

Gender, Work, and Service in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe

Research Perspectives and Questions

EVA-MARIA CERSOVSKY / JULIA EXARCHOS

1. Approaching Gender, Work, and Service¹

In 1541, a woman approached the Strasbourg city council to petition for the support of her husband and child.² She explained that the family had moved to the city because she had planned to work for a local hatmaker specialized in making berets.³ Unexpectedly, however, this hatmaker had died and her husband had fallen so ill that he had been taken to the civic hospital. In order to provide for the family, the woman – who remains anonymous in the council minutes – asked for permission to take on service work in the same hospital and place her child in the civic orphanage until her husband had recovered. After an examination, the councilmen agreed to these terms. They were acquainted with similar requests by both women and men, from abroad and resident, who struggled to secure the livelihood of a family and care for their children as a (temporarily) single parent with little economic means.⁴ Nonetheless, the council made clear that the woman's earnings should also be used to contribute to the child's stay in the orphanage.

1 The majority of this introduction to the edited volume has been written by Eva-Maria Cersovsky.

2 Archives de la Ville et de l'Eurométropole de Strasbourg (AVES, 1 R 3, fol. 44r).

3 For a depiction of such a hatmaker, the *parettmacher* Jörg Hölbling in 1596, see the Housebook of the Nuremberg Twelve Brethren, a chronicle and death record of a retirement home for old craftspeople founded by the mining entrepreneur Matthäus Landauer: Stadtbibliothek im Bildungscampus Nürnberg, Amb. 279.2°, fol. 67r, <https://online-service.nuernberg.de/viewer/image/225a2718-c1c1-43fd-9f4a-4911bfe95219/135/>, last access 02.06.2026.

4 For a discussion of cases involving husbands and wives, mothers and fathers before the city council see Cersovsky, *Geschlechterverhältnisse*, pp. 121–128. Research on Strasbourg's orphanage in the sixteenth century is still missing, but see Safley, *Children*, esp. chap. 4, who includes the temporary placement of children and negotiations with the city council in his study on early modern Augsburg.

Offering her services to the city's hospital and outsourcing paid care work to the orphanage, the woman thus found ways to provide for the whole family during her husband's sickness, in a city where she obviously still missed important social connections which could have been activated for help. Seeing that the family had apparently moved because of *her* work – with her husband's line of labour not mentioned at all –, her working and earning abilities also seem to have been central to the family's sustenance prior to the difficulties they faced in 1541. Neither the woman's relation to the hatmaker nor the kind of work she would have performed for him are mentioned in the Strasbourg council minutes. She could have been hired as a servant performing housework but could also have worked in the hatmaker's workshop, or both.⁵ Serving in the city's hospital, she might have been involved in cleaning, washing, cooking, distilling remedies, and nursing the sick poor as well as in textile work, since its female servants also spun cloth, all under the watchful eyes of both a female and a male master who held supervisory authority.⁶

The example illustrates the significance of women's work to family sustenance and to urban institutions, their capacity to assume leading roles in familial economic units, their mobility as well as the complexity of their working experiences and relationships, which were certainly not unusual in premodern European societies. Since the 1980s, in particular, historians of women and gender have attested for the variety, flexibility, and intricacy that characterized the working lives of a large number of medieval and early modern women and, in fact, men.⁷ Today, the history of premodern work in relation to women and gender continues to be an incredibly lively and productive field of research. Plenty of synthesizing or comparative contributions have been published by historians of various European countries during the last couple of years alone. New methodological approaches and expanded perspectives on labour have nuanced our understanding of what constituted premodern work and how it was gendered across

5 On women's work in the textile sector of early modern Strasbourg see Wiesner, *Working Women*, pp. 149–185.

6 On Strasbourg's hospital and its staff, see Cersovsky, *Geschlechterverhältnisse*; and her contribution in this volume.

7 Here, we just refer to the summaries on women, gender, and work in Christian or Ashkenazic Jewish communities given by Baumgarten, *Gender*; McKee, *Slavery*; Reyerson, *Urban Economies*; Whittle, *Rural Economies*; Drell, *Aristocratic Economies*; and Howell, *Gender*. They all offer good overviews of the important findings from the 1980s to the early 2000s, especially the ones published in English. For German-speaking scholarship, that is less represented in these publications, see Wensky, *Stellung*; Simon-Muscheid (ed.), *Was nützt die Schusterin dem Schmied?*; Rippmann, *Weibliche Schattenarbeit*; *eadem*, "Frauenwerk"; Wunder, *Stellung*; *eadem*, *Er ist die Sonn'* (translated into English as *eadem*, *He Is the Sun*); Keil, "Maistrin"; *eadem*, *Mobilität*; Ziwes, *Reynette*.

time and space, social and religious groups as well as varying legal and confessional traditions.⁸

This volume aims at contributing to recent lines of research by combining an encompassing understanding of work, that moves beyond paid productive labour, with a renewed interest in premodern services as an important socio-historical reality of work. Studies on services have brought into sharper focus not only questions of dependency, coercion, and freedom but also settings such as religious and charitable institutions which are less frequently included in (economic) histories of work.⁹ Most chapters of this book thus focus on services in a variety of different forms and spaces between 1300 and 1600, exploring their gendered nature. They investigate service and work in lay artisan, merchant, or noble households, in urban workshops and on fields, service personnel within religious communities as well as services provided for civic communities, whether in brothels and charitable institutions or in relation to communication, war, and mediation of economic networks. Moreover, a point of contact between all contributions is the examination of economic and social relationships between female and male actors, including their inherent hierarchies and degrees of dependency and autonomy. Studying the strategies used to negotiate constraints, responsibility, and authority in relationships that were often at once based on inequality and mutual obligations, they advance discussions at the heart of both the history of work and of service.

The authors gathered here include 16 international scholars, established and new, who offer rich case studies based on a broad palette of historical sources. They analyse normative documents like statutes, administrative writing such as contracts, account books, and council minutes as well as court records, letters, chronicles, wills, hagiographic accounts, visual sources, and material remains. Mining these heterogeneous sources, they do justice to the plurality of working people, activities, and sites, and reveal the diversity of lived experiences of work and service in different locales. While most contributions focus on Latin-Christian contexts of Western Europe, others add valuable comparative perspectives on Orthodox Serbia as well as Jewish women and men in medieval Ashkenaz. The chapter's span the broad period of time between the

8 Among these recent contributions which mainly focus on the period from 1400 to 1800 are: Ågren (ed.), *Making a Living*; Bailey *et al.* (eds.), *Women and Work*; Bellavitis, *Women's Work*; Avalone/Colesanti (eds.), *Donne e lavoro*; Whittle/Hailwood, *Gender Division*; Ifft Decker, *The Fruit of Her Hands*; Dauchy/Scheuch (eds.), *Arbeit und Familie*; McLeod *et al.* (eds.), *The Whole Economy*; and the articles in the special issue of *Cuadernos Medievales* 35 (2023), e.g., Villanueva Morte/Almenar Fernández, *Presentación*; Briggs, *Women*; and Zanoloni, *Donne*. Haemers *et al.* (eds.), *Urban Women*, also contains several publications on work.

9 For instance, see Curry/Matthew (eds.), *Concepts*; van der Heijden *et al.* (eds.), *Serving the Urban Community*; Gilomen *et al.* (eds.), *Dienstleistungen*; Sarti, *Historians*; Schiel, *Ragusan "Maids-of-all-Work"*; Whittle (ed.), *Servants*; Cochelin/Wolffthal (eds.), *"We are All Servants"*; Dalarun, *To Govern Is to Serve*.

fourteenth and sixteenth centuries that has long been central for studying the intricate accordion-like movements of gendered opportunities and constraints in worlds of work.¹⁰ These centuries saw a number of social, economic, and cultural changes, including the Black Death, the increase of waged work and labour legislations, and the Protestant Reformations, to just name a select few. Assessing how these developments affected working people and were intertwined with the operation of gender and other categories of difference in different regions, represents an ongoing concern of gender history.¹¹ Additionally, analysing (gendered) patterns underpinning service work through to modernity, a first chapter by Jeremy Goldberg utilizes an anthropological approach to compare late medieval England and Italy with the modern-day Solomon Islands and near contemporary Lebanon.

Together, the essays in this volume address interlocking questions of gender, social, economic, legal, and marital status, of age, religion, and race/ethnicity. In so doing, they make visible the often non-linear and contradictory perceptions and experiences of premodern working women and men. The sections of the book are grouped according to different settings of work and service, but there are many themes that cut across them. In the following, this introduction discusses the thematic and methodological through-lines of the volume by embedding them in the scholarship on work and service and highlighting the specific contributions of the book's chapters.

2. Defining Work and Situating Women in the World of Work

Historians interested in gender have long recognized work to be crucial in articulating and shaping but also subverting gendered norms regarding individual roles and positions within a given society.¹² This insight has had important repercussions on research agendas, with regard to both the people and subjects chosen to be studied, and to the very definition of work. Focusing on women's work in particular, medievalists and early modernists have broadened the scope beyond adult male workers and 'productive' paid work, shedding light on the varied economic contributions of female workers

10 The idea of an 'accordion-like movement' with regard to women's working opportunities was proposed by Angela Groppi, who mainly focused on the inclusion and exclusion of women in guilds and highlighted the economic situation as a decisive factor. See Groppi, *Un questionario*; and Groppi, *Lavoro*.

11 Bellavitis, *Women's Work*, pp. 43–81, concisely sketches the developments of these debates. On labour legislation in a European context after the Black Death, see Whittle/Lambrech (eds.), *Labour Laws*; Michaud, *Earning Dignity*; Cohn, *After the Black Death*. On the Protestant Reformations, see Wiesner-Hanks, *Gender and the Reformation*; Labouvie (ed.), *Glaube und Geschlecht*; Capern, *Protestant Theology*.

12 In a German-speaking context, Karin Hausen has been influential in developing this insight, see Hausen, *Wirtschaften*.

at all social scales. They have shown that girls and women worked throughout their lives and in every sector, whether in trades, commerce, crafts, agriculture, or care and housework, whether in urban, rural, courtly, or monastic environments.¹³ Still, various areas of female economic activity continue to be fully fleshed out only now, as Edward Loss' analysis of female spies engaged by Italian cities most clearly demonstrates among the contributions to this volume.

Economic historians, in particular, have also argued that girl's and women's work was not only central to the survival and prosperity of families and households but also crucial to entire premodern economies and societies.¹⁴ In a similar vein, an important undertaking has been to draw sustained attention to the ways in which care and housework activities, largely performed by women, were monetized – simultaneously highlighting the value this kind of work had to the economic wellbeing of a household and the wider community when it was provided without remuneration.¹⁵ Looking at work in relation to women and gender thus equals examining the “whole economy”, as Catriona McLeod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren have prominently put it in 2023.¹⁶

Highlighting the importance of women's contribution to economy and society, scholars have neither remained blind to gendered differences of working opportunities nor to structural inequalities shaped by multiple categories of social distinction. The conditions under which different men and women worked could vary tremendously as reflected by gendered regulations, earnings, work status, levels of visibility in the sources, degrees of coercion and autonomy, and the cultural values attached to specific types of labour. The patriarchal norms and structures of late medieval and early modern European societies had the general effect that women were given lesser access than men to qualified training, positions of authority, high wages, and work that required large capital investment.¹⁷ While historians have shown gender to be of importance in the history of work, they have also revealed that gendered norms operated flexibly and

13 See the studies cited in footnotes 7 and 8. For the monastic context also see Müller, *Monastic Women*; and for the courtly environment see Sarti, *Women and Economic Power*.

