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Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: eWork and Gender Issues

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Introduction

This paper examines the differential impact of eWork on male and female workers in North America. Telemediated or 'eWork' refers to labour that involves processing information that can be transmitted by a telecommunications link. The research employs an analytical framework that captures how the intersection of gender, class, ethnicity and citizenship mediate the impact of eWork developments for residents of Canada. The frame-work allows for the identification of social groups particularly at risk of social exclusion amidst the new patterns of employment that are emerging in the global information society, while also illuminating new opportunities for women and other groups presently disadvantaged in the labour market.

This paper explores the intersections between capitalist logic and patriarchal practice, the interplay of class formation, gender stratification, and ethnicity, and the linkage between the individual, family, state and global restructuring. The data for this paper is drawn from an investigation of two distinct groups of eWorkers: employed professionals who eWork and call center workers. Though much of this data derives from a North American context, the findings have implications in other locales as the rationale for, and material conditions of, eWork have common roots.

eWork is differentiated from telework, typified as work performed with the help of information and communication technologies, often located at a distance from a main office site. While telework in Canada, and telecommuting in the US, has come to mean highly skilled professionals hooked-up electronically to their corporate offices, often working at home or at a mobile worksite usually on a part-time basis, eWork encompasses a much larger range of working relationships including call and data processing centers.

While a number of stakeholders have placed high hopes on the emergence of telework as a planning solution to traffic management problems, as a way for businesses to cut costs, increase productivity, provide a new benefit to employees that relieves stressful commutes and as a way to gain the flexibility they need to cope with family obligations, and rural communities see telework as a potential strategy for environmentally friendly, economic development, eWork is more mixed in its impact (Handy and Mokhtarian 1995; Ellen and Hempstead 2002). One of the most disquieting corollaries has been the reinforcement of inequalities in employment status and income between the genders.

A consequence of the shrinking of the welfare state and the spread of flexible production techniques has been growing social polarization. This is largely based on the relative decline in the bargaining power of labour to capital and the subsequent bifurcation of the labour force into a small number of "good jobs" (i.e., secure, long-term, well paying, unionized jobs) and a much larger number of "poor jobs" (i.e., part-time, part-year, low paying jobs without benefits and unionization) (Duffy, Pupay and Glenday 1997). Many of the latter, in the flexible or floating labour force of domestic workers, independent contractors, call centre workers and agricultural workers, are a sizeable percentage of workers world wide and are rapidly increasing in the North. Most of those are women.

Gender, Technology and Economic Restructuring

Franklin (1999) and Haraway (1990), two noted feminist theorists of technology, argue that technology must be understood as embedded in a social practice and in structure of social relations. Rather than taking a technological determinist stance that obscures a gender and class analysis, a feminist analysis locates technology, and work such as eWork dependent upon technology, within the framework of differing social and labour relationships that impact an individual's economic and information resources, as well as temporal and spatial constraints imposed by their household responsibilities.

A critical factor in the analysis of eWork is who has control of the information (i.e., who sends information to whom) and how can the technologies be manipulated. The activities generated by information technologies are part of larger societal processes. Some of these numerous modes of electronic communication between individuals, corporations, and the global society allow for decentralized information gathering and decision-making, while others reinforce centralized and hierarchical structures. Activity patterns depend upon an individual's economic and information resources, and on the temporal and spatial constraints imposed on him or her.

The emergence of the World Wide Web in 1993 led to a whole new set of relationships to technology. Even those in the 1980s who saw computerization as a threat to job loss, increased automation of tasks and decline in the quality of work, especially for women, welcomed the Web's communication potential to make information accessible and create communities of like-minded people across a wide geographical area. Women were encouraged to embrace the new technologies as a way of leveling the playing field and extending their already well developed abilities to communicate. In just a few years, however, it is now mainly seen for its potential in creating and sustaining economic growth.

