

Gender and Work¹

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Abstract

Over the past 30 years, the US labor market has undergone fundamental structural changes. In the past, loyal and hardworking employees could expect to spend their entire careers working for a single employer. But starting in the 1980s, globalization, deregulation, and the decline of unions transformed this standard employment contract between workers and employers. Today, employment has become more precarious, unstable, and insecure. This essay reviews the limited research on how the rise of precarious employment in the United States has impacted men and women. We also analyze the gender implications of policies designed to address precariousness, and set an agenda for future research on gender inequality and precarious work.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 30 years, the US labor market has undergone fundamental structural changes. Since the 1980s, globalization, deregulation, and the decline of unions have rewritten the standard employment contract between workers and employers. In the past, many workers could expect to spend their working lives with a single employer, climbing a career ladder and earning steadily increasing wages and growing retirement pensions in return for their loyalty and hard work. Today, employment has become more precarious, unstable, and insecure. Downsizing, outsourcing, and subcontracting have eliminated many jobs in manufacturing, while job growth has been concentrated mostly in the low-wage service sector, where many jobs are temporary and part-time.

Men have been hardest hit by these changes. A whopping 74% of the workers who lost their jobs at the start of the Great Recession of 2008 were men (Boushey, 2009), leading some commentators to describe the economic crisis as a “mancession” (Standing, 2011). Unemployment rates for men and women have since converged, but the gendered consequences of the changes wrought by the so-called new economy are not fully understood. Our goal

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in this essay is to review the limited research on how the rise of precarious employment has impacted men and women, to analyze the gender implications of policies designed to address precariousness, and to set an agenda for future research on gender inequality and precarious work.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH ON PRECARIOUS WORK

Sociologists agree that jobs in the formal economy have become more precarious over the past 30 years (although there is some disagreement about the extent of this change). Arne Kalleberg (2011, p. 86) writes that “virtually all jobs are now more unstable as insecurity permeates the entire occupational structure.” The evidence he provides includes growth in nonstandard employment (such as part-time and temporary jobs), decreases in employee tenure, heightened employee perceptions of job insecurity, and increases in involuntary job loss and long-term unemployment. In Kalleberg’s view, precarious working conditions have increased because of globalization, deregulation, and reduced institutional protections for workers. Previously, precariousness was specific to low-wage jobs (including jobs in the informal economy), but now all sectors of the labor market have been impacted, including professional and managerial jobs.

Some sociologists include an assessment of job quality in their definition of precarious work. For example, Leah Vosko (2010) notes that, unlike workers in other industrialized nations, US workers have no statutory claim to job security even if they are employed in “permanent” (as opposed to temporary) full-time positions. Also, in contrast to workers abroad, US workers typically rely on their jobs for access to health care and pensions. According to Vosko, increasing precariousness is reflected in the deterioration of these benefits over time, as workers today are required to pay all or part of the cost of their health insurance and retirement plans. Wages have also stagnated for most workers despite their increasing productivity. Her main point, then, is that precariousness is increasing even in seemingly secure full-time positions owing to the declining quality of jobs in this country.

Although there is some dispute between sociologists and economists about the extent of these changes, all agree that the perception of job precariousness has grown, and that this has impacted workers’ sense of well-being. Anxiety about job security and stability is strong in the United States (Kalleberg, 2011). Vicki Smith (2010) describes an “employment culture of insecurity” inflamed by media accounts of long-term unemployment, driving even those in full-time jobs to worry about their future prospects. As firms dismantle traditional career ladders, workers must seek opportunities for advancement outside of their organization. Surviving today’s turbulent economy, she argues, requires them to spend considerable time and energy

updating their skills, developing their networks, and researching opportunities in the labor market. Those without jobs must constantly reinvent themselves to enhance their *employability*—the term she uses to describe the individual effort required to appear desirable and trustworthy in the eyes of potential employers.

Carrie Lane (2011) analyzes the employability projects of long-term unemployed workers in the high-tech industry. She finds that these workers embrace a neoliberal ideology that celebrates individualism and entrepreneurship. This ideology, she writes, “naturalizes the absence of secure, long-term employment, casts the resulting insecurity as an empowering alternative to dependence on a single employer, and prescribes explicitly individualist, apolitical, pro-market means by which one can best position oneself to succeed in an increasingly global and competitive world” (p. 13). This ideology may bolster the optimism and self-esteem of job seekers during long bouts of unemployment, but it is based on a myth. Although these unemployed professionals glorify the independent entrepreneur, Lane exposes their financial and emotional dependence on their families, who absorb the costs of their retraining and networking. She argues that the contradictions they experience between the ideology of self-sufficiency and the reality of dependence often lead to depression and divorce.

