

The Cottage or the Sweatshop?

Gender and Home-Based Work on the Information Highway

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between women's everyday experiences with home-based information work and relevant structural contexts. In particular, while analysing the problems with this form of work, the possibility that women may use such situations to pose challenges to the status quo is also explored. The research summarized in this paper was supported in part by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowship

1. INTRODUCTION

The information highway has augmented the feasibility of doing paid information work from our homes. As Heather Menzies writes of the new technological environment,

“...global computer-communications have created a new digital environment where work, which had been materially grounded in paper, filing cabinets, etc., becomes immaterial and mobile. This permits...the de-institutionalization of work and its re-constitution anywhere there is a compatible computer system and modem. The information highway [is] crucial to this new decentralization of work under centralized supervision” [12, p.105-106].

The new ‘immateriality’ and ‘mobility’ of information work, via digital networks, introduces the potential for computerised work to be centred in the home. Such computerised work arrangements offer the possibility for both a spatial and temporal intersection of paid work with its unpaid counterpart, a phenomenon that presents both promises and problems for women.

Nearly two decades ago, Alvin Toffler coined the term ‘electronic cottage’ and predicted a “return to cottage industry on a new, higher, electronic basis, and with it a new emphasis on the home as the centre of society” [19, p.210]. Worker alienation, monotony on the job, poor wages and overspecialisation would become obsolete due to the increased autonomy which individuals would achieve. The positive popular representations of flexible, autonomous home-based information work embody the promise of Toffler’s electronic cottage and present us with a particular “story about the world” [19].

The contrasting story is that of the “online sweatshop.” (I use this term as a modified version of Barbara Garson’s “electronic sweatshop” [6].) In a striking Canadian example of the online sweatshop, Audrey Down [3] writes of her experiences with home-based piecework writing abstracts of newspaper and magazine articles. Regarding this work, she recounts that,

For pieceworkers, there are no off days. If we take longer than usual to do our hourly quota and fall behind, that’s our problem. We receive instructions, ask questions, go to the toilet, get a cup of coffee -- even blow our noses -- all on our own time. There is no downtime for the employer. The company only has to pay for the finished product [3].

It was with the two contrasting images, the electronic cottage and the online sweatshop, in mind that I began my research. I was sceptical of the highly optimistic popular images of the electronic cottage as well as those in much of the flexible specialisation and post-Fordist literature regarding new ways of structuring work. A more critical, even neo-Fordist, perspective seemed to indicate that the on-line sweatshop is a reality, possibly even the dominant experience of home-based information workers. I sought to identify the problems behind the popular promises as well as to explore any potential for home-based work to present challenges to the status quo with respect to paid (and unpaid) labour. The project examined the impact of differences in gender, occupational status, family situation, as well as between employees and independents or self-employed workers. This paper summarises the gender analysis within the study.

2. THE RESEARCH

This project involved meetings with 24 women and 14 men. I interviewed 23 independents and 15 employees from the private and public sector. Both the independents and the employees included clerical, technical, and professional workers. The goal was to add to existing knowledge about home-based information work by describing and analysing a *range* of home-based work experiences.

In order to analyse my findings in a manner sensitive to differences of gender, I relied in part upon Leah Vosko's [20] analysis of women's paid work and her efforts to extend analysis of employment relationships beyond labour market criteria to include important variables such as "social infrastructure, household structure and geographic conditions" as well as "child care and elder care requirements, physical distance between the home and the workplace, the number of breadwinners cohabiting within a household and the distribution of income among household members" [20, p.36]. This approach is a potentially rich basis for analysing the experiences of contemporary workers by considering workers' conditions of *existence*, rather than conditions of work alone, thereby taking a "fuller view of the economy" [20, p.38].

3. CONDITIONS OF WORK? OF EXISTENCE?

Three aspects of everyday experiences with home-based work which separate the participants quite clearly along gender lines (cutting across both independents and employees) involve the division of domestic labour within the home, the ways in which child care arrangements are handled, and whether or not the paid work is being done full-time or part-time.

