household members were not always exploitative but remained complex, often marked by differentials in class and race.

Keynote speaker **Shireen Ally** described relationships between masters/mistresses and servants in South Africa (1652-1914) by presenting three case studies in three different periods analysing slave and indentured labour and domestic service contracts. She referenced the complexities inherent in these relationships as a 'funny kind of love.' Ally called for greater integration of scholarship between various academic disciplines. **Bela Kashyap** analysed how the complex bonds between mistresses and maids shifted in 19th and 20th century Southeast Asia. Colonial legacies and efforts of modernisation were investigated.

Henrique Espada Lima highlighted the contested definitions of work in the private sphere in his analysis of 19th-century court cases in Brazil. **Adéla Souralová** provided an analysis of the complicated relationships between Czech nannies, their Vietnamese employers and the children they cared for in Czech society, an interesting case of reversing the care chain.

Colleen O'Neill described 'colonial parenting', outlining the attempts of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to integrate American Native women into the American urban working class in the 1950s, by relocating them into cities to transform them into 'daughters for hire'. Some contributions concentrated on the histories of European domesticity and domestic and caregiving practices instead. **Christa Matthys**, for example, discussed negotiations of motherhood between mothers and wet-nurses, governesses and children's maids and their conflicting perceptions.

According to **Robyn Pariser** who investigated domestic service in colonial Tanzania (1919-1961), male domestic servants were important actors in shaping European domesticity, domestic routines, and employers' identities as housewives. Complicating previous understandings of colonisers and the colonised, Pariser argued that the colonised too enjoyed significant power due the colonisers' dependence on their knowledge.

Meanings

Victoria Haskins discussed the contested meaning of wages in her analysis of the "outing system" implemented by the federal US Bureau of Indian Affairs in the late 19th to mid-20th centuries. Wages, she argued, had a specific cultural value, meaning different things to different historical actors, both symbolic as well as material.

Fae Dussart searched for meanings in the dialogue between domestic servants and their employers conducted indirectly through editorials and letters to The Times between

1850 and 1900, the expression of opinion by the working classes which she argued was a demonstration of reciprocity within domestic patriarchy.

Yukari Takai and **Mary Gene De Guzman** presented their on-going research on Filipina domestics in Toronto and shed light on the complex meanings of both home and wages within the migrant population.

Apart from the struggles between different agents visible in the public sphere, practices of everyday resistance were also examined. **Jaira Harrington** and **Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman** analysed non-unionised and informal domestic workers' resistance in Brazil in the framework of racialisation and domestics' ambiguous roles within private households. **Vilhelm Vilhelmsson** presented a court case of a refractory servant in the context of bonded service in 19th century Iceland.

Jessica Richter investigated the struggles by courts and public authorities as well as domestic servants and their organisations to define domestics. **Lokesh** located a spontaneous strike of women domestic workers from Pune, Maharashtra in the history of domestic slavery and domestic workers' organisation contextualised by issues of gender and caste.

Concluding Discussion

The conference closed with a lively discussion of the state of the field and potential directions to follow for further research. For example, by providing IDWN recommendations **Vicky Kanyoka** aimed to expand collaboration between researchers and activists. She e.g. asked the participants to share research results with domestic workers' organisations in the regions studied.

Some participants asked how remunerated domestic work could be integrated into a critical theory of the political economy. It seems evident that the category labour has to be broadened in any such theory in order to include domestic and emotional work. The need for studying domestic workers' non-integration into well-established unions as well as their transnational networks and struggles was accentuated. Some discussants demanded to make the complexities of domestic labour relations as well as researchers' own role of employer or care-receivers of domestic and caregiving work a part of analysis. Since migration was highlighted as the key to understand domestic work in the households of others, questions of citizenship should be further investigated.

Report by Bela Kashayap (University of Cincinnati, USA) and Jessica Richter (University of Vienna, Austria)

Programme

- Workshop: http://www.ith.or.at/konf_e/zeitpl_2013ws_e.htm
- Main Conference: http://www.ith.or.at/konf_e/zeitpl_2013_e.htm