



OUT OF SIGHT AND OVER HERE

FOREIGN FEMALE DOMESTIC SERVANTS IN LONDON 1880–1939



OLIVIA ROBINSON

CONTEXT

There were c.12,000 foreign-born female domestic servants in the 1911 population census, with just under half living in London. Barely mentioned in the literature, they are occasionally referred to as an exotic minority or being engaged in specialist roles such as cooks and lady's maids for elite families. My research shows that neither description adequately addresses the wide variation in social, occupational and ethnic backgrounds of the servants or those who employed them. My research aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the motivations, challenges and achievements of migrant female domestic servants in Britain. Hidden both in the literature and by the nature of their work, it will give a voice to this highly marginalised group and uncover diversities in their experiences according to gender, class, race, nationality and age. Arriving alone, unmarried and separated from family and community, where did they come from and why did they come? Who hired them and how were they treated? And what do their work experiences tell us about the wider role of domestic service in global networks?

HOW TO SOLVE THE SERVANT PROBLEM.

Householders Strongly Advised to Try Foreign Domestic.

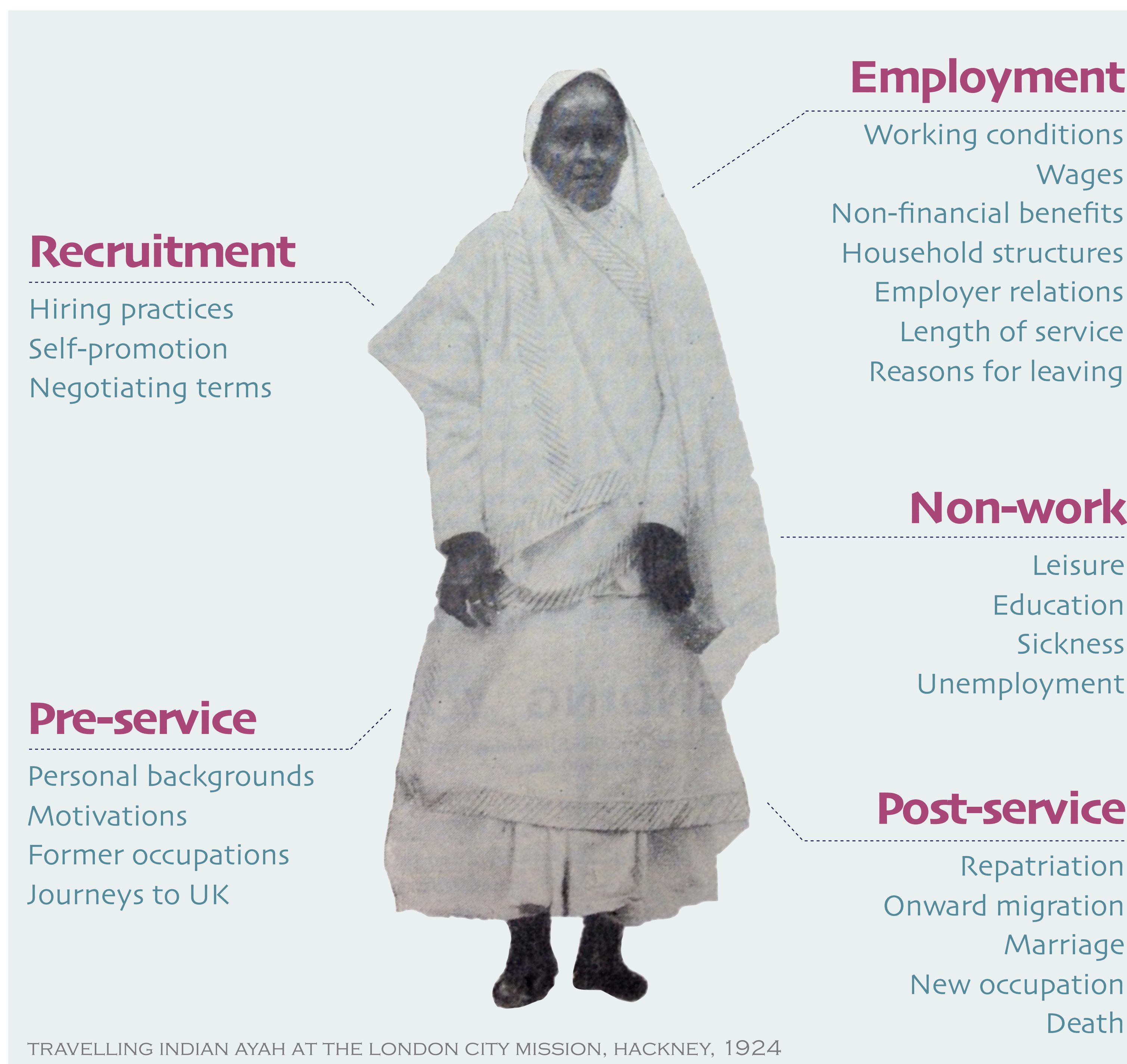
DAILY MIRROR, 10 SEP 1906

GATHERING EVIDENCE

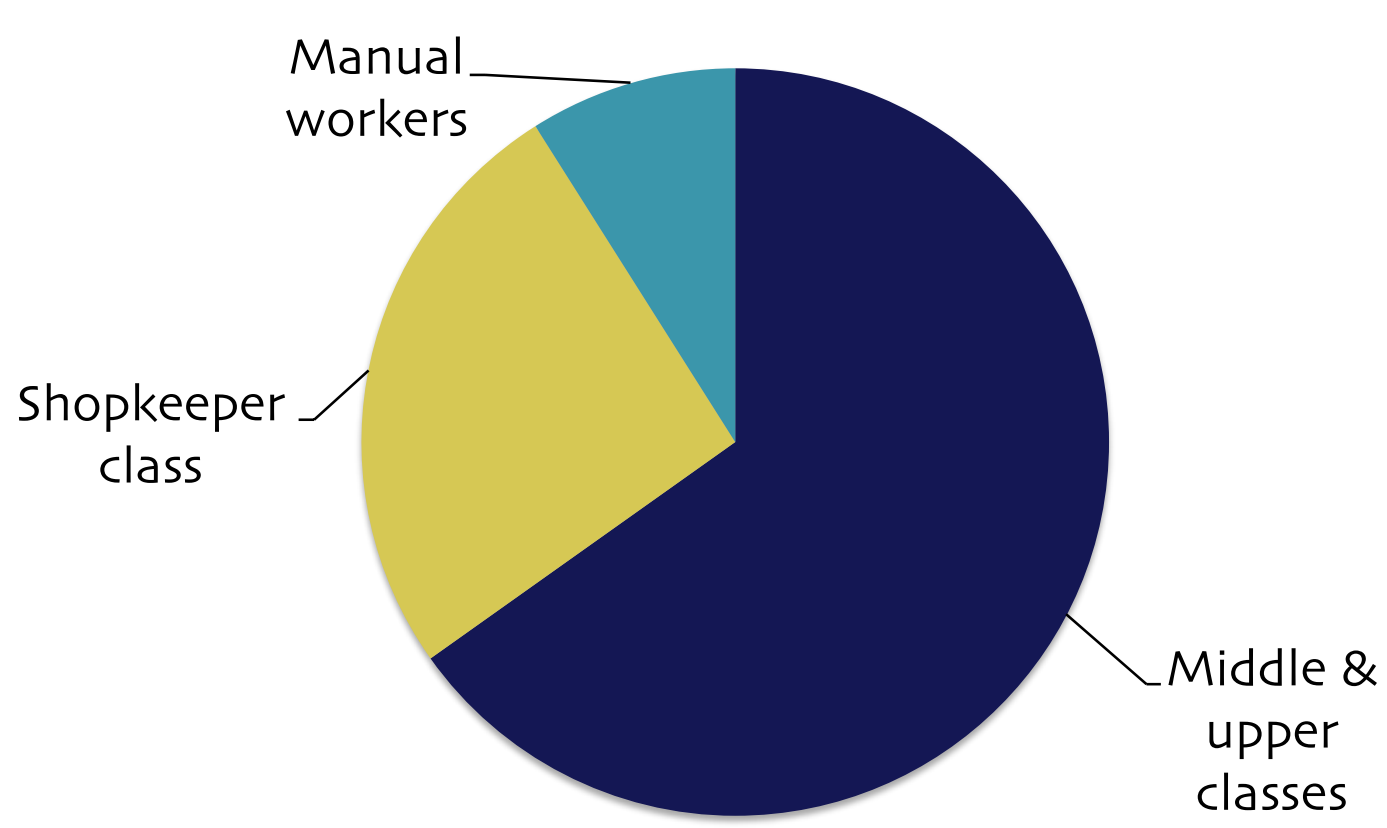
Avoiding the trap of examining female migrant workers as passive victims with no history, I am using a five-point employment framework (illustrated) to capture women's experiences before, during and after service. I draw on data from the population censuses, newspaper advertisements, genealogy records, and case correspondence held by government and charitable organisations established in the nineteenth century to support domestic servants and migrants in London.