I asked my participants about their role(s) in domestic labour in the home -- both what proportion of it they perform and when they do it. With the exception of one man who reports doing all of the house-work and cooking, the woman in the household either described herself or was described as doing 'half,' or 'most' or 'all' of the unpaid domestic work in the household. In some cases, where the work is seen as fairly evenly split between two partners, the woman is described, in Leanne's words, as "doing more of the tedious stuff." This is consistent with the most recent Canadian Census findings in which twenty-four per cent of women report spending between 15 and 29 hours per week on housework or home maintenance, while 14.3 per cent of men put themselves in the same category [18]. Additionally, comparing home-based workers to others, the 1996 Census data shows that the gender difference is exacerbated when individuals work from home [13]. An earlier survey also shows that even among full-time, dual-income couples women were still primarily responsible for housework, with only ten per cent of couples sharing responsibilities and another ten per cent in which the husband does most or all of the domestic work [16].

The timing of unpaid domestic work done by my participants is also noteworthy. Regardless of what proportion of this work they report doing, men tend to try to keep domestic work, and even child care in many cases, separate from their paid work activities. On the other hand, many women,

although not all, explain that they intersperse many activities with their paid work. These might include putting on laundry, light cleaning, grocery shopping while delivering or picking up work at clients' offices, putting supper on, etc. This is consistent with research studies done by others [2, 15, 7]. Moreover, when child care is also involved in the mix, many of the women I spoke with who intersperse all three -- paid work, housework and child care -- actually do a considerable amount of their paid work in the evenings in order to handle all of their responsibilities.

Seventeen of the women I interviewed and six of the men have children under 18 years of age living with them. Of these, seven of the women and four of the men have at least one pre-schooler. A clear gender difference emerges from our discussions about the ways each of them reconciles childcare with their paid activities. Among the women, 12 of them report regularly doing some of their paid work in the evenings after their children are in bed. In cases where the children are cared for by someone else during the day, the total number of evening hours is not as high as for those who are trying to look after their children themselves [2]. However, even when the children are cared for by someone else, often within the home, there are more interruptions in the day which translate into paid work left over into the evening. And, while many home-based workers, particularly independents, work evenings due to heavy workloads, the women I spoke with often faced this requirement as well as the desire and/or need to spend daytime hours with their children. None of the six men with children report working evenings as a strategy that accommodates child care duties. This finding is consistent with what feminist work on the subject of domestic labour has argued that:

“Women may take on paid work, get help from relatives and other children or from paid substitutes, but asleep or awake, in sickness and in health, in the labour force or at home, most women still retain the primary responsibility for the children” [1, p.114].

Thus, given such a political-economic context (including, although beyond the scope of this paper, the inadequacy of child care policy in Canada), the possibilities presented by home-based work which purport to ‘ease’ this burden should be examined carefully. As one participant observed, “women are now being told they can somehow do it all -- *simultaneously*.”

One of the strategies which some of the women I met with are using to deal with the range of expectations placed upon them is the adoption of *part-time* paid work. As Ann Duffy and Norene Pupo have argued, what are most often considered ‘choices’ to work part-time must be seen as being made within the context of labour market structures, job opportunities, child care

availability, family power structures, division of domestic labour, financial need, and individual skills and training [4]. Their careful examination of the interconnectedness of the spheres involved leads Duffy and Pupo to argue that part-time work is both promise and problem in that it could launch a challenge to traditional conceptions of work and gender or it could solidify existing inequalities [4, p.39, 259]. Just as Duffy and Pupo suggest, the women I met with have all chosen from among, to varying degrees, limited options. However, the fact that the work is part-time *from home*, may reinforce the potential for inequalities. For women such as Hillary, who acknowledges her own position of privilege and who has a high degree of training and marketability as a chartered accountant, her choice gives her increased control over the various spheres of her life without placing her in a vulnerable or overly-precarious position. On the other hand, women with whom I met such as those who do clerical work, often at piece rates, would appear to be choosing from considerably more limited options. If it is the case, as Duffy and Pupo suggest, that part-time work is a “privatized solution to women’s structural location” within the socio-economy which leaves intact patriarchy, power structures and family form [4, p.77, 81], then *home-based*, part-time work is at risk of being doubly so.

4. CHALLENGES TO THE STATUS QUO?

In spite of the issues identified through my analysis, I was also struck by how many of my participants expressed their satisfaction with certain aspects of home-based information work. For women in particular, this related to what might be considered a renegotiation of the status quo with respect to the historical, socially constructed dichotomy between paid work and home life [11]. While some studies have shown that home-based workers strive to maintain the division between work and home [14], in my research many individuals are seeking to find ways to make the two complement one another better through this new temporal and spatial intersection of paid and unpaid work.

