

Gender(ed) Labor - Fachtagung der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Geschlechterforschung 14.–15. September 2023

Panel (organized in two parts: I & II):

Challenging the Dominant Concept of Work: A Gendered and Intersectional Perspective on Precarious Employment and Invisible Labor

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The panel is assigned to the thematic focus 1 "Gendered Labor" and examines the concept of work both theoretically and conceptually and by means of empirical examples from a gender perspective and from an intersectional point of view. Drawing on five empirical studies, the panel aims to question the dominant concept of labor, critically discussing the concept of normal labor as paid, formalized, regulated, and lifelong work.

The normal employment relationship "privileges not only gainful employment at the expense of other socially necessary activities, but also a [certain] type of gainful employment" (Ehmer 2018: 36). Deviations from this are referred to as atypical employment and are subject to precarization (Motakef 2015: 7). Women are disproportionately represented in atypical forms of employment (Motakef 2015: 115). From a gender perspective, precarious work and living conditions are therefore discussed comprehensively, whereby the concept of work, in addition to formalized gainful employment constructed as normal work, also includes "[...] housework, care and subsistence work, as well as voluntary and civic engagement" (Motakef 2015: 71).

The empirical examples contextualize the common characteristics of so-called informal, invisible, female labor and reveal the ambivalences of insecure working and living conditions. In doing so, we focus on the inclusion of different forms of social inequality and illuminate work from the perspective of less privileged positions in order to explore the limits of the common concept of work. The panel will discuss how precarious work is socially negotiated and how so-called informal and/or un(der)paid work is made invisible in the field of tension between relationship and work as well as leisure time and work, and how such mechanisms influence the working and living conditions of workers.

The panel consists of 7 papers and is organized in two Parts.

Sources:

Ehmer, Josef. 2018. «Zur Geschichte Des Normalarbeitsverhältnisses: Rekonstruktion Und Kritik». S. 21–40 in *Normalarbeit*. transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839434628-002>.

Motakef, Mona. 2015. Prekarisierung. transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.1515/transcript.9783839425664>.

PART I:

Contribution 1: Digital Labour

Claudia Amsler, ICFG + Digital Humanities, University of Bern

The work of content creators who engage in educational activities on Instagram is largely undervalued economically, despite the value their work adds to the platform. Although some individuals may achieve financial stability through this type of work, their social status is often ambiguous. Content creation on Instagram is portrayed as a dream job as well as "not a real" job. These conflicting evaluations are not coincidental, but rather part of a history of underpaid and gendered digital labor. The work of content creators and influencers is further characterized by ambiguities, as the platform perpetuates prevailing power

structures through discriminatory algorithms, yet the medium can also be used as a tool to intervene in these hierarchical formations.

The dissertation project aims to examine the sociotechnological imaginaries of this ambiguous labor through a triangulation of critical discourse analysis and a thick data approach. The study explores the challenges faced by content creators who advocate for social justice on their profiles and must navigate algorithmic precarity to maintain visibility on the platform. By providing insights into the tensions and strategies employed by these individuals, this research contributes to the understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding digital labor on Instagram. Moreover, it sheds light on the broader implications and promises of digital labor and the potential for interventions within existing power structures.

Contribution 2: Informal work

Philipa Birago Akuoko, Institut of Geography, University of Bern

The second contribution explores the impact of urban redevelopment on women's work, livelihoods, and gender equality in the global South, focusing on Kumasi, Ghana. Public-private partnerships and neoliberal capitalism are driving the physical infrastructure transformation of cities, resulting in the eviction, relocation, or displacement of informal workers, mostly women. We use the new institutionalist approach, institutional resource regime framework, and feminist political ecology approach to analyze the gendered dimensions of resource governance in cities. The study highlights the metonymic relationship between informality and women's work and how removing informality from public spaces worsens women's working conditions and livelihoods. By examining the impact of public space redevelopment on women's livelihoods in Kumasi, the study provides insights into the broader implications of urban redevelopment for gender equality and sustainable development in the global South.