International studies have noted that women generally have been affected differently than men by the fluid economic and social landscape of the restructuring that has been occurring world-wide (Aslanbeigui, Pressman and Summerfield 1994). Economic restructuring has been identified as a cause of the breakdown of the family unit, leaving an increasing number of women as sole provider for their children. The reduction in the value of wages and increasing male unemployment has meant that more married women are entering the work force as supplementary or sole income earners. Women tend to make up the majority of public sector employees and they have been the most impacted by lay-offs associated with structural adjustment programs. Consequently, women have had to bear a disproportionate amount of the paid work, and unpaid domestic work, to maintain their households.

The "feminization of labour" involves both an increase of women in the labour force and an increase in flexible employment practices such as part-time, seasonal, and casual work (Fudge 1991). Rather than the increase in labour participation eroding the sexual division of labour, it is consolidating it. Economic restructuring is also creating more traditionally "women's work" such as sales and service sector jobs. This category employs 3.7 million workers, or 26% of the total employed – of which two-thirds are women (Statistics Canada 1996). Given the precarious employment future it is men who are now going into this employment sector, rarely are women making inroads into traditionally male employment. Between 1991 and 1996 male participation increased in all of the lower paid traditional female occupations (such as clerking, food and beverage, cashiers, childcare workers and secretaries) while women showed no signs of integrating into the highly skilled and well-paid jobs in the trades.

Labour flexibility is not a new phenomenon created by the use of information technologies, but rather, non-standard and flexible work arrangements are integrally linked with inequalities based on race, gender, and immigrant status (Vosko 2000). Castells (1996) argues that it is their

flexibility as workers that has resulted in the expansion of women's employment. This flexibility in schedules, and entry and exit from the labour market, has resulted in women constituting the bulk of part-time and temporary employment, and for a significant share of self-employment. Further articulated by Castells, the type of worker required for the "informational, networked economy fits the survival interests of women who, under the conditions of patriarchy, seek to make compatible work and family with little help from their husbands" (Ibid.:173). Nevertheless, this flexibility is at a cost in stretched time and resources (Hochschild 1989).

Profiles

eWork in Canada has to be looked at critically and in relation to other forces that are acting in society. It reflects both the globalizing force of work practices and the localizing of those practices in daily life patterns. It is both a strategy by government and institutions to create a more "footloose" employment structure and an approach by individuals to create more control over their work life. Gender becomes important in understanding the experiences of eWorkers because gender differences are prevalent in their employment status. In North America, the numbers of professional teleworker employees are not that large while self-employed entrepreneurs and independent contractors who exclusively use information technologies are extensive. The following analysis of eWork patterns uncovers a portrait of workers' employment and domestic strategies in that context.

Data on all forms of eWork in North America are sketchy but there is a reported increase in home-based and non-home-based telework in North America. Helling (2000) estimates that in the US this comprises 16.7% of the workforce of which half are telecommuters who have a non-home primary workplace and work at home at least eight hours every two weeks. In Canada, Statistics Canada does not report data on telework separate from home-based work but the 1996 Census did reveal that all forms of home-based work had increased 40 percent from 600,000 in 1991 to one million in 1997 (Statistics Canada 1997). Most of that increase was attributed to telework. Telework employees are a small percentage of the entire workforce while the rise in self-employment has been phenomenal. Between 1989 and 1997, self-employment contributed 79.4 percent of job growth in Canada (Monthly Labour Review 1999). Of the new businesses created in Canada that are sole proprietorships, most have started from home and comprise the use of information technologies either for creation or marketing of goods and services. Women entrepreneurs comprise a significant portion of new business formation.

While there has been growth in Canada in employment for the high paying "knowledge workers," low paying jobs are equally being created in the sales and service sector such as call centre workers acting as agents or telephone service representatives working over the telephone. There is unreliable data on the industry in Canada and elsewhere but generally the consensus is that it is currently one of the fastest growing in the country (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000). A 1998 Price Waterhouse Coopers Study referred to in the Buchanan and Koch-Schulte report estimated that in Canada there are approximately 6,500 call centres, employing approximately 330,000 workers, many of those who work part-time and are women. Close to half of those centres are in Ontario, 28% are in the West, 19% in Quebec and 5% in Atlantic Canada.