INITIAL WORK

I have done some preliminary quantitative analysis by taking a 10% sample of the 1911 London census, transcribing 600 household schedules containing at least one foreign female servant. Demographic data was captured for the servants and the household heads, including birthplaces, ages, occupations (coded into 'class' categories) and household structure. Some key results, which generate questions of their own, are shared below and will be expanded upon as the project progresses.



PRELIMINARY FINDINGS



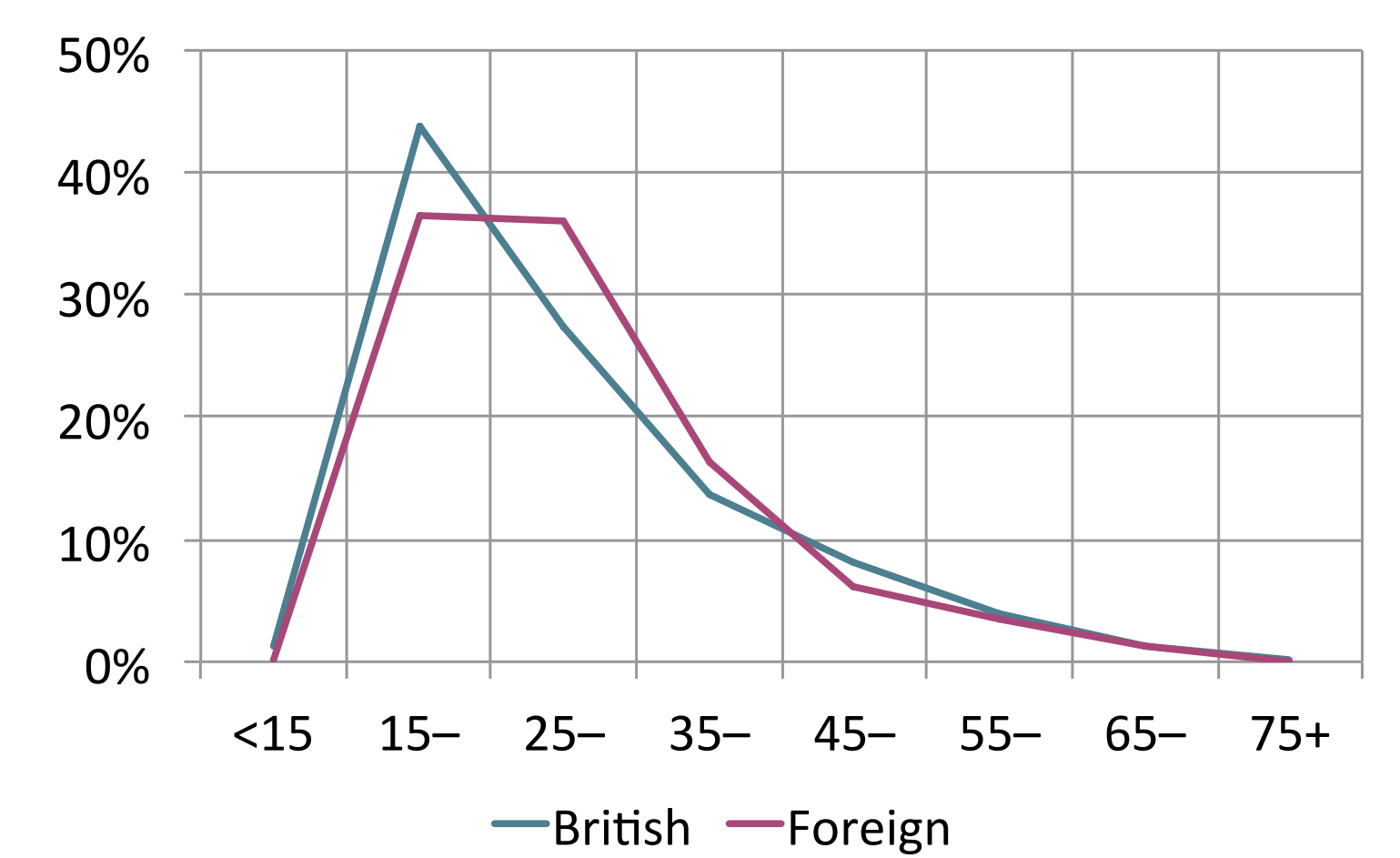
Class of household head

EMPLOYER CLASS

Far from being the sole preserve of elite families, over a third of the foreign servants sampled worked for working-class heads of households.