Home-based information work might be seen as containing a potential challenge to the status quo as it is expressed in the public-private divide (in terms of paid labour being considered ‘public’ and done outside the home (predominantly by men), and unpaid labour constituting the ‘private’ realm in which women are expected to perform most or all duties, regardless of whether they also do paid work outside the home). As women attempt to do paid work from home and to better co-ordinate this with either looking after children directly or simplifying the childcare arrangements they have, some of the stress related to the two may be reduced. At one level, this might be

seen as a mere *accommodation* of these expectations, but I wish to argue that it might also be seen as a form of *rejection* of the need to separate the two spheres, a rejection of the legitimacy of the public-private divide. Or, as Phizacklea and Wolkowitz put it, such a choice made by women constitutes a refusal “to accept male working patterns for themselves” [15, p.83]. However, although women may challenge the legitimacy of the public-private divide in this manner, the same authors also note that it is only once work done in the home, both paid and unpaid, becomes truly *visible* that home-based work will present a challenge to the public-private divide. At present there remains considerable risk that, especially for women, paid work performed in the home may be ‘privatised’ rather than unpaid labour becoming more ‘public.’ This invisibility of work done in the home also relates to the second level at which the public-private divide is relevant to home-based work -- the gendered social relations of the home in which women are understood to do the unpaid work and men to do the paid work. When men work from home, they typically do not use this opportunity to take on more unpaid labour, although they certainly could. For women home-based workers to experience genuine flexibility within their situations, they need more progressive options from which to choose, including more equitable sharing of domestic labour and childcare.

In spite of the communication potential of information-communication technologies pointed to by a number of researchers [23, 5], none of the women I spoke with are working collectively, either online or otherwise, with other home-based workers to better their conditions of work or of existence. As individuals become more and more isolated in a fragmented work force, the issue of protecting conditions of work is critical; unions are very concerned about this issue, since a fragmented labour force is extremely difficult to organise [8, 9, 10, 21]. And, as one participant explained to me, the sense of competition among home-based independents who are very concerned about having enough work means that individual workers may be pitted against one another perhaps more than ever. However, there is nonetheless still reason for optimism regarding the potentialities of electronic communication as a means of improving the lot of home-based workers. Particularly as more and more of these individuals become connected to the Internet, more comfortable with the technology, and more concerned about their conditions of existence, the opportunities for making connections to discuss issues of mutual concern will grow.

5. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

My analysis of women's experiences with home-based information work reveals that this arrangement is neither the post-Fordist electronic cottage nor the neo-Fordist on-line sweatshop but, rather, a phenomenon in paid work that typically involves a complex and contradictory set of individual negotiations and compromises made within the context of larger structures and forces. The flexibility sought by women who decide to do paid information work from home generally involves increased control over the management of their own paid work and, very importantly, additional control over the relationship between that paid work and their family life. This form of work *could* launch a challenge to rigidly structured paid work as experienced since the advent of the centralised workplace, and, perhaps even more importantly for women, traditional conceptions of the public-private divide, including those related to paid work being seen as a public issue and the domestic sphere as merely private, a situation which has long made for gendered social relations at both levels.

However, for all the women I met with, the overall flexibility achieved is considerably constrained by a combination of: a) prevailing economic and labour market conditions, b) certain aspects of the organisational and/or public policy context, and c) private negotiations within households. When individual experiences are viewed in the context of wider structures, home-based information work must be understood as, in many cases, a *privatisation* of many public policy issues (such as unemployment, underemployment, and child care) as well as the reinforcement of the private nature of certain more general social issues (including the division of unpaid domestic labour and child care within households). Yet, the workers I met with nonetheless *have* negotiated strategies for control, however narrow, over their individual circumstances. These women often make sense of their situations as ones in which the arrangements are the preferred alternative to their other options, and they choose the limited increased control they achieve even in exchange for heightened insecurity and instability which tend to accompany much home-based work. From within a very complex and powerful set of constraints, women may be using home-based information work to negotiate some degree of increased control over the rhythm of their everyday lives. This potential is worth watching and cultivating.

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