The works of Smith, Lane, and others suggest that precariousness is not only a characteristic of work in the new economy. Precariousness is part of the cultural *zeitgeist*, a widespread belief and sensibility that is hegemonic in society. Workers have become convinced of the logic and inevitability of job insecurity. But instead of fighting against the (real or imagined) degradation of their jobs, workers sympathize with their employers, who appear powerless in the face of competitive global capitalism. Even unionized workers feel compelled to give concessions just to keep their jobs. In order to stay at the forefront of an insecure job market, Americans of all types are flocking to the entrepreneurial self-help movement, where they learn corporate marketing strategies to develop a personal “brand” as a bulwark against economic vulnerability (Vallas & Cummins, 2014).

However, the picture is not entirely bleak. Not everyone is suffering in the era of precariousness. Kalleberg (2011) emphasizes that there are winners in the new economy, in particular workers with specialized skills in high demand. But who are these winners and losers? And how do gender dynamics shape the experience of job precariousness in the new economy?

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH: GENDER AND PRECARIOUS WORK

For the most part, studies of precarious work do not consider gender. But men and women workers have been impacted differently by the spread of

precariousness in the new economy. As noted earlier, the structural changes wrought by the new economy appear to have hit men hardest. However, it is not the case that women are doing better than men, nor is it the case that all men have been negatively impacted.

White working class men have experienced the steepest declines because they have lost certain advantages they previously enjoyed. The origins of these advantages lie in the post-World War II economy. The standard employment contract that provided job security in return for loyal work was developed in the 1940s and 1950s during the so-called golden age of capitalism (Reich, 2007). A product of an unprecedented collaboration between the US government, business, and unions, this contract was available only to a select group of employees—mostly white male workers employed by large oligopolistic firms. The “family wage” was a cornerstone of this contract. Acknowledging their dependence on women’s domestic work, male union members fought for and received an income deemed adequate to support a wife and children at home. Importantly, union members and employers excluded women and racial/ethnic minority men from receiving the family wage.

Thus, the “standard” employment contract was in fact a gendered and racialized contract (Vosko, 2010). It was based on the shared belief that men should be the family breadwinner and women’s place is in the home. During the “golden age,” married women were not supposed to work at all; those who did work were forced to do so because their husbands were prevented from earning the family wage. The few jobs that were open to women rarely offered security, career ladders, or benefits. These jobs were designed to be temporary or part-time, providing low wages and limited opportunities for advancement. This was true not only of jobs in the service sector—such as domestic, retail, and clerical work—but also those in the so-called women’s professions. Until they were overturned in the 1970s, laws required women teachers and nurses to leave their jobs when they married and had children (Thistle, 2006).

Not surprisingly, as globalization, deregulation, and outsourcing began to whittle away the terms of the standard employment contract, working class men experienced the greatest declines. African American and Latino men who managed to make headway into unionized jobs before the 1970s were the first groups hit by deindustrialization, a trend that has now impacted white working class men as well. Over the past 30 years, their jobs have become increasingly precarious—that is, more similar to women’s jobs. In fact, some commentators describe this deterioration of men’s jobs as the “feminization of labor” (Standing, 2011). This does not imply that women today encounter better working conditions than men, but that many of the

advantages men—primarily white working class men—previously enjoyed in the workplace are disappearing.

These disappearing advantages are reflected in a number of statistical trends. Significant gaps between men's and women's rates of labor force participation, job tenure, and perceived job insecurity are closing (Kalleberg, 2011). The earnings gap for men and women has also decreased, but for reasons that are different for workers at the lower and upper strata of the labor force. On the one hand, the gender wage gap for workers at the middle and lower tiers of the labor force declined because men's wages dropped precipitously. For example, the median income of male high school graduates aged 25–34 fell 25%, from \$41,000 in 1980, to \$31,000 in 2010 (in constant dollars); women high school graduates in this age group experienced a decline from \$26,500 to \$24,000 over the same time period (Pedulla, 2012, p. 29). Thus, the ratio of women's earnings to men's earnings for this group narrowed, from 0.65 to 0.77, but it would be a gross misrepresentation to call this an improvement in women's status. Instead, it indicates a decline in men's status due to the demise of the standard employment contract.

