

Call for Papers

The Mobile Domestic Servant: Gender, Class, Language and Mobility

Two-day seminar, 30 November–1 December 2026

The female domestic servantⁱ is a remarkably mobile figure. Studies suggest that domestic servants moved considerably greater distances than most other social groups. Their mobility was geographical, as young women left rural communities for employment in towns and cities, but also social: domestic service brought women into intimate contact with households, lifestyles and forms of language different from those in which they had grown up. The movements of domestic servants formed part of the wider transformation of Scandinavian societies during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as urbanisation, industrialisation and changing forms of household organisation reconfigured relations between town and countryside. Studying the individual trajectories of domestic servants allows us to examine how such large-scale transitions were experienced and negotiated in everyday life.

The female domestic servant therefore offers a particularly rich point of departure for exploring the intersections of mobility, gender and class. The home, in which the women served, may be understood as a microcosm of society and even of the nation-state: a space in which boundaries, hierarchies, belonging and exclusion are produced and negotiated. As rural women entered urban households, the home also became a site where broader transitions between rural and urban ways of life, social positions and linguistic practices were encountered at close range. This perspective connects the historical house servants to contemporary arrangements involving e.g. au pairs. It also raises questions about vulnerability and the position of women at the bottom of urban hierarchies. In 1899, for instance, *Politiken* reported that housemaids constituted the largest occupational group among registered prostitutes in Copenhagen (Chakravarty 2015: 15).

The seminar also invites attention to the domestic servant as a linguistic figure. How is she represented, categorised and given voice in archives, literature, newspapers, memoirs and public debate? What linguistic practices emerged when servants moved between rural and urban environments or entered households with different social and linguistic norms? And how have labels such as *maid*, *domestic worker* and *au pair* shaped changing understandings of gender, labour, intimacy and social status?

We invite contributions from across disciplines, including history, ethnology, literary studies, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, gender studies and migration studies. In keeping with TRANSITION's focus on changing urban and rural lives, the seminar approaches the female domestic servant as a figure through whom relations between

mobility, place and societal transformation can be explored. We are particularly interested in contributions that connect individual lives and everyday practices to broader processes of urbanisation and social and cultural change.

Contributions may address historical or contemporary material and may be empirical, theoretical or methodological. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- Domestic service and geographical or social mobility
- Gendered and classed relations within the household
- Rural–urban migration and encounters
- Housemaids, language and linguistic change
- Literary, archival and media representations of domestic servants
- Domestic morality, hygiene and ideals of femininity
- Vulnerability, sexuality and prostitution
- Au pairs, migrant domestic workers and contemporary forms of domestic service
- The household as a site of belonging, exclusion and nation-building
- Terminology and the housemaid as a linguistic and cultural figure
- Domestic service, urbanisation and changing rural–urban relations
- Life trajectories and everyday experiences of societal transition

Presentations will be allocated 20 minutes, followed by 10 minutes for questions and discussion.

Participation in the seminar is free of charge. Participants are responsible for arranging and covering their own travel and accommodation.

Please submit an abstract of no more than 500 words, together with your name, affiliation and contact information, to transition@hum.ku.dk by October 4. Applicants will be notified by October 15.

The seminar will take place at TRANSITION – Centre for Changing Urban and Rural Lives, University of Copenhagen. The working language of the seminar is English.

ⁱ Terminology varies across historical periods, and terms such as *servant*, *domestic servant*, *housemaid* and *domestic worker* carry different associations and connotations. In this call, we use *domestic servant* as an overarching term to denote both historical and present-day forms of domestic work.