

## Paid Work in the Home — A Brief Report

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Volume 26, 1990

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/lt26cr01>

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### Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Gannagé, C. (1990). Paid Work in the Home — A Brief Report. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 26, 151–154.

# CONFERENCE REPORT/ RAPPORT DE CONGRÈS

## Paid Work in the Home — A Brief Report

Charlene Gannagé

**Making Connections, Workers and Their Communities Conference York University, May 26-28, 1989. Participants: Mary DeVan, Sedef Arat-Koc, Anne Richmond, Margaret Oldfield, Belinda Leach, Nigel R. Moses.**

BECAUSE OF THE SMALL GROUP nature of our session, the discussion was lively and informal with everyone participating. Anne Richmond from the Ontario Women's Directorate was in attendance and helped to focus our comments on the social policy implications of our research. She was particularly interested in developing a policy paper that examined women's paid work in the home as it affects both industrial homeworkers and middle-class women who want to start their own businesses. Each of us were at different stages of the research process; this combination made for a more useful sharing of ideas.

Mary DeVan from the University of British Columbia got the discussion rolling with a report of her findings from a recently completed Ph.D. dissertation on Filipino domestic workers in Vancouver, where she conducted interviews with representatives from employment agencies as well as domestic workers. Based on in-depth interviews, she described the long hours of domestic workers, their working conditions, and low pay. She stressed the need to focus on the structural context that shaped the interrelationships of domestic workers, the women that employed them in their households, and the employment agencies that mediated the contractual relationship for their own economic advantage. Paid work in the home is commonly viewed to be embedded in a gender division of labour whereby

Charlene Gannagé, "Paid Work in the Home — A Brief Report," *Labour/Le Travail*, 26 (Fall 1990), 151-153.

women's family responsibilities shape their waged work experience and vice versa. Both DeVan's research on the role of the employment agency, and Leach's work (described below) on the role of the jobber, point to an added dimension in this structural relationship embodied in the "middlepersons" in subcontractual relationships. This wage-labour nexus is often referred to in the literature as the "informal economy."

Margaret Oldfield's research on clerical homeworkers is critical of the futurist model of work popularized by Alvin Toffler, among others, that romanticizes the cottage industry as a strategy for women to utilize their entrepreneurial skills within a community setting. By contrast, the labour process of homeworkers described by Oldfield's research on clerical workers and Belinda Leach's research on garment workers were akin to the work of domestic workers: long hours, low-waged, isolated employment in the household with little protection through unionization or employment standards legislation. In Oldfield's research, technological innovation in the form of word processors enhanced the employer's control of workers' productivity through new forms of monitoring, quality control, and the introduction of the piece-rate system. Oldfield's respondents earned approximately \$10,000 a year and were in a contradictory class designation because of their relationship to a spouse who was usually employed as a professional. Leach's respondents, who were immigrant homeworkers, were also paid by the piece but earned less than the minimum wage despite the very skilled nature of sewing a garment. In both cases, the long hours of the homemaker were compounded by family responsibilities that extended her working day late into the night and on weekends. Oldfield expressed an interest in understanding the interpersonal relationship between spouses as a result of their contradictory class positions and the gender division of labour in the home.

Belinda Leach described the methodological challenges she faced in obtaining access to her interview respondents, primarily because of the isolated nature of homework, the precarious status of new immigrants in their unfamiliar surroundings, and language barriers. True to anthropological acumen, Leach revised her initial research strategy by focusing on the relationship between the jobber and the homemaker. The jobber is the employer of the homeworkers and usually the middleperson in a contractual relationship with the owner of the factory. Using a snow ball sample, she has thus far conducted interviews with approximately twenty homeworkers facilitated by contact with the employer.

Sedef Arat-Koc's recently published article in *Studies in Political Economy* provides insights into another aspect of the political economy that shapes the informal economy — the relationship of the state to domestic service. State legislation not only governs the immigration of domestic workers as cheap labour to fulfill the needs of better paid working women for daycare and housework assistance, but also serves to maintain this dependent relationship between employer and employee by making it difficult for domestic workers to obtain full citizenship rights. While domestic workers are explicitly encouraged to immigrate

to Canada for these so-called "employment opportunities," Gannagé pointed out that industrial homeworkers are also forced into their precarious employment by the lack of full citizenship rights. As Arat-Koc has indicated, the issue of citizenship is crucial to understanding the nature of precarious employment in the informal economy.

In the discussion that followed, Nigel Moses suggested that both domestic workers and immigrant homeworkers may be economic or political refugees who have left their country of origin because of repressive regimes or a harsh economic climate. In the case of homeworkers, Gannagé suggested that lobbying efforts solely focused on legislation against contracting out tended to blame the victim; she argued for an alternative economic strategy that questions the gender division of labour and recognizes the skills of immigrant labour. The state has successfully manipulated the struggles of immigrant workers against better-paid women workers by failing to provide adequate and accessible childcare, full citizenship rights, and in the case of domestic workers, accreditation or access to early childhood training programmes to enable domestic servants to become childcare workers employed outside the home. With Anne Richmond's interest in social policy to guide us, we discussed a variety of methods for protecting the rights of workers in the informal sector: worker cooperatives facilitated by immigrant women's organizations; the unionization of employment agencies; in the case of homeworkers, employment through the union hiring hall; legislation geared to improving the social wage. Minimum wage legislation is piecemeal, varies from province to province, and is pitifully low. (Perhaps, the minimum wage should be pegged to the average industrial wage, promoted by the CSN in Quebec.)

Gannagé noted that the pressure on workers in the informal sector may worsen with industrial restructuring and its concomitant acceleration under the Free Trade Agreement as more and more women are pushed out of employment in the formal economy to take on even more precarious employment in low waged, non-unionized sectors that may involve some form of paid work in the home or part-time employment. In either case, the erosion of the social wage and the possibility of increasing poverty among immigrant women and children will be a major concern.

Paid work in the home represents one of the weakest links in the intersection between the capitalist labour process and the gender division of labour. With the development of new technology, the global restructuring of capital, and the neoclassical market orientation of advanced capitalist states, this wage-labour nexus, rendered invisible by the isolation of the household, has increasingly become a worldwide phenomena, embracing not only the traditional sectors of industry and service but also threatening to transform the clerical sector. A holistic approach to women's work that takes into account women's family responsibilities and develops a new creative commitment to labour-community organization will be necessary to uncover the reality of women's labour that is hidden in the household. The papers presented in this session have made an important contribution to the understanding of the Canadian case.