In contrast, the incomes of college educated men and women have steadily increased over the past 30 years. Women have closed the education gap with men; they now outnumber men on college campuses where they receive the majority of degrees (England, 2010). Kalleberg (2011, p. 106) shows that the incomes of men and women in the top 5% of income earners have increased significantly, with men's wages growing from \$39/h in 1973 to \$55/h in 2009 (in constant dollars), and women's growing from \$24 to \$41 over the same time period (the corresponding ratios are 0.62 and 0.75). For this group of elite workers, the declining gender wage gap is due to the steeper rise of women's incomes compared to men's.

Thus, the rise in precariousness has had uneven effects. For the majority of workers, job quality has deteriorated, a change felt most keenly by men without college degrees. For those at the top, the new economy has been a boon—although a significant gender wage gap still exists. But who are these winners? What do we know about gender dynamics at the top of the labor market?

At the very top, of course, the winners are virtually all men. In 2013, only 23 Fortune 500 companies were headed by women (catalyst.org). Executive compensation has soared during the period of rising precariousness. And although executive turnover is also high, job dislocation at the top is softened by generous separation packages, often referred to as *golden parachutes*. While we know that men are overrepresented at the very top, very little is known about the organizational processes that exclude women from these positions.

Of course, most high earners are not CEOs. They are managers and professionals concentrated in male-dominated occupations. The increase in

women's incomes since 1980 is due almost entirely to women's movement into these male-dominated jobs (England, 2010).

These elite workers are typically required to work very long hours (Correll, Kelly, O'Connor, & Williams, 2014), in stark contrast to workers at the bottom, who struggle to get more hours (Lambert, 2012). In the current economy, employers treat exempt (salaried) and nonexempt (hourly) workers differently—hiring too many at the bottom and too few at the top. In the employment culture of insecurity, salaried professionals may feel compelled to work long hours to prove their worth to their employers in an effort to avoid being laid off. This overwork is facilitated by new communications technology that makes workers available to their employers around the clock. Those with specialized skills may choose to become consultants or start their own businesses, but these strategies can expose them to even greater precariousness and exacerbate the problem of overwork.

The requirement to work long hours has consequences for gender inequality because women continue to retain primary responsibility for child care. Although elite workers can outsource childcare (often to immigrant women in low-paid precarious jobs), many women choose to “opt out,” or quit their jobs instead. Youngjoo Cha (2010) found that mothers married to men who work long hours are the group most likely to pursue this “opt out” strategy. The opposite is not true (fathers do not opt out when their wives overwork). Thus “opting out” is a coping strategy for married women with high-earning husbands, a small and privileged group. However, it is possible that for some of these women “opting out” is a gendered cover story to hide job displacement. When women face the threat of layoffs, they may claim to leave work voluntarily to look after children in order to increase their “employability”—making their absence from work seem legitimate in the eyes of future employers.

Working women across the income spectrum feel torn between the demands of employment and the demands of motherhood, but most women do not have the option of quitting their jobs. Despite the rhetoric of women's liberation, married women entered the labor force in large numbers because men's salaries dropped (Thistle, 2006). Surviving the culture of employment insecurity for most households requires two incomes, so that the earnings of one spouse can act as a buffer in case the other is laid off. However, because most household costs (rent/mortgage, bills) require both incomes, the fix is only temporary. In a sense, insecurity is doubled in dual-earner households, as there is no homemaker who can enter the market if the breadwinner falters.

Single mothers and their children are especially vulnerable in the era of employment precariousness. While the economic situation of single mothers has always been tenuous in the United States, their situation has worsened

in recent years because of the erosion of the social safety net, and in particular diminishing welfare benefits. To receive public assistance today, poor mothers must participate in paid work or job training (to enhance their “employability”). But the jobs available to them pay very low wages. In fact, many of these “workfare” jobs are exempt from the requirement that they pay the federal minimum wage. Moreover, as hourly workers, they are expected to be available at any time—to work late at short notice or to work non-standard hours. Low-wage employers are allowed to expand and contract working hours depending on customer traffic. (US workers have a right to minimum wages, but not minimum hours.) Single mothers unable to cope with erratic schedules are consequently forced to forfeit their meager welfare benefits (Collins & Mayer, 2010).