Contribution 3: Decolonizing work: Unpacking the gendered-colonial distinctions between work from home and domestic work

Muneeb Ul Lateef Banday and Anukriti Dixit, ICFG, University of Bern

Domestic work is nearly always assumed to not 'directly' contribute to an economy. The 'economy' of a country is in fact produced through the lens of 'paid vs. unpaid' work – where only paid work contributes to the GDP. The very construction of 'economics' is therefore predicated on leaving a crucial, formative and imperative form of labour – namely domestic work – outside the purview of what is considered 'paid' or 'breadwinning' (interview with Brigid Schulte, NPR, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic provides us with a unique window to find alternate articulations for 'domestic work'. 'Work from home' became a norm during this pandemic, with companies paying employees to do 'paid' and 'economic' activity from their homes – thus making 'home' a legible and categorical space for 'work'. Even with the attention focused on the household however, housework is still largely delegitimized as not belonging to 'work'. This paper follows an account of academic scholarship produced on gendered labour during the Covid-19 pandemic to reiterate that what we consider 'objective' and 'scientific' scholarship makes two epistemically violent moves. For one, it relegates domestic work as 'chores' (Deshpande, 2021), as 'unpaid' labour (Haney and Barber, 2022; Zamberlan et al., 2021) and inside a 'breadwinning-homemaking' binary (Aladsani, 2022; Giordano, 2020). Secondly, academic scholarship, in keeping with the 'separate spheres' model of 'work', attempts to push 'Work from Home' into the forays of 'remote work' (Mendrika et al., 2021), 'telecommuting' (Lyttelton et al., 2022) and 'virtual work' (Maurer et al., 2022; Karl et al., 2022) in a move to retain the separate contouring of boundaries of 'work' vs. 'domestic chores'. We wish to counter-posit these knowledges against feminist decolonial knowledges that illustrate the importance of unionized domestic work (Acciari & Pero, 2020) in an attempt to 'de-precariatise' domestic work (Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2010) and recognize the 'home' as a sphere of action for the (in)formal capitalist economy (Boeri, 2018). In this process, we aim to reveal how gendered colonial discourses of work produce distinctive boundaries between domestic work and work from home eschewing the blurred boundaries between them.

Contribution 4: Care Work of Foster Parents
Valeria Pisani, Michèle Amacker, ICFG, University of Bern

The Interdisciplinary Center for Gender Studies at the University of Bern is investigating the placement of children in foster families from a historical and sociological perspective as part of the National Research Program 76 "Welfare and Coercion". Based on qualitative interviews with foster parents and discussions with experts, an explorative subproject will study the activities of foster parents between public service and private family life. The work of foster parents is a particularly illustrative case study for the discussion of a strongly gendered concept of work. Thus, the question of whether the work of foster parents is work or simply parenthood, and thus love, has been renegotiated over time. Currently, it is again particularly topical in the canton of Bern, as foster care is being reorganized with the introduction of a new legal basis.

The amendments in the law aim to standardize the payment system and thus enhance the value of the work performed by foster parents. At the same time, they aim for a stronger centralization of control in the area by the state to counteract the historically developed fragmentation of responsibilities in extrafamilial accommodation of foster children. Foster parents are ambivalent about the revision. The changes have different effects on their work and life realities and trigger new discussions about the value of care work.

PART II:

Contribution 5: Dalit Trans Activist Labour as Dissent Against Necrocapitalism: Exploring Trans Conceptions of Equity as Just Worldmaking

Sohini Chatterjee, University of Western Ontario

Rural, Dalit or oppressed-caste, working class, trans-feminine people, without class privilege and cultural capital—who cannot be identified as elite activists in metropolitan Indian cities—have been providing critical, life-affirming material supports to each other since before the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and have been simultaneously articulating an expansive idea of equity centering multiply marginalized and historically oppressed trans people without socio-cultural legitimacy or acknowledgement. By demanding affirmative action in education and employment from the Indian state in the form of horizontal reservations, they have been relentlessly dissenting against state-sponsored necrocapitalism and trans necropolitics—challenging capitalist, carceral, and casteist logics that the state operates through to render the lives of working class, oppressed-caste Dalit-Bahujan trans people, in particular, unlivable. Highlighting food and housing insecurity, precarious access to employment opportunities, and foregrounding the lack of robust economic safety nets, trans people have been challenging statist developmentalist narratives, and have been able to foreground the many cracks that they have been made to fall through owing to neoliberal ideas of progress for decades on end. Rendered invisible, trans activist labour organized against necrocapitalism is critical in the evolving conception of equity and justice in India today, which makes prominent the perils of liberalization, increasing privatization, and dangerous deregulation of the Indian economy.

Contribution 6: Labour Exploitation of minors

Tina Büchler, Julia Egenter, Gwendolin Mäder, ICFG, University of Bern

The fifth contribution deals with the labor exploitation of minors in Switzerland. The contribution is based on the scientific report for a monitoring report of Switzerland to the European Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), which was prepared by the Interdisciplinary Center for Gender Research IZFG of the University of Bern in 2021. The report - and thus the contