

# Women, Gender, and Work in Migration (Nineteenth to Twenty-first Century)

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## ABSTRACT

Largely marked by a feminine presence since the nineteenth century, labor migration arriving in, crossing through, and leaving the European continent opened new possibilities for migrating women. Whether they were farmers with their partners, industrial laborers, or employees in different kinds of service, they were for a long time just as active as native-born women, if not more. However, for some marriage and the interruption of family networks led to additional domestic work and a break with work outside the home during certain highly gendered phases of the family life cycle. The World Wars and the extraordinary transformations experienced by European societies, in addition to decolonization, accelerating globalization, and the ease and speed of transport, changed the volume and nature of migratory flows within and toward Europe. Older and newer occupations now coexist in composite flows that are henceforth majority female.



Medical examination for arriving immigrants at Ellis Island.  
Source: National Park Service: Statue of Liberty National Monument.



Advertisements for “badante” (nursing assistants), one Ukrainian and the other Italian, on a telephone booth in Milan. Source : [cafebabel](https://www.cafebabel.it/).

The vast majority of massive flows have consisted of labor migration, with an estimated 60 million individuals migrating within and departing from the European space between the mid-nineteenth century and the eve of the Second World War. While men initially represented the majority, at the turn of the twentieth century the German and Irish immigrant populations in the United States consisted of 41% and 53% women, respectively. In France, Italian women represented 40% of immigration networks at the time, coming essentially from the North of the peninsula.

In the nineteenth century, all branches of the textile, food processing, and tobacco industries offered plentiful jobs for these female workers. Men, who were employed in the steel and mechanics industries, mining, and construction were more visible in the working worlds of the Second Industrial Revolution. In addition to these essentially urban migrations, there was rural family migration as part of highly specific circuits: from Northern Europe to the Western United States, from Spain and Portugal to European colonies in South America, and from Italy to Southern France. However, it was domestic workers who held the attention of the public, which was concerned about their morality. These domestic service employees made up a considerable portion of mass migration, whether it was as part of internal migratory flows, international flows within the European continent, or transoceanic ones leaving Europe: Breton maids in France, Galician wet-nurses in Spain, Irish domestic workers in England, the United States, and New Zealand, and German, French, and English governesses, who were sought after in major capitals and the colonies by colonial civil servants and local elites. Of the 206,254 women listed in domestic service in Paris in 1901, nearly 20,000 were foreigners from Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium.

## Career Paths, Migratory Networks, and Gendered Experiences in Migration

From the nineteenth century onward, domestic workers became part of independent mobility networks, ranging from specialized networks sustained by former migrant women, to networks established by charitable societies, along with placements made by the many agencies that appeared in major cities. These women sometimes left alone, and were often shut up in the confined spaces of the homes they worked in. On the contrary, among female factory workers, “*suiveuses*” (followers) migrated with their spouse, father, or brother; if they arrived while young, they mastered the host country’s language and found new professional opportunities. The migratory experience reshuffled the deck when it came to gender relations.

In families many women internalized gender roles, including additional domestic tasks in contexts of immigration where family networks were absent or largely broken. Similar patterns emerged in the families of political exiles

during the nineteenth century, with a few rare and exemplary exceptions. Emigration could also have an emancipating effect, as it inserted initially unskilled women in the non-domestic working world, and enabled them to acquire a technical specialization, for instance women leaving Southern Europe and finding jobs in the Swiss watchmaking industry in the mid-twentieth century.

Other service industry occupations, such as laundries and small companies in the food trade, drew largely on the increasingly large waves of migrant women coming to the European continent after the introduction of restrictions and ethnic quotas in the United States between 1921-1924. While some found stable occupations in these fields, for many the journey toward entrepreneurship was more mixed. Self-employed work was often synonymous with precariousness, especially for women. The line between itinerant odd jobs and prostitution was porous.

The support role of families, caring for young children and the elderly in the locations of departure or arrival, was essential until the mid-twentieth century. Extended family and active parental networks enabled the mobility of men, as well as married women with children. These ties that provided care often extended across two countries, and sometimes even three for ethnically grouped diasporic migrations (such as Greeks and Italians in France, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire). Women and men rarely migrated without family support, and it was precisely those journeys that involved a “break” with close relations that proved complicated.

In the late nineteenth-century, rapidly increasing migration led to a considerable transformation of the public and private structures in charge of migratory flows, which were soon administered in gendered terms. The reception of women and children was made possible through the recruitment of women—who were sometimes former migrants themselves—within the transit infrastructure, at border posts, in international organizations, or as social workers at welfare institutions in the locations of arrival. The secular Société humanitaire (Humanitarian Society) and the Catholic Bonomelli Society provided premises and staff for a gendered reception at the French-Italian border of Bardonecchia. The First World War was a turning point in Europe with respect to state intervention in regulating flows and implementing a new migratory system based on signing international conventions, for which France and Italy were pioneers in 1904 and 1917.

The two World Wars were also key events that sparked massive flows of refugee populations consisting of men and women of all ages and conditions with no possibility of return, and facing pressing issues of professional mobility.

## **New Trajectories?**

After 1945, the whole of Europe became a center of immigration. Germany and later Italy attracted growing waves of workers. The most recent European migratory flows, from Southern European toward primarily Germany, Belgium, and France, are also divided between men and women. They coexist with massive migrations from Africa and Asia connected to decolonization. In 1992, 45.5% percent of the 14.8 non-European Union nationals were women. There has been an increasing number of Turkish women, followed by women from North Africa and, beginning in the early 2000s, those from countries bordering the EU on the East. The feminization of these flows, which has been highly pronounced since the 1990s, has changed the composition of immigrant populations. It has supplied affordable labor for agencies providing cleaning services or personal care, in addition to the restaurant industry and large retailers, in conditions that often bend labor laws. Just as specific is the implementation of male, female, and transgender migrant networks for sex work, which often have a global dimension.

More recently, newer and more skilled categories, such as healthcare professionals, nursing assistants, and nurses have emerged despite obstacles to recognizing their professional status. Finally, the increase of international careers has prompted the migration of highly educated and skilled individuals, including within the cultural and artistic sectors.

While the twenty-first century has opened with migratory circulation that is majority female, it is marked by the

diverse professional experiences sparked by these flows, which combine former specializations as well as the new frontiers of women's work in migration.

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