The incompatibility between the demands of unpaid domestic care work and precarious paid work is provoking a crisis of social reproduction. *Social reproduction* refers to the labor necessary to keep households functioning—the work required to raise children, care for the sick and elderly, and tend to the upkeep of house and home. In the “golden age,” this reproductive labor was performed by married women who were supported by the “family wage” their husbands received. This bargain was largely limited to white families; racial/ethnic minority families were excluded, forcing married women into low-wage jobs to make ends meet. Today, all families are left on their own to survive. In this era of precarious employment, maintaining a livelihood is increasingly incompatible with raising children. As a result of this tension, two societal-level consequences are likely: (i) increasing poverty and income inequality and (ii) declining fertility (Esping-Andersen, 2009). Both are occurring in the United States. The increasing income gap is well known here; less apparent is the declining fertility rate because it has been obscured by immigration patterns. Discounting the births to first-generation immigrants, the US fertility rate would fall further below replacement level and look similar to rates in Europe, which average about 1.6 births per woman.

CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES TO PRECARIOUS WORK

The increase in precariousness has not been a rallying point for US workers. The “Occupy” movement, for example, targeted increasing income inequality but not the problems of job insecurity and declining job quality. In Europe, by contrast, there is considerable talk of the growing “precariat” (Standing 2010), an eclectic class of workers who are disgruntled by the rise of insecurity in the labor market. Their activism has spurred a variety of responses to precariousness. Here we review their implications for gender inequality.

In some cases, the rise of precariousness has stirred a nostalgic longing for a return to the standard employment contract. Because this would entail a return to the traditional gender division of labor, some feminists have been wary of this particular response. In Italy, for example, young feminists argue that precariousness might not be all bad. They disavow the “stability” of their mothers’ generation, wanting nothing of the stresses of “balancing” paid work and unpaid domestic work. In their view, temporary work contracts are not problematic per se; low pay at work and the continued exploitation of women’s unpaid labor in the home are the focus of their organizing efforts (Fantone, 2007).

Some have argued that the standard employment contract is no longer feasible precisely because it relies on the unpaid domestic labor of women. Unlike the economy of the 1950s, the economy today depends on women’s participation in the paid labor force. Moreover, some argue that the “home” can no longer provide its traditional function of offering respite and regeneration to workers due to the “economization” of society. Lisa Adkins (2012, pp. 622–623) explains that economization is “the folding of the economy into society,” a process occurring as “productive and value-creating activities [move] away from the formal workplace” and become dispersed “across the social body.” This process is well under way, as technology is making workers available to their employers 24/7, domestic work is becoming thoroughly commodified, and the unemployed are busily enhancing their employability. In this context—where we work even when we are not working—the standard employment contract is hopelessly anachronistic.

Two forward-looking alternatives to the current precariousness are “flexicurity” and “beyond employment.” Flexicurity is a labor policy first introduced in Denmark that provides both flexibility for employers (allowing them to hire and fire workers as needed) and security for workers (in the form of generous benefits and opportunities for retraining during periods of unemployment). Flexicurity is a “win-win” proposition, according to Kalleberg (2011, p. 183), because it addresses the needs of both employers and workers in the context of competitive global capitalism. However, the flexicurity model does not address gender inequality. It assumes that the work of social reproduction will be carried out either by paid workers outside the home (e.g., day care employees) or unpaid caregivers in the home who rely on an employed partner to support them (e.g., stay-at-home mothers). Just as in the standard employment contract, in the flexicurity approach, the individual’s economic well-being depends on his or her labor force participation. Those who are not in the labor force receive no benefits even if they are engaged in the important work of social reproduction. Thus, this approach does not address gender inequality stemming from the double burden of women’s work.

Although not a part of the “flexicurity” approach, some scholars advocate for increased workplace flexibility to facilitate the combining of women’s domestic and paid work. Policies such as part-time schedules, telecommuting, and flextime, it is argued, can enable women (and ideally, men as well) to maintain their labor force participation while also performing domestic work. Ironically, these forms of flexibility already characterize many precarious low-wage jobs, albeit under the control of employers and not workers. In other words, low-wage employers get to determine the time and place of work without regard for workers’ needs (schedules are flexible for employers, not employees). But advocates maintain that instituting flexible work policies in professional careers can help women to “balance” their work and family responsibilities (Correll *et al.*, 2014).

There are a number of problems with this approach. First, research suggests that women’s careers suffer if they take advantage of these policies (Glass, 2004). Second, women may be especially reluctant to ask for or take advantage of these policies in an era of job precariousness, fearing that to do so will jeopardize their employment. Third, it is unlikely that, if implemented, these policies would be under the control of workers. A recent study of telecommuting, for example, confirms that employers control the conditions of telecommuting and are its primary beneficiaries (Noonan & Glass, 2012). Finally, these policies do not actually lessen women’s total amount of labor; they merely shift the distribution of women’s time from fewer paid hours to more unpaid hours of work. Thus, it is unlikely that institutionalizing increased workplace flexibility will mitigate gender inequality.