14 For recent studies on the links between women's work, their rights regarding property, and economic development in the period from about 1400 to 1800, see Bellavitis/Zucca Micheletto (eds.), *Gender, Law and Economic Wellbeing*; Whittle, *Putting Women Back*. De Moor/van Zanden, *Girl Power*, has been very influential in the field but has also received a number of criticisms, see the summary in Bellavitis, *Women's Work*, pp. 8–9; and Wiesner-Hanks, *Women's Agency*, pp. 18–24.

15 See, e.g., Whittle, *Critique*; Cersovsky, *Pflege*; Nolte, *Domestic Care*; Maglaque, *Care Work*; Comas Via, *Mujeres*; Whittle, *Putting Women Back*. Schmidt, *Profits*, has argued some time ago that family members always performed unpaid work in their family's shop, too, that could be classified as ‘productive’. On this, also see Mazo Karras, *Women's Labors*.

16 McLeod *et al.*, *Whole Economy*.

17 As summarized by Bellavitis, *Women's Work*, pp. VII–IX, 253–258; or Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, pp. 112–156.

were one of many factors which influenced how women and men experienced labour, ensured their livelihoods, and negotiated various legal and social constraints.¹⁸ All contributions in this volume are informed by this vital understanding of the intersectional realities of premodern lives, as we will discuss below. Moreover, by focusing on the relations of gender with other categories of difference in the context of work and service, some essays also make visible little studied aspects of male economic activity, such as the male tertiaries serving as workforce in both male and female Dominican convents which are discussed by Adrian Kammerer. Others highlight the effect of gendered ideals on men's working opportunities, like Eva-Maria Cersovsky does in her analysis of male administrators and medical practitioners working for urban charitable institutions.

By paying attention to gender, historians have also reassessed the very nature of work and blurred the lines between home and workplace, family and market, productive and reproductive labour, remunerated and unpaid work. As Gabriela Sarti, Anna Bellavitis, and Manuela Martini have stated, numerous activities "which today we would classify as production, reproduction, and care were normally and crucially all considered as work" in medieval and early modern Europe.¹⁹ Semantic histories of the concept of work corroborate this. While different understandings coexisted during the medieval and early modern period, scholars have highlighted the broad spectrum of activities that encompassed concepts of work as a historically contingent category. They included not only paid, occupational activities but also such tasks and responsibilities as running a household, birthing and raising children, begging for alms, or receiving donations for praying to support oneself and one's family or community.²⁰ The expectation to perform some kind of labour as long as physically and mentally possible in order to contribute to families and communities in an unpaid or paid way was also shared among Christian and Ashkenazic Jewish cultures, as Eyal Levinson suggests in this volume.²¹

One of the most important methodological approaches which has been developed to arrive at this more expansive concept of work are 'verb-oriented-methods' aimed at identifying occupations and activities according to verb descriptions rather than noun

18 The relational nature of gender and its intersections with various categories of differences are at the core of modern gender history, see e.g., Bennett/Mazo Karras, *Women*; and Opitz-Belakhal, *Geschlechtergeschichte*.

19 Sarti *et al.*, Introduction, p. 15.

20 See the concise overview of semantic histories of work in Bailey *et al.*, *Approaching Women and Work*, pp. 8–9; Sarti *et al.*, Introduction, pp. 5–9. On the complex and changing relationship of begging, poverty, and work in the late medieval and early modern period, see Oexle, Armut; Schubert, "Hausarme Leute".

21 For the Christian context, also see the important findings coming from the field of disability history, e.g., the handbook Nolte *et al.* (eds.), *Dis/ability History*.

descriptors, i. e., looking at work tasks rather than occupational titles.²² This has not only contributed to recovering a broad spectrum of women's work activities, which were rarely identified by formal titles, but also represents more adequately the vast majority of people in late medieval and early modern Europe whose working lives were characterized by a combination of multiple tasks and a necessary flexibility in an economy of makeshifts.²³ Among the following chapters, Dorothee Rippmann Tauber and Julia Exarchos, in particular, draw attention to these realities affecting women and men by illuminating working experiences in agriculture and within urban economic networks of migrants and minority groups.

While authors of this volume are generally sensitive towards questions of economic history and to both noun and verb approaches in their understanding of labour, they particularly build on notions of work as a social and cultural activity. In late medieval and early modern Europe, the ability to function within one's social context was often synonymous with one's ability to work. Work usually sustained livelihoods and secured material existences, but it also influenced whether people could uphold their position and fulfil social roles according to their social group, their gender, economic means, age, and other markers of social distinction.²⁴ Moreover, activities to sustain oneself materially were bound into "complex networks of mutual duties and exchanges regulated by customs, solidarity norms and culturally constructed emotional ties rather than by the market", to once again refer to the important insights by Sarti, Bella-vitis, and Martini.²⁵ This understanding is also fundamental to concepts developed by German-speaking historians and drawn upon by Marco Tomaszewski and Dorothee Rippmann Tauber in this book. Both the term "livelihood activities" (*Lebensunterhaltsaktivitäten*), coined by Sigrid Wadauer,²⁶ and the concept of "economy of social relations" (*Ökonomie sozialer Beziehungen*), developed by Gabriele Jancke and Daniel Schläppi,²⁷ combine a focus on economic strategies – which could include monetary payment but also immaterial resources like honour – with a focus on the reproduction of social relations and values in the context of such strategies. For the purpose of this book, highlighting the socio-cultural dimensions of work and emphasizing the social

22 Ägren (ed.), *Making a Living* (on early modern Sweden). Similarly, Jane Whittle and her team have developed a work-task dataset based on early modern English court depositions, see Whittle *et al.* (eds.), *Experience. Peres, Female Work Arrangements*, argues for an extended approach that includes not only what women did but also what was done to them in order to explore relationships of work.

23 This has been highlighted in studies on gender and work from the 1980s onwards, e. g., see Rippmann, *Einleitung*. The notion of an economy of makeshifts was coined by Hufton, *The Poor*, studying poor families in eighteenth-century France, and has since been widely applied to other times and regions.

24 See footnote 20.

25 Sarti *et al.*, *Introduction*, p. 16.

26 Wadauer, *Arbeit*. Also see Tomaszewski, *Beyond Wage Labour*.

27 Jancke/Schläppi (eds.), *Die Ökonomie sozialer Beziehungen*.

relationships that organized premodern economies seems to be particularly fruitful for including questions of service.

3. Defining Service and Making Its Contexts and Providers Visible

Scholarship engaging with service usually points towards its blurry boundaries during the premodern period, which often challenge modern attempts at definition and classification. Historians have therefore put emphasis on the diversity of service and the variety of servants to be found during the medieval and early modern period. What exactly was service then, what was a servant?²⁸ The medieval world was conceived in terms of relationships of service. As Rosemary Horrox has stated, “[s]ervice has some claim to be considered the dominant ethic of the middle ages.”²⁹ The hierarchical relationship between masters and servants was central for understanding divine order, the relationship between God and humans, and, thus, for modelling human order and human relationships accordingly. The vocabulary of service – which was in itself varied – could therefore denote the relationship of individuals to God, of individuals to a community, of children to their parents, of lovers to their beloved, of subjects and vassals to their lords, or of different workers to their employers.³⁰ Isabelle Cochelin has recently highlighted that the feudal, religious, and patriarchal models of service prevalent in the medieval and early modern period – represented by their respective archetypes of the squire or knight, the monastic servant, and the maid – shared strong personal and familial connotations of benevolence, loyalty, and reward. Although these often existed side by side with more contractual and narrowly economic aspects from the late Middle Ages onwards, the latter only gradually came to be dominant characteristics in the understanding of service in the modern world.³¹ Scholars have pointed to further similarities between premodern relations of service. These were all relationships which involved power asymmetries as well as dependency, constraint, and obedience on the parts of the ones serving, but they were also relationships of mutual obligation, care, and sometimes contractual consent, and they could involve emotional, spiritual, or devotional bonds.³² While premodern societies were thus based on tiers of authority and subordination founded on the idea of (good) service as a “profoundly Christian virtue

