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‘Family, kinship, and domestic work in nineteenth-century England and Wales’

Domestic service was the single largest employer of women in nineteenth-century Britain. Given its sheer scale, women’s labouring experiences in the past cannot be fully appreciated without a thorough understanding of their work in domestic service.

The existing literature duly paid great attentions to the topics such as female servant wage rates, working conditions, and socioeconomic background. In light of this, it is rather surprising that there is still little consensus on the most fundamental issue of exactly how many women were engaged in domestic work in nineteenth-century England and Wales.

This lack of consensus, to a large extent, arises from the uncertainty over a large number of female servants who were related to their ‘employer’ by kinship – for example – a niece recorded as a servant in her uncle’s household in the census. This phenomenon, coined as ‘female kin servant’ was first brought to light by Edward Higgs. Since Higgs’ publications, scholars have used ‘female kin servant’ as a powerful example to demonstrate i) the unreliability of census recording of female employment, and ii) women’s subordinate position in kinship. Few studies attempted to study whether ‘female kin servant’ carries any indication of female relatives’ actual work in domestic service.

This article, using the full sample of 1851 census manuscripts, manages to place the enumeration of ‘female kin servants’ against a wide spectrum of household socioeconomic conditions in nineteenth-century England and Wales. It argues that, contrary to the previous belief, ‘female kin servant’ is not a mis-specification of women’s work. Rather, it indicates three distinctive scenarios. Firstly, a significant proportion of female kin servants were day servants. Secondly, many female kin servants were mostly likely to have carried out work of similar content as classic domestic servants in exchange for lodging and monetary returns. Last but not least, female kin servants’ work was not restricted to domestic realm. Many of them were crucial labourers in the operation of family-based businesses.

Based on the hitherto mentioned results, this article also goes further to provide tentative suggestions on how to reconstruct the number of women working in domestic service. The regression results suggest that at least one million adult women who did not have an occupational descriptors in the census should be counted as participating in the labour force.