Employed Teleworkers

Teleworkers employed by companies are often highly skilled, upper-middle class professionals with financial resources and flexibility in employment. These teleworkers work away from the employer's office or production facility, often in employees' own homes, usually on a part-time

basis (i.e., part-time at home and part-time in an office), using telecommunications and information technologies to communicate with their offices. Their main reason for opting for such a work situation (unless they have been pushed by their employer) is work flexibility and they appreciate the control over their time that telework affords them. However, they are only a small segment of eWorkers.

Some corporations who recognize the loss of productivity due to the stress and burnout of working conditions have pursued avenues to inspire workers. Telework programs, in which employees work at home part-time, began to be actively promoted by organizations as an incentive to keep workers motivated. Following upon pilot projects developed in the USA and Europe (JALA Associates, 1990; European Foundation, 1995), a number of pilot telework projects for employees of Canadian government agencies and private sector corporations were introduced in the early 1990s and were subsequently evaluated. The studies found that the flexibility and freedom of telework enhances worker productivity. Armstrong-Stassen, Solomon and Templay (1998) quantified this to as much as a fifteen to twenty percent increase in productivity. They further rationalized that telework may be used as a response to downsizing as "...telework is an innovative and integrative way to preserve jobs while reducing organizational costs" (14). Though these telework pilot projects appeared to be highly successful, they were few in number and even fewer have survived as a long term strategy. It was found that managers felt uncomfortable with managing remote workers and the government agencies and corporations who were involved in these telework pilot projects have since further retrenched their organizations laying off many more workers.

Women and men seem to participate in telework programs at comparable rates. A Canadian-wide survey on telework and home-based employment (Gurstein 1995) found that 61% of the public sector teleworkers (i.e., those who work for a public institution or crown corporation) and 47% of the private sector teleworkers (i.e., those who work for a private corporation) were female. In contrast, 81% of the independent contractors and 58% of home-based business operators were female, while only 38% of the self-employed consultants were female. The presence of more women in public sector telework programs is primarily due to their strong presence in public sector employment.

Independent Contractors

Low-paid workers are being hired as pieceworkers in a variety of occupations from data processing to garment making. These workers are predominantly women, and typically hired on a part-time or temporary basis, and often work in their homes. They are called independent contractors because they are not on a regular payroll and work on a contract, temporary or piece-rate basis. However, they are often treated as employees since they work for only one company, work on materials provided by the company, and are often directly supervised by the company. Nevertheless, they frequently have no guarantee of regular hours, no employee benefits, and few opportunities for advancement within the company. Since they are hired on a piecework basis and must fill quotas, their long work hours interfere with their family responsibilities. If they work at home, because of spatial constraints, they work in spaces intended for other uses. They usually operate entirely out of the mainstream of the company. As a result, they often work in isolation.

Call centre workers most often work in an office because of employers' need for close supervision and because the technologies (i.e., telephone linked with a computer) are there but sometimes in their homes, mostly on a non-standard temporary, part-time and/or contractual basis. The type of services they provide and their relationship to the consumer differentiates call centres. Inbound centres provide customer service and support (i.e., internet and long-distance support and sales,

financial and banking services, hotel and airline reservations, and dispatching) while outbound centres do sales and marketing (i.e., telemarketing, survey market research, and charity fundraising) (Ibid.). Outbound centres are the most stress inducing for the workers because they require doing "cold calls," which can be met by resistance by the consumer, while at inbound centres it is the consumer who is contacting them for assistance. Inbound centres are relatively "good jobs" as they are usually in customer service departments of large corporations, and workers are more likely to be employed on a permanent, full-time basis and earn more than workers in outbound centres. Outbound centers often fit the profile of "bad jobs" as they tend to have non-standard contracts and there is a high turnover rate in these centres due to stress, burnout and poor working conditions.

