Domestic Workers of the World: Histories of Domestic Work as Global Labor History

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Introduction

Although domestic work has been a global phenomenon through the ages, it has only been explicitly connected to globalization very recently. First, the need for care work is universal as all human beings, at one time or another in their lives, are dependent on other people's care. Second, the importance of domestic work has been evident across the world, with ancient Mesopotamian sources referring to it and continuing – and probably even expanding – into the present. Third, domestic and care work is often determined by and has contributed to global connections. It has been and still is a substantial aspect of the global division of labor. This work’s universal character and the need to improve its generally harsh working conditions and poor remuneration have recently been recognized by the International Labor Organization's (ILO) 2011 adoption of international standards for domestic work in the Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic workers (Convention No 189, hereafter referred to as C189).

Historically, as the chapters in this volume show, (labor) migration, gender, and ethnic and colonial encounters have played a large role in the lives of domestic workers. They have also been a constituent factor in labor relations. Domestic work has always been a highly feminized sector and still is today. Nowadays, more than 80 per cent of all domestic workers worldwide are women – men in this sector being mainly employed as gardeners, drivers, and butlers. Put in another way, one in every thirteen female wage workers is a domestic worker. For some regions of the world, such as Latin America/the

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2 See Chapter 2 by Raffaella Sarti on recent research and Chapter 3 by Dirk Hoerder on the relationship between domestic-care work and migration.
Caribbean and the Middle East, ratios are even far higher – one in four, and one in three respectively.\(^3\) As a consequence, most – but not all – of the contributions in this volume concentrate on female domestic workers.

The authors in this volume use a broad and inclusive definition of domestic work: Work in the households of others includes all tasks concerning household work such as cooking, washing, cleaning as well as care work such as taking care of children, elderly and sick persons. Defined in this way, domestic work can be paid or unpaid, forced or free, formal or informal employment. This inclusive definition is part of process of the broadening the scope of labor history as proposed by Marcel van der Linden and Jan Lucassen in their plea for a research agenda of Global Labor History.\(^4\)

Traditional labor history was mainly concerned with “white,” organized, male labor, typically found in the industrializing, and then industrialized Global North: Western Europe, North America, Oceania and Japan. The “Old” Labor History, established around the turn of the twentieth century, was inspired by Marxists, trade unionists, and other social activists, such as Sidney and Beatrice Webb. It was highly focused on the development of (labor) organizations, political debates, socialist parties, and strikes. The rise of New Social History in the 1960s also entailed a New Labor History, in which proponents such as E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm stressed the need to contextualize labor struggles in societal structures and cultural praxes. This implied looking beyond political struggles, trade union leaders, and successful strikes to examine the actual work and living experiences of “ordinary” members of the working classes – who incidentally were not always (active) members of the labor movement. In the 1970s and 1980s, neo-Marxist and feminist historians as well as scholars of race-and-ethnicity, developed this line of research further by including every-day forms of resistance, women workers, and black workers into their analyses. From the early 1990s onwards, scholars from the Global

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\(^4\) See e.g. Marcel van der Linden and Jan Lucassen, *Prolegomena for a Global Labor History* (Amsterdam, 1999), notably 8–12, and Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden, 2008), esp. Chapter 2, 17–38. For a discussion about the future of transnational perspectives in labor history, including labor and empire as well as labor and migration see Leon Fink, *Workers of the Americas. The Transnational Turn in Labor History* (Oxford, 2011). For a recent discussion the definitions and yields of the global labor history approach see *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (Fall 2012), with contributions by Marcel van der Linden, Jürgen Kocka, Dorothy Sue Cobble and Prasannan Parthasarathi.