A more radical solution to precariousness is the “beyond employment” approach, which seeks to uncouple employment status and social well-being (Vosko, 2010). This approach originated from a group of experts convened by the European Commission. It is based on the idea that it is in society’s best interest to enable individuals to move in and out of the labor force at different points in their lives, depending on their caregiving responsibilities and their personal needs for care and training. But instead of workers bearing the risks and costs of fulfilling these needs, the state and employers should take on these costs. In this model, economic well-being is not tied to market activity, but to valued contributions to society, including raising children. A worker who drops out of the labor force to raise children is treated no differently than a worker who is laid off or otherwise experiences discontinuities in employment due to precariousness: All workers who are involved in socially necessary labor would be guaranteed income replacement. This “beyond employment” model aims to break down the breadwinner–homemaker division by imagining a “universal caregiver” norm, under which a more equitable distribution of unpaid work is prescribed and “all jobs are designed

on the assumption that workers are caregivers, shortening hours of work for pay across-the-board" (Vosko, 2010, p. 222).

The "beyond employment" model has flaws. Unless it includes support for publicly funded child care, it may not empower women in the market. Instead, the model could encourage women to take on (state-subsidized) caregiver roles while men continue to engage in paid work with some support in-between precarious jobs. Moreover, the implementation of shorter maximum work hours, which is a key to this approach, may not be enforceable given the ubiquity of communications technologies that expand the working day. Although not perfect, this "beyond employment" approach nevertheless offers a vision of gender equality, making it unique among the proposed alternatives to the current state of precariousness.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ON PRECARIOUSNESS AND GENDER INEQUALITY

Scholars examining poverty have long studied precariousness, especially in communities of color. Now that precariousness has spread throughout the economy, it has become a new focus of research in the sociology of work. Scholars are just beginning to study the implications of precariousness for gender inequality. The literature we have reviewed has many gaps that call out for additional research.

First, we need better measures of precariousness. As we have discussed, the quantitative data are indicating a convergence of men's and women's experiences, but these numbers are contested. It may be the case that the degree of precariousness in women's jobs is underestimated because of the ways that the information is gathered and analyzed. As suggested earlier, women may claim to be "opting out" in response to the threat of layoffs. Moreover, they may call their part-time work "voluntary" because their domestic duties are onerous (researchers typically include only the "involuntary" part-time workers in their measures of precariousness). More research is needed to uncover the conditions under which women's "voluntary" choices are made. Researchers should not assume that because women make the choice to opt out or work part-time that they are not impacted by precariousness.

Second, we need more research on how gender inequality shapes the process of finding job opportunities in the new economy. Under the regime of precariousness, people obtain jobs through networks, unpaid internships, and temporary employment services. Men and women may face different challenges navigating these new pathways to work (Williams, Muller, & Kilanski, 2012). The need for self-"branding" and self-promotion in order to secure work may also be experienced differently by men and women. For example, it may not be feasible for women to assimilate the

neoliberal ideology in the same ways it is embraced by men (Lane, 2011). Because this ideology is based on the assumption that workers are free to move, change jobs, and be available at any time to their employers, it is likely to be incompatible with the experiences of women with caregiving responsibilities.

Third, more information is needed about precarious work in the informal economy. The research we have reviewed is all based on changing employment conditions in the formal sector. But one of the most precarious forms of employment is day-labor. Day-laborers are employed in a variety of industries, including construction, agriculture, domestic work, and sex work. Some workers are forced into these jobs because the state excludes them from formal sector jobs on the basis of their immigration status or criminal records. Others have no other options for work because employers discriminate against them, for example, on the basis of race or gender presentation. Because they work “off the books,” these day-laborers do not appear in the quantitative data used to measure and analyze precariousness. Because racial/ethnic minorities are overrepresented among day-laborers, scholars can overlook the ways that the experience of precariousness is not only gendered but racialized. We need more studies exploring the ways that precarious conditions in these jobs impact men and women differently.

Finally, more research is needed on alternatives to the standard employment contract. The problems with precarious work that US workers are facing are being addressed by different welfare states. Comparative and transnational research on the experiences of workers under different policy regimes in Europe and elsewhere could help guide US labor market policy and worker activism.

Periods of economic crises can elicit nostalgic yearning for an idealized “golden” past, but they also can be opportunities to rewrite the gender contract and imagine a future of gender equality. As we hope to have demonstrated, women’s interests must be part of any discussion of the future of precarious work.

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