SERVANT AGES

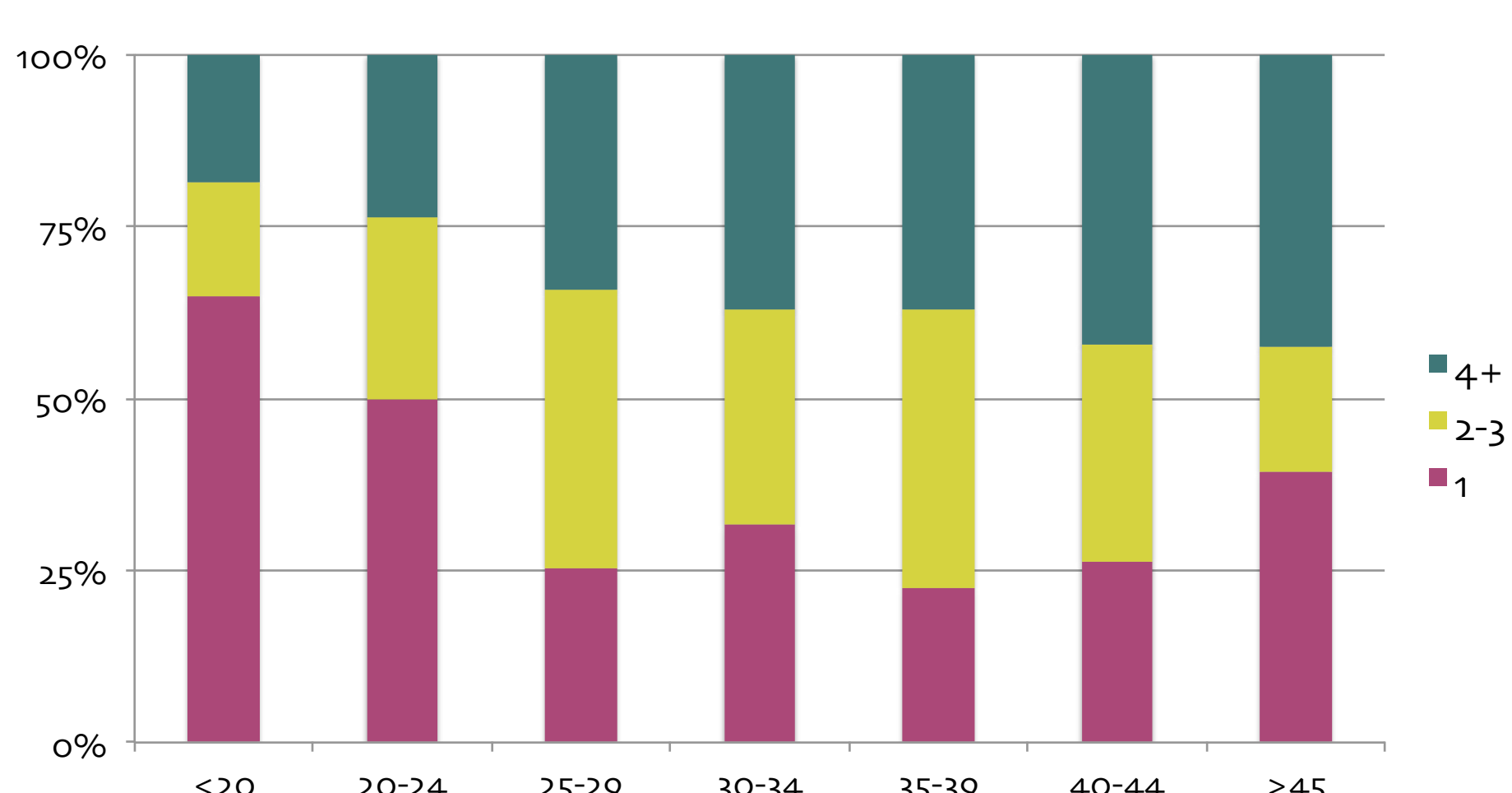
Foreign servants were more likely to stay on in service beyond the age of 25, unlike their British counterparts, suggesting a different lifecycle pattern.



Age distribution among London female servants

EMPLOYER HOUSEHOLDS

Foreign servants experienced different household structures according to the gender of the household head, servant nationality and age: while younger women were more likely to be employed in single-servant homes, the proportion in large households increased with age.