28 Here, we allude to the important article by Goldberg, *What Was a Servant?*. Similarly put for the early modern and modern period in Sarti, *Who Are Servants?*

29 Horrox, *Service*, p. 61.

30 See, e. g., Horrox, *Service*; Goldberg, *What Was a Servant?*; Cochelin, *Introduction*.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

32 Horrox, *Service*; Goldberg, *What Was a Servant?*; and the contributions in Cochelin/Wolfthal (eds.), “We Are All Servants”. With a focus on domestic service, Sarti, *Servo e padrone*, p. 16, puts more emphasis on the asymmetries and contrasts of direction and obedience, independence and dependence, and freedom and constraint.

and perfection”³³ – with everyone being subject to another, if only to God –, some relationships were, of course, more unequal and hierarchical than others.³⁴ Consequently, the status and experiences of servants diverged from one another according to factors such as socio-economic and legal status, gender, or age, as well as time and place.

Building and expanding on these insights, the edited volume at hand underlines the diversity of service and servants with a specific focus on the notion of service in the organization of labour and service as work, whether paid in money, remunerated in other ways, for example by receiving housing, training, and/or clothing, or entirely unpaid. The chapters thus delve into different spatial and social contexts with their varying forms of work and service. In the following section, we will first outline these settings by grouping them into the broader categories of service in lay households of artisanal, merchant, or noble families, service in convents, and service for civic institutions and communities, although many chapters discuss aspects that could fit into more than one of these categories. In another section, we will focus more closely on the relations between the ones serving and the ones being served as well as the hierarchies, dependencies, and scopes of action that shaped working relationships.

Serving in a lay household and living in the home of the employer receiving board, lodging, and/or money based on a written or oral agreement might be considered the core of the traditional definition of servanthood.³⁵ In the medieval and early modern period, the *familia* did not only consist of the nuclear family but of all people living, working, and serving under the authority of a male and/or female head of household; an understanding which fit homes of various types and sizes as well as religious and civic institutions.³⁶ The essays by Jeremy Goldberg, Dorothee Rippmann Tauber, Jacqueline Turek, Angela Zhang, and Marco Tomaszewski portray the heterogeneous motivations, structures, and gendered patterns of serving in lay households in different locales of Europe. Young people in North-Western and Central Europe, and to some extent in Southern Europe too, often served in the households of other families, especially urban ones, before marrying. This so called ‘life-cycle service’ helped them to acquire socialisation experience, skills – on occasion including the training for a trade

33 Roest, *Lay Servant*, p. 456. Baumgarten, “A Separate People”?, p. 216, has emphasized similarities between Christian and Jewish understandings of service and power relationships including their gendered dimension. On notions of (religious) government as based on relationships of service, also see Dalarun, *To Govern Is To Serve*.

34 As highlighted in, e. g., Sarti, *Freedom*; Cochelin, *Introduction*; Laumonier, *Domestic Service*; or Sarti, *Slaves*. Also see our discussion of different forms of dependency below.

35 See, e. g., Whittle, *Introduction*, p. 1 (with a focus on farming households in rural Europe).

36 On medieval and early modern conceptions of family, household, and domestic sphere see, e. g., Goldberg, *Household*; Goldberg/Kowaleski (eds.), *Medieval Domesticity*; Beattie/Maslakovic/Rees Jones (eds.), *Medieval Household*; Eibach/Schmidt-Voges (eds.), *Haus*; and Eibach/Lanzinger (eds.), *Domestic Sphere*.