



Hidden Economies: Modern Women Between Precarity and Illegality

Ljubljana, January 21, 2026

The workshop, organised as part of the MOONLIGHTING project, will address the issue of irregular, illegal, and precarious work among women between the 19th and 20th centuries. Its aim is to focus on the social, economic, and cultural characteristics of unstable women's labour during periods of war and post-war, but also in times of peace, to better understand the forms of continuity and discontinuity that shaped female occupations such as domestic work, retail trade, prostitution, and smuggling.

The north-eastern Adriatic region, where the Germanic, Romance, and Slavic worlds converge, offers a privileged vantage point for studying women's cross-border economic activities and the relationship between countryside and urban centres. Historically, the region has also been the site of many illicit forms of paid work, arising from the volatility of political borders and state sovereignties, as well as from the deep political and economic divide between the Western capitalist and Eastern socialist worlds during the Cold War. The thematic structure of the proposed project addresses these issues along three main axes:

- domestic work and retail trade
- prostitution and trafficking
- black market and smuggling

The first axis concerns forms of labour that were only loosely regulated during the observed period. Both, domestic work and retail trade entered the sphere of the informal economy but also created a space for women's autonomous action, social integration, and exploitation. Retail trade was primarily carried out by rural and suburban women farmers, whose work contributed to the survival of poor peasant families or of populations experiencing the disintegration of traditional peasant society in rural and suburban areas. In addition to women farmers, members of the lower classes were also employed as paid domestic servants.



The second axis focuses on prostitution and the sex trade, which lay at the core of women's illegal and undocumented work. These activities encompassed a wide spectrum of issues such as migration, patriarchal power structures, and clandestine labour conditions. The borderland areas of the north-eastern Adriatic constituted zones of smuggling and trafficking which, throughout the *longue durée*, became intertwined with gendered discourses of supply and demand, ranging from the so-called "maid question" to contemporary debates on organised crime in the *senza confini* area.

The third axis examines black-market activity and smuggling, which were closely linked to wartime conditions and to various forms of socio-political instability during peacetime, including early post-war eras, economic crises, international tensions, and political shifts. They were strongly connected to the illegal cross-border activities of mobile segments of the border population. Studies and sources indicate that women played a significant role, not least because they were often perceived as "less likely" to engage in such illicit practices. In times of crisis, smuggling was also facilitated within productive enterprises, as workers stole factory products to sell on the black market or to exchange for other goods.

The workshop will prioritise the latest research methodologies and theoretical frameworks that, within historiography and beyond, address the history of irregular, illegal, and precarious work. Contributions on other comparable topics along the proposed three axes are also welcome. We are particularly interested in an interdisciplinary exchange of knowledge concerning the political, legal, and broader social context, considering systemic, collective, and biographical perspectives.

The workshop will be conducted in English.

Organizing committee:

Marta Verginella, Urška Strle, Teresa Bertilotti, Dagmar Wernitznig

Submissions are invited in the form of a short **abstract** (up to 1,000 characters) and a brief **biographical note** (up to 500 characters) to the following address: urska.strle@zrc-sazu.si by **November 7**.