Proportion of household staff sizes by servant ages

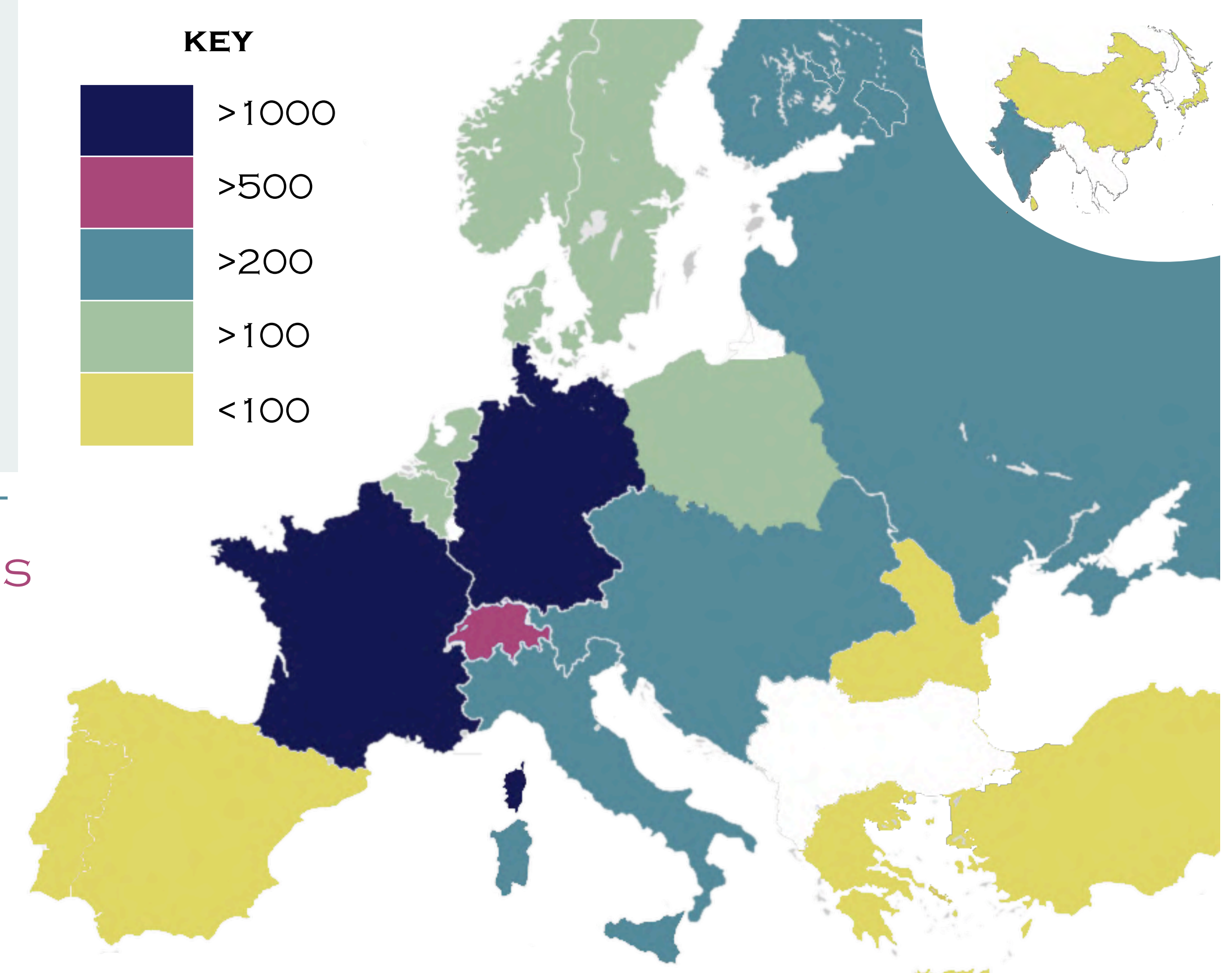
Using the experiences of foreign female domestic servants from 1880–1939, this project explores which social attitudes towards 'otherness' shaped the servants' lives in Britain and how they turned these experiences to their own strategic advantage, linking London sculleries with global networks of movement and cultural exchange.

EMPLOYER NATIONALITY

Though the British were the largest nationality employer, more than 60% of household heads were born overseas in one of 43 countries.

SERVANT ORIGINS

Nationalities were prevalent in certain job types indicating patterns of employment along racial lines.



Foreign female servants in London: stated country of birth Source: 1911 census report

THOUGHTS, SUGGESTIONS, FEEDBACK?

olivia.robinson@history.ox.ac.uk | www.oliviaronbinson.co.uk