While the jobs require a high degree of skill in interpersonal communication and customer service, call centres are now being typified as the "sweatshops of the nineties" because they are low paying, offer few opportunities for career enhancement, are closely monitored and are highly stressful. Little recognition of these issues has been made when economic development plans are being formulated. Some provinces in Canada, most notably New Brunswick, are basing their government's entire industrial strategy on the promotion and retention of call centres.

Call centres servicing North American customers have been developed in rural areas, in prisons and convents as well as offshore in the Caribbean and Asia (Belt and Richardson 2000). These centres are predominantly staffed by women who work on contract to their employers on an hourly or piece rate basis. A study of call centre workers across Canada found that an average of 70 – 72% of all workers in all sites were women and that a high proportion of call centre employees are youth (under 29 years old) and recent immigrants (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000).

In addition to call centers, back-offices have been created in a variety of locales in North America away from the central corporate headquarters. Many such offices have been developed in suburban communities to tap the large number of educated female suburban homemakers who want to return to work. These back offices primarily process data processing such as insurance claims. The kind of work that is located in these centres rarely offer opportunities to rise in the corporate ladder, the supervisory structure of the corporation is not altered, and the workers are often independent contractors.

Gender and the Knowledge-Based Economy

Placing gender considerations at the centre of the analysis of the knowledge-based economy reveals several critical insights. Vosko (2000) in her analysis of the "global feminization of employment" has found that while women's formal labour force participation has risen globally, increasing women's existing workload of unpaid or informal work, the existing gendered division of reproductive labour (the unpaid household work) has not been transformed. In addition, women predominate in casual, part-time and temporary labour increasing income and occupational polarization between the genders. Call center work illustrate this analysis clearly as it reinforces gender polarization and segmentation of labour markets while devaluing reproductive work.

Employment flexibility in this context can have precarious impacts. Independent contractors are not part of the romanticized media portrayal of the middle class teleworker or consultant working out of a "home office." Instead, these workers represent a labour market characterized by a feminization of the work force, extremely low wages, irregular work loads, inadequate and often stressful work conditions, virtually no protection of rights or access to social benefits, and the double burden of paid work and household responsibilities including childcare. Much of these

conditions are attributable to the weakness of the eWorker's bargaining power given their low levels of socio-economic status linked to class, gender and ethnicity, combined with the growing "casualisation" of work (associated with the "floating" or "flexible" labour force) within global economic restructuring. For the ethnic minority population of eWorkers their ethnicity compounds their vulnerability due to discrimination from the dominant culture, language barriers and patriarchal practices within their own cultures.

While clearly employed teleworkers have significant advantages over other workers in terms of flexibility and control over their time and resources, there is a very real danger that conditions similar to those found for call centre workers could be perpetuated on this group as well, especially as they become vulnerable to a change in status to independent contractors when they work at home. However, the supporting evidence suggests that highly-skilled information workers because of their skill level are at an advantage in the flexible labour market as they are portable and can easily move employment (Carnoy, Castells and Benner 1997) while the low-skilled information workers (predominately women) are not as portable making them vulnerable to exploitation (Pearson and Mitter 1993).

Policy Implications

What are the wider implications for an understanding of the role that gender plays in global economic restructuring and its impact on social exclusion and social policy? While governments in many jurisdictions see positive attributes to the employment created by call centres, among other knowledge-based industries, rarely do they see the consequences of these initiatives in reinforcing a polarized labour force. Government employment creation needs to develop strategies in concert with employers and employees that recognize that the quality of the jobs is as important as the quantity. Any strategy would need to be multi-faceted to recognize the scope and the complexities of the flexible workplace. To further this understanding a redefinition of the workplace would have to be proposed in concert with new forms of co-operation between the various actors in the knowledge-based economy, skill development, a reevaluation of employment and contractual relations, and a recognition of the risks of stress and diminished well-being that eWork might produce.

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