

The working lives of women in rural Austria from the late 19th century into the interwar years: Remarks and reflections*

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Abstract

Drawing on extensive life history records and contemporary ethnographic material, the paper discusses women's labouring lives in rural Austria, with an emphasis on the eastern Austrian Alps, during the late imperial and the interwar period; it examines their lives within the context of household economy and in relation to individual experience. It traces the different places occupied by women of different ages (girls as well as older women) and different socio-economic backgrounds within rural, especially peasant, households, which, in their capacity as economic - labour units, functioned largely along pre-industrial norms in an age of otherwise high industrialisation. Women performed a range of labour and were evaluated differently by rural communities. They worked from different positions within labour and socioeconomic hierarchies that largely privileged men in various (though not always visible) ways, whereas labour demands often clashed with pregnancy and the experience of motherhood. Yet women also enjoyed spaces of power that were inextricably linked with their everyday lives, acting as agents of their working lives.

Keywords: social history, rural history, history of women, gender, female labour, peasants, household, Austria, Alps



Ο εργασιακός βίος των γυναικών στην αυστριακή ύπαιθρο από τον ύστερο 19ο αιώνα μέχρι την εποχή του μεσοπολέμου: Παρατηρήσεις και προβληματισμοί

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Περίληψη

Το άρθρο συζητά πλευρές του εργασιακού βίου των γυναικών στην αυστριακή ύπαιθρο κατά την ύστερη αυτοκρατορική και την μεσοπολεμική περίοδο. Στηρίζεται σε εκτενή αυτοβιογραφικά/βιογραφικά κείμενα και εθνογραφικές μελέτες της εποχής, και εξετάζει την ζωή των γυναικών αφενός στο πλαίσιο της οικονομίας της οικιακής ομάδας, αφετέρου σε συνάρτηση με την ατομική βιωμένη εμπειρία. Ιχνηλατεί τις διαφορετικές θέσεις που κατείχαν γυναίκες διαφορετικών ηλικιών (νεαρές κοπέλες καθώς και γυναίκες μεγαλύτερης ηλικίας) και διαφορετικής κοινωνικο-οικονομικής προέλευσης στα νοικοκυριά της υπαίθρου (ιδίως τα αγροτικά) που ως οικονομικές-εργασιακές μονάδες λειτουργούσαν εν πολλοίς με προ-βιομηχανικούς όρους σε μια περίοδο έντονης εκβιομηχάνισης. Οι γυναίκες εκτελούσαν ένα φάσμα διαφορετικών εργασιών που σχετιζόταν και με την διαφορετική τους αξιολόγηση από τις κοινότητες/κοινωνίες της υπαίθρου. Εργάζονταν από διαφορετικές θέσεις στο πλαίσιο εργασιακών και κοινωνικο-οικονομικών ιεραρχιών που έδιναν στους άνδρες ποικίλα (παρότι όχι πάντοτε ορατά) προνόμια, ενώ οι απαιτήσεις της εργασίας τους συχνά έρχονταν σε σύγκρουση με την εγκυμοσύνη και την εμπειρία της μητρότητας. Παρά ταύτα οι γυναίκες ασκούσαν επίσης εξουσία στο πεδίο της εργασίας (άρρηκτα συνδεδεμένο με την καθημερινή τους ζωή), και λειτουργούσαν συχνά ως ενεργά υποκείμενα του εργασιακού τους βίου.

Λέξεις – κλειδιά: κοινωνική ιστορία, ιστορία της υπαίθρου, ιστορία των γυναικών, φύλο, γυναικεία εργασία, αγρότες, οικιακή ομάδα, Αυστρία, Άλπεις

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Introduction

Women's history, gender history, labour history, and rural history are all established research fields in History – yet within these the history of rural women and female rural labour, particularly agricultural labour, remains somewhat on their margins, does not appear to be a central issue the way the history of women and female labour in urban centres does.¹ This paper looks at rural women and female rural labour in Austria, mainly in the eastern Austrian Alps, during the late 19th and early 20th century (including the interwar period). It outlines women's position(s) and social role(s), tracing the main features of women's labour in the mountainous, mainly agricultural regions of Salzburg, Tirol, Carinthia, Styria but also, to a lesser extent, Upper Austria and Lower Austria.

