Historical Perspectives on Domestic and Care-Giving Workers’ Migrations: A Global Approach

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I am not beautiful,/Yet, I am the most wanted woman.  
I am not rich,/Yet, I am worth my weight in gold.  
I might be dull, stupid,/Dirty and mean,  
Yet, all doors are open for me./I am a welcome guest.  
All of the elite compete for me.  
I am a maid.  

(Finnish women in North America, 1935)\(^1\)

Young talented Filipina

(T-shirt imprint of a domestic worker, Hong Kong, 2005)\(^2\)

The present debates on a “feminization” of migration suggest that women’s mobility is a recent phenomenon. Similarly, feminist and sociological concern and research about “domestic workers” – in household chores, skilled household labor, and care-giving emotional labor – often assume a development beginning in the nineteenth century and changing under the impact of the present phase of globalization. However, service labor, as archeologists note, may be traced back to urbanization thousands of years ago. Depending on period and society, household workers could be enslaved, bound contractually for years, unpaid dependent kin, waged live-in or commuting workers, or casual labor. This makes any survey difficult, since normatively and, in most countries, legally, modern household labor is waged work. In the theoretical considerations I will primarily refer to waged labor, in the historical survey I will deal with the interlacing of bondage and remuneration. I will, first, briefly

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\(^2\) Photographed by Christiane Harzig, September 2005.
point to recent research on gender ratios in migration from the nineteenth century to the present for those regions of the world for which data are available. I will then note the connection between urbanization and specialized service labor. In the main historical survey part, I will summarize the development of migration of household and care-giving workers for selected major regions of the world to the Depression of the 1930s or, when changes in patterns of service labor suggest, to the decolonization in the 1950s. In conclusion, I will discuss some research issues raised by the studies on specific regions as well as from specific perspectives.3

Dealing with the same issues but analyzing “feminization” by gender, migration, and ethnic niches, Jose Moya has recently provided a major synthesis. He criticizes the widespread assumption that industrialization provided jobs primarily for men – after all, factory production began in textiles – and he discusses strategies developed in ethno-cultural contexts. Meticulously summarizing the share of women in domestic service he documents a feminization, with regional variations, in the nineteenth century and asks why this is part of the route to modernity. He notes the shift from paternalist inclusion into households to waged employees and, focusing on transnational migrants, argues that for some groups domestic labor, for cultural reasons, became the preferred labor market segment for women and, depending on legal and economic frames, for whole families.4

In the present, whole state apparatuses re-conceptualize themselves from administrative or ruling institutions protecting – or in charge of – a country’s population to export organizations of labor and, in particular, of laboring women. The Philippine and Bangladeshi states, for example, set quotas for out-migrating women (and men) per year according to the need for their remittances to balance the deficits of external trade and state debt obligations. Other (nation-) states import household and care-giving workers but do not cover them by (protective) labor legislation. In the case of “democracies” this creates a layer of residents with minor rights and thus undermines their very constitutional basis. The migrants themselves make their decisions within

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3 This survey is based on my own research on global migrations as well as on publications and research notes of the late Christiane Harzig. See also the recent European Servant Project, <http://www.uniurb.it/Servantproject/>, discussed in Chapter 2 of this volume: Isabelle Schopp, Suzy Pasleau, and Raffaella Sarti (eds), Proceedings of the Servant Project, 5 vols (Liège, 2005).