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Personal and Household Services: Past, Present, Future
A Legendary Being?

In 1907 a Belgian author, Gringoire, argued that the old servant was going to disappear thanks to electricity: she would become a ‘legendary being’ whose very existence, in the future, was to be questioned by some intellectual.

The “lesson” of history: some questions

• For a long time, paid domestic and care work had been expected to disappear because of modernisation.

• Instead, in the 1980s-1990s (and even today) it was (and is) experiencing a kind of ‘resurgence’.

→ Why?

→ What were/are the continuities and discontinuities in domestic and care work in the past and present?

→ Which were/are the similarities and differences as for the economic, social and cultural roles of domestic and care work in various EU countries?
Percentage of domestic workers in the economically active population in selected European countries, 1850s-1980s
The “lesson” of history: some answers

• Preindustrial era: *life-cycle service* in Northern and Central Europe but not in Eastern and Southern Europe

• 19th century ca.: feminisation ruralisation stigmatisation of domestic service

• 1880-1920 ca.: “servant question”: domestic service is expected to disappear; diminution of absolute/relative number of domestic and care workers

• 1920s-1930s: revival of paid domestic work in several countries

• 1950s-1980s: diminution of domestic workers, especially live-in

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Present

1980s-today: revival of paid domestic and care work (migrant domestic workers; crucial role of welfare and migration policies)

⇒ **Home**
⇒ as open and dynamic arena of cultural exchanges and conflicts, as well as of social confrontation
⇒ as a place where backwards labour relationships survive and **new inequalities** develop
The reasons for this expansion

The expansion of paid domestic and care work is a consequence

a) of demographic, social and economic changes:
   - the ageing of population,
   - the growing female employment,
   - the growing imbalance between rich and poor/impoverished countries, etc.

b) of specific policies:
   - specific migration policies (ex. Italy),
   - (insufficient) gender equality policies (“re-genderisation”),
   - insufficient public welfare,
   - policies aiming to expand the so-called proximity services,
   - and cash-for-care policies.
An interesting comparison:
Spain and Sweden
1980-81

- Female labour force participation rate
- Percentage of domestic workers in the economically active population
- Public social expenditure as percentage of the GDP
- Public social expenditure on the family as percentage of the GDP
• Domestic and care work is often undeclared
  It is necessary to develop policies leading to
  the reduction of undeclared work, performed by
  both migrant and native workers
• Even declared domestic and care workers often
  suffer from (legal) discrimination if compared
  with other workers, and enjoy limited social
  protection

It is necessary to overcome this discrimination
and to extend to domestic workers full social
protection (see ILO convention n. 189)
It is important
→ to eliminate live-in domestic work
→ to improve the quality of domestic workers by organising courses, particularly for babysitters and elderly carers
→ to professionalize domestic work
→ to give domestic workers the possibility to have a career
→ to overcome the private relationship between employer/employee via professional cooperatives among domestic workers or providers of services
→ to establish uniform salary scales to guarantee the same remuneration for the same task, in particular in order to stop racialisation and ethnicisation
→ to reduce costs for families through public contributions to the population which most needs help and care (vouchers etc.)
→ to develop new public services for the families, to introduce new technological solutions to improve the autonomy of the elderly reducing the “do-it-yourself” welfare solutions and the recourse to private solutions