This paper draws on so-called qualitative textual sources, more specifically over 100 autobiographical narratives of rural women from the Documentation of Life History Records, a modern archive at the University of Vienna. A large number of these records have been published in collective volumes and a few in single ones; among the published autobiographical records on the region of Salzburg those by Barbara Passrigger, born in Pongau in 1910, and Maria Schuster, born in Lungau in 1915, are particularly insightful and revealing.² Furthermore, this paper draws on ethnographic material collected by older or contemporary researchers such as the Upper Austrian topographer Ignaz von Kürsinger (1853); the Tirolians theologian and professor Beda Weber (1838); librarian and author Ludwig Hörmann von Hörbach (1909); and especially the historian and ethnographer Hermann Wopfner (1995/1; 1995/2; 1997).

Ethnographic material and autobiographical records permit an historical-anthropological approach: they allow us to trace division of labour within peasant households (which were the primary labour units in the regions during the time period examined here), labour relations on the microlevel within the context of family/household and social relations and working conditions as well as women's (and men's) attitudes towards work.

In much of rural Austria, especially in the mountainous regions and above all in the eastern Austrian Alps, where well into the 20th century impartible inheritance dominated (Wopfner, 1995/1:163),³ peasant households constituted both living and working units; relying principally on manual labour, these households served largely –but by no means exclusively– subsistence purposes.

¹ At the fourth ELHN in Vienna (2021) two sessions were dedicated to rural women; in papers that were delivered rural women appeared to be invisible or hardly visible in many otherwise rich historical sources, whereas in some cases it was through an interest in industrial work that they came into the fore: <https://www.worck.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/worck21-26-08.pdf>, pp. 12, 14 of the uploaded programme. See also footnote 3 in Papatthanassiou (2015).

² On the Documentation of Life History Records, see: https://bibliothek.univie.ac.at/sammlungen/dokumentation_lebensgeschichtlicher_aufzeichnungen.html (accessed 18.10.2021).

³ Farms passed to a single, preferably though not necessarily male, heir. For a detailed and comprehensive analysis of inheritance laws and customs going back to the early modern period, especially in regard to Tirol, see Schennach, 2003.

Animal husbandry, which was crucial to survival, demanded permanently available labour and thus employment of live-in servants, both female and male, although at peak times agricultural labour could also be employed temporarily (Papathanassiou, 2001). On the whole, the agrarian economy in late 19th-early 20th century and in interwar Austria was undergoing a very slow mechanisation; rural exodus existed but was not particularly dramatic. Indeed, the percentage of the population leaving the countryside diminished during the interwar period and the number of rural servants remained high in some regions. For instance, in 1902 one third of the adults in the region of Lungau in Salzburg worked as rural servants while half worked in a dependent position in Upper Austria in 1923 (Weber, 1985: 27; Klammer, 1992: 16-17).

Against this background we examine several interrelated questions regarding labouring women: was there “a woman’s place” within peasant households and in what sense; how did work interact with factors such as position within labour hierarchy, social class, age and the life cycle; did women’s working conditions and experiences differ from men’s and how; did women experience discrimination in favour of men; and, finally, how far and in which ways could women exercise power related to work or have a positive working experience or both.

A woman’s place?

It emerges clearly from the texts of contemporary researchers and, above all, women’s autobiographical writings that a gendered division of labour permeated work within peasant households. There were principally two distinct labour groups –women and men, or *Weiberleute* and *Männerleute*– with gender-specific tasks and workspaces. Women were primarily responsible for housework (*stricto sensu*, baking bread, cooking for either the people or the animals to be fed, cleaning, washing, bringing water and wood into the house, looking after the children). But since the borders between productive and so-called non-productive labour were often blurred in rural economies, these tasks included much work around the peasant house, such as cultivating the house garden and caring for small animals like hens, geese, pigs, and milking the cows (contact with udders being culturally associated with women). But outside the house and its immediate environment, women and men worked together, undertaking usually different but complementary tasks in the woods, fields, and sometimes alpine pastures. Men felled trees but women would work alongside them to lop off their branches. During harvest it was usually the men who cut hay or harvested corn but the women who bound it into sheaves.

There were then women’s ‘places’ within the peasant household, in a flexible sense –and there is much evidence that women replaced men conducting male tasks when men were at war or when peasants could not afford more than one or two servants (Wass, 1985: 182). “Neither of the spouses should interfere with the business of the other part, but the peasant’s wife was, to an often-intolerable extent, a co-worker in her husband’s field of work,” notes Hermann Wopfner, who conducted ethnographic research in the early 1920s (1995/2:53).

There is no evidence of the reverse occurring, that is, of men undertaking female tasks since so-called female work was regarded as inferior. Men may have been considered heads of the households by Austrian authorities conducting censuses since the mid-18th century and local communities alike – yet a gendered division of labour meant that the household economy could barely function without a woman on the male head's side. In Hermann Wopfner's words, "A peasant without a woman, is no peasant" (1995/1:257).

The same was true for rural working class households,⁴ the households of cottagers who provided peasants with much needed workforce especially at peak times, and households of the very small holders proliferating in the fertile plains of Lower and Upper Austria (Ortmayr, 1992: 321) as well as in regions where land property was divided among all heirs.⁵ Without intense pluriactivity they could barely survive and while husbands usually migrated for wages or generally for cash during the warmer months, wives were responsible for the subsistence economy. Women were primarily (if not exclusively) responsible for what middle class contemporaries called 'housework', (cooking, cleaning, washing, caring for infants) as well as for the land plots and the few animals that produced a large, or rather the largest, part of the family's food. In narratives by authors from rural working-class families, it is for the most part their mothers who are shown to cultivate cereals and vegetables, take care of hens and milk animals, or collect firewood and animal feed. Furthermore, the narrators constantly recall themselves as young children working alongside their mothers or being assigned tasks that related to subsistence economy, for instance, collecting mushrooms and berries from the forest.

The living experience of Berta Rainer's mother is typical of wives in cottager households. Berta grew up in Upper Austria during the 1920s and the early 1930s. She lived with her parents and three siblings in a cottage (in fact an old mill) granted by a peasant who had also granted the family plots of land. Her mother cultivated the family's garden and potato plot for food and at the same time worked on the peasant's behalf:

In autumn [...] mother had to dig out her potatoes [...] In spring [...] farm work and meadow work for the peasant began. In her garden mother cultivated parsley, carrots, spinach and she planted onions, salad and underground kohlrabi and on the edge runner beans. She helped the peasant and his servants to plant potatoes and, if needed, in garden work. Then the summer came and the harvesting of hay began. Mother waited for Rosina to come back from school. Then she went with me to the large meadow for the harvesting of hay [...] (Rainer, 1992).

Correlations

Beyond this description of rural women's 'places' in rural Austria –a description that in many cases could also apply elsewhere and in other time periods– there was a relatively strict labour hierarchy within each of the two gender-specific groups. The larger the farm and number of animals kept, the

⁴ On the so-called rural underclasses (*ländliche Unterschichten*), see Mitterauer (1981).

⁵ See the example of Vorarlberg: Weitensfelder (2003).

greater the need for labour; the more servants employed, the stricter the division of labour among them along the same strict, gender-based hierarchy. As a gauge of scale, in general, –significant regional and local variations notwithstanding– to be categorised a peasant required a minimum of five to ten hectares of land and ten to 20 cows, while the farm size could even reach 100 hectares (Wopfner, 1995/1: 185; Klammer, 1992: 57-58).

In other words, and regarding women, not all women working on a farm occupied the same position within it. The female labour group was headed by the peasant's wife, the *Bäuerin*, in most cases and at least in medium-sized or large farms; below her were three or four female servants (called *Mägde* or *Dirne*) in a –more or less– well-defined order, with various names, depending on the region and sometimes designating the principal tasks for which they were employed. There was an upper female servant called *Großdirn*, *Erste Magd*, or *Moardirn* in Lungau; one to three female servants of lower order called *Felddirn*, *Kleindirn*, or *Hausdirn* and *Viehdirn* or *Stalldirn* or *Kuhmagd*, the latter usually a very young girl; eventually a younger girl (an older child) for various assistance tasks and sometimes a *Sennerin* or dairy maid, who occupied a very special position within labour hierarchy, equal in some respects to that of the upper female servant. Above all it was the grade of responsibility attributed to each that defined a woman's position within the labour hierarchy: the higher the grade of responsibility, the higher the position.

Did position within labour hierarchy signify a woman's social class within the peasant society? The *Bäuerin* was the peasant's wife and together they formed the peasant couple (*Bauersleute*) who owned the farm and the cattle, employed people, distributed tasks among servants and later day labourers. Female servants were usually employed by the *Bäuerin*. The couple belonged to the dominant social group, the peasants – which, in turn, had its own hierarchy according to the peasant's wealth, farm size and soil fertility, number of the cattle, and region. But among the servants there were peasants' daughters (and sons) or sisters (and brothers) who often worked under the orders of their own mothers (and fathers) or sisters (and brothers). Before marriage all peasant women had worked as rural servants in different positions mostly in both the parental and other households through kinship and community networks that covered peasant households' shifting labour needs.

Anna Starzer, born in 1914, in Upper Austria, was the only child of a peasant. Later, after marriage, she inherited the farm. She writes:

So, when I finished school I had to become immediately a servant (*den Dienstbotenstand einsteigen*). I enjoyed the varied work and the relation to nature. For six years I occupied the position of a second *Magd*. We had a very good first *Magd* and I dispensed with the position of a first *Magd* until she got married (Starzer, 1985: 113).

This does not mean that class did not matter. Many *Mägde* were illegitimate or foster children who had grown up in foster households –cottagers' or poor peasants' children who had no prospect of inheriting– whereas a peasant's daughter would, theoretically at least (since inflation was endemic in the interwar years), be compensated in cash for her share of the farm by her brother or rather by the

brother who had inherited the farm. And, indeed, one notes that sometimes in autobiographical texts, peasant children are distinguished from the *Dienstboten* (servants) although the same authors may, in other parts of their texts, use this and other words like the term *Magd* or *Bauernmagd* for a peasant's daughter or son. This points to a different, more flexible than presumed, meaning of social class: it mattered, but was not directly associated with the position within labour hierarchy (Papathanassiou, 2015). To this it should be added that records show peasants paying their own children less than other servants or not at all (though this information comes up in a very general manner in the ethnographic material).

Above all, a woman's (and a man's) position within the farm's labour hierarchy depended on age. Female rural labour refers to various ages: child labour, youth (girls'), middle-aged, and elderly. Age should be used as an analytical category since work and labour relations took different forms and meanings depending on age –not just labour relations between the peasant's wife and the female servants, but also among the female servants themselves and between male and female servants.

Theoretically, in official discourse and most contemporaries' language, rural service was associated with youth –unwed individuals in their teens, twenties, and early thirties– and considered a transitional stage in the life cycle to be followed by marriage and the creation of a family, either as a peasant or a cottager. In reality, and especially in the eastern Austrian Alp with their restricted labour market (particularly in poor areas with infertile soil such as the Lungau in Salzburg), women (and men) often remained in rural service after their forties and well into old age. There are examples of dairy maids working well into their seventies and eighties in our sources; within the gender-specific division of labour, contrary to men, elderly women could more easily contribute to the household economy, tending to the home and children (Wass, 1985: 179). When no longer able to work due to old age, women (like men) would rotate from one farm to another and be cared for by different peasants and peasant women (often close or distant kin, sometimes even their siblings) according to specific communal systems that dominated well into and after the interwar period (Klammer, 1992: 185 ff).

It has been estimated that between one-fourth and one-fifth of Austrian rural servants of both sexes were lifelong rather than life-cycle servants (Ortmayr, 1992: 322). Still, the majority of female (as well as male) rural servants were young –the youngest would occupy the lowest position(s) in the labour hierarchy. The latter were young girls in their early teens and even as young as ten years old. Female children under the age of ten years would also undertake various relatively simple jobs, even though they did not officially belong to the *Weiberleute*. Most of these children's tasks –like carrying water or herding animals– were by no means gender-specific, with the exception of looking after the peasant couple's babies (*Kindermädchen*), which was exclusively assigned to girls who were too young to be of use in the fields. Child labour was self-evident and, in fact, an integral part of raising children, a sort of apprenticeship, especially as many servants grew up as peasant or foster children in peasant households or entered service very young when coming from cottagers' families who were tied to peasant families,

economically and socially. Contemporary researchers note –as also evidenced in autobiographical material from the period– that the peasant couple had an ‘educational right’ (*Erziehungsrecht*) over children who lived and worked on their farms. In fact, older and higher-ranking male and female servants also had educational rights and power over children. Power relations within the peasant household thus depended as much on age as on gender.

Gender asymmetries

Working conditions and experiences were to a great extent similar for both men and women: waking up very early in the morning (at four or five o’clock) to start work; a workday of at least 12 hours; working at a very intensive pace, not only at peak times, but throughout the year through since caring for the animals was continuous. This is depicted vividly in autobiographical narratives describing their everyday lives; lack of sleep and great physical exhaustion were common experiences for both women and men in rural Austria, particularly in the eastern Austrian Alps, despite efforts to ease the labour’s intensity by singing, talking, and joking while working. But a careful reading of the texts makes clear that, in general, working conditions were harsher for women than for men. Women rose earlier in the morning and worked later into the evening because of housework that had to be done before going to the fields or stables. Women also enjoyed less freedom in terms of going out during their scant leisure time. Both peasant women and female rural servants (as well as female cottagers) lived and worked in a male-dominated world.

On Holy Sunday all male servants in the peasant household of Lungau, where Maria Schuster worked, were free from work duties. It was not the same for women:

All wooden vessels in the house and the stable got scrubbed with soap-suds. The food for the animals had to get prepared beforehand for three days. The pigsty and henhouse were cleaned and firewood was brought in the house. The *Moardirn*, the *Viehdirn* and the *Hausdirn*, each one had her part of the house and yard to sweep, and, and, and... (Schuster, 1997: 201).

Female servants in the region where Schuster grew up seem to have ‘never enjoyed leisure time’ (ibid.: 38). In winter, a season generally free from intensive agricultural tasks, they still worked almost all day long, emptying the straw sacks and refilling them with fresh straw on the beds, cleaning the house, washing, cooking, looking after the small children and the animals, and, above all, spinning flax, whereas

the men had finished work by the time it was dark. Most of the time they spent the evening at the room table with card games, reading the newspaper or some practical joke [...] (Schuster, 2001: 124).

And Josef Kranebitter, recording the experiences of his mother, who worked as a female servant in late-19th-century Tirol, notes:

The work time of the female servants was long. They had to wake up at five in summer and in winter, and my mother wished she could sleep until six in the morning once a year. In

winter months stable work began in dark and ended again in the evening (...) Stable work was hard work. My mother had to clean out the stable, scatter hay, milk and comb down the cows, and the work in the fields had to be done during the day. In winter female servants sat after dinner at the spinning wheel and span wool and hemp. They were tired and sleepy, and waited for the clock to strike nine, leave the spinning wheel aside and go to bed (Kranebitter, 1985: 193-194).

During the interwar years rural servants were paid in cash –either yearly (which was the rule before the first world war) or monthly (which became usual, albeit not always prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s), as well as in kind. While we cannot trace such payments in serial data, there is evidence that, regarding cash, female servants were paid less than their male counterparts; even their payment in kind was often of a lower value. Women’s inferiority to men was even expressed in how they were paid: both men and women were handed their pay in a formal, ritualistic manner by the peasant and not by his wife, even though she was responsible for hiring female labour.

In interwar Tirol, female wages were between one-third and one-half of male wages, a traditional pattern confirmed in several regions (Weber, 1985:20; for Tirol, see Wopfner, 1995/1: 609-612; Hörmann, 1909: 303-309). During the 1920s in Lungau, *Mägde* received between 5,000 and 6,000 Kronen monthly while *Knechte* received 10,000 to 15,000. Furthermore, the respective payments-in-kind (clothes, shoes, underwear, wool, etc.) that were crucial well into the 20th century were of smaller monetary value for women than those given to men (Klammer, 1992: 170-171). Maria Schuster describes annual payments made by her stepfather and peasants in general, whereby male servants were paid first, followed by female servants. On payday, her stepfather offered servants bacon and liquor in quantities that corresponded to their rank and gender; the highest-ranked female servant, for instance, would receive less than the most senior male servant (Schuster, 1997: 22).

The interaction between pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing is generally crucial to our understanding of the female rural work experience in the past in its gender-specific dimensions since men did not share the same physical experiences and children were not considered their responsibility.

In the case under examination, the primacy of the peasant economy and labour was unquestionable. This meant that pregnant women had to work hard until childbirth and in most cases immediately afterwards. This is often recalled and sometimes noted in autobiographies and is always associated with memories of hardship and fatigue. From this point of view, female bodies were put under much stress due to the demands of the labour they performed. It was not only peasants’ wives who had children: female rural servants in the eastern Austrian Alps often had children born out of wedlock since their kind of work, namely service, was incompatible with marriage –initially legally and, during the interwar period, morally. Historians have noted the impressive numbers of so-called illegitimate children in the regions under examination, which account for 30 to 90 percent of all childbirths (Ortmayr, 1992: 348) and connected them with demand for labour. For female servants this meant that unless, as it happened in some cases, they became cottagers working as day labourers on behalf of the peasants

(Konrad, 1994: 64), they should place their children in a foster family, mostly against payment –which could reach as high as sixty percent of their earnings (Thomas, 1994: 199), although fathers often failed to observe their legal obligation regarding child support (Mitterauer, 1991; see also Ziss, 1994: 307-327).

My mother was born in 1920. She was the illegitimate child of Juliane Wuppinger. Her mother came from a peasant family in Seekirchen in the region of Salzburg; at the time she worked as a rural servant at Fuchsbauer in Hallzwang. The child's father separated from her, and she could not keep the baby, because she had to work further as rural servant (Lindner, 1985: 171).

Having no choice but to place the child in foster families – not all children spent their entire childhood with the same foster family – usually meant that there was little time for a mother-child bond to develop and much time for feelings of emotional deprivation to emerge. Under the relentless pressure of agricultural work, female servants visited their children at infrequent intervals, as Anna Lassachhofer, born in 1920 and raised by foster parents in the mountain community of Mariapfarr in Lungau, writes:

My mother came once a year. She didn't have more time. She always came for a short visit by the Murtal train. With one train she came and with the next she went again. Once she stayed away for five years! ... Most of the time she scolded me: "You didn't tie your shoes and and and [...]" (1992: 97).

Pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing were in many respects incompatible with rural work, and this deeply influenced women's lives.

Spaces of power

Women's work experiences could also be positive. Women worked within a male-dominated society and economy, yet work did not necessarily always mean subordination and discrimination in favour of men. Women could enjoy power and privileges related to work and their position within labour hierarchy –and separating them from other women on the farm.

This may be more obvious for the peasant's wife, who exercised power over the other labouring women (the *Weiberleute*) since she was responsible for the division of labour within the female labour group but also for the women's behaviour. Autobiographical records often refer to the peasant wives' supervision and control of the everyday lives of the *Mägde* and especially their sexual behaviour, forbidding men's visits into their bedrooms; there were usually two dorms, one for female and one for male rural servants known, respectively, as *Mägdekammer* or "*Weiberleutekammer* and *Knechtekammer* or *Männerleutekammer*." In reality, men (peasants' sons and male servants from other households) did visit the female servants in their rooms at night (as attested by the high number of children born out of wedlock), but as Barbara Passrugger, born in 1910 in Pinzgau (Salzburg), notes:

Peasant women made sure that everything was quiet. It was always terrible when something was found out, also in other peasant households. Mother would not have liked it'. When

the nine-year-old Barbara understood what had happened, she decided to be ‘extremely careful’ and not to ‘betray anything’ (1989: 60-61).⁶

Together with their husbands, peasant women formed the ‘peasant couple’, the leading labour group of the household; they slept in separate bedrooms, often ate at a separate table, and held the key for the storeroom where food was kept. Female servants enjoyed spaces of power as well. The most senior-ranked, especially, had pieces of power by custom and also ceded by the peasant couple. The highest female servant, who was responsible for weaning piglets and fattening pigs for slaughter, would be offered the pig’s tail and some of its meat afterwards and would customarily invite the other servants, her co-workers, to share this precious food (Schuster, 1997: 136-137). Before fresh clarified butter was stored, the highest male and female servants had the right to enjoy a glass of it (ibid.: 94). Payment in kind (food, flax, wool, clothes, shoes) mostly meant payment from what was produced on the farm, and this in turn meant that labouring people (among them women) had direct access to the products of their labour.

The most interesting instance of rural women enjoying a privileged position due to work is that of the dairy maids in the alpine pastures, the so-called *Sennerinnen* (Papathanassiou, 2011). Animal husbandry was in many respects the core of rural economies in the eastern Austrian Alps and thus alpine pastures –where animals (mainly cows, but also goats, sheep, and barren animals) moved during the warm months of the year to be fed better– were crucial to the smooth functioning of the peasant household economy. These dairy maids spent the summer in the pastures, away from the peasant house, and were primarily responsible for the pasture economy (herding, usually with the assistance of a young boy, milking, and making cheese and butter). Their responsibility was considerable and they had to be trustworthy since they did not work under the peasant couple’s immediate supervision. Our sources show peasants preferring their daughters and sisters or close to distant kin over strangers (although the latter term may partly refer to distant kin). Preference was also given to older women over younger ones, although girls in their late teens could become *Sennerinnen*, depending on the capacities of the labour market. In ethnographic and autobiographical records *Sennerinnen* appear to have been held in high esteem: they usually had a share in butter and cheese and generally in the products of their labour, more than other rural servants who were more detached from the means of production. Distance from the peasant house meant a sense of freedom and in general a kind of emancipation (including sexual relations) that emerges in former dairy maids’ narratives.

This does not mean that there was no gender discrimination or that employers did not try to control these women. In alpine pastures we find both women *Sennerinnen* as well as men *Senner*. The women were mostly in medium-sized and small non-commercialised alpine pastures like those in the limestone

⁶ Franz Obergottesberger, born in 1895 in Upper Austria (Hausruckviertel), recorded a story he had been told by his grandmother, who had to enter rural service at the age of 12: “ ‘the *Mägde*’ harassed me terribly because once I told the peasant’s wife that men came in their bedroom” (1985: 202).

zone (*Kalkzone*) of the Pingau, in Tirolian Stanzertal, and in Lungau (Keidel, 1936: 48, 53; Moritz, 1956: 30; Dengg, 1926: 19) tending to 15 or 20 cows, while the men laboured in large, commercialised alpine pastures. From this point of view, capitalism and the development of the rural market economy appear to have been a male space of action. Furthermore, there is some scattered evidence that cash payments in Tirol were smaller for *Sennerinnen*, than for *Senner* (Wopfner, 1997: 462-463) and there were efforts by both the Catholic Church and the peasants to control these women through enforced church attendance and confession. Yet the everyday lives of these women for the most part were largely emancipated from employers' and men's domination. As a former *Sennerin* put it:

I admit it was a lot of work, but up there we were free for the first time! I could divide the day myself! Of course one had to look after the time, because of milking. But when you had divided your time well, then it was so nice, when you were ready by the afternoon or by evening! (Draxler, 2003: 112).

Conclusion

Within the peasant and cottager households in rural Austria, in particular in the eastern Austrian Alps – a region with strong pre-industrial, non-commercial characteristics well into the 20th century (the interwar period included)– there was in general ‘a woman’s place’, meaning that women were primarily or exclusively responsible for a group of tasks that constituted a female sphere of labour and that largely required cooperation between women. But there was also ‘a woman’s place’ in the sense that women, on the whole, despite working hard and regardless of work level, shared the experience of gender discrimination –especially in regard to work time, but also to pay.

However, in a society where labour permeated everyday life, women (like men) derived their self-value from labour. Not all were in the same position: peasant women and senior rural servants enjoyed privileges and broad spaces of action. Age was crucial and social class mattered, but the latter did not necessarily affect a woman’s position within the labour hierarchy and thus her practical power. The cases explored here show, as I see it, that historians of female rural labour could –and should– first, look for differences, not only between labouring women and labouring men but also among labouring women and the concomitant power/labour relations; second, use age as an analytical category, taking into account the extent of child labour in rural Europe, which stretched well into the 20th century; third, look for different meanings of social class and not necessarily identify it with social/labour hierarchy; and, fourth, explore women’s spaces of action and thus agency.

Furthermore, on the very level of concrete historical proceedings, scholars could ask to what extent involvement in market economy and the use of technologically advanced agrarian machines was or became a male privilege and, in relation to this, whether and to what extent lack of or delayed commercialisation, dominance of manual work, and self-subsistence made female rural labour indispensable and of much higher value, thus empowering women’s position within the realm of rural labour relations.

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Short CV

Maria Papathanassiou is Associate Professor of Modern European History at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Her research/academic interests lie in the history of work, children, youth, family, gender, the rural world, artisans, migration, material culture and colonialism, with an emphasis on German-speaking Europe from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. She is the author of research books on child labour, rural childhood and on tramping artisans and a textbook on the history of European colonialism. Her publications include articles on the social history of the peasant world in the eastern Austrian Alps and of women in rural Austria.

Σύντομο Βιογραφικό σημείωμα

Η **Μαρία Παπαθανασίου** εργάζεται ως Αναπληρώτρια Καθηγήτρια Νεώτερης Ευρωπαϊκής Ιστορίας στο ΕΚΠΑ. Τα ερευνητικά /ακαδημαϊκά της ενδιαφέροντα εστιάζουν στην ιστορία της εργασίας, των παιδιών, των νέων, της οικογένειας, του φύλου, της αγροτικής υπαίθρου, των τεχνιτών, της μετανάστευσης, του υλικού πολιτισμού και της αποικιοκρατίας, με έμφαση στην γερμανόφωνη Ευρώπη, από τον 18^ο ως τον 20^ό αιώνα. Έχει συγγράψει ερευνητικές μονογραφίες (βιβλία) για την ιστορία της παιδικής εργασίας, την ιστορία των παιδιών στον αγροτικό χώρο και τους περιπλανώμενους μισθωτούς τεχνίτες, καθώς και ένα εγχειρίδιο για την ιστορία της ευρωπαϊκής αποικιοκρατίας. Στις δημοσιεύσεις της περιλαμβάνονται άρθρα για την κοινωνική ιστορία του κόσμου των αγροτών στις ανατολικές αυστριακές Άλπεις και των γυναικών στην αυστριακή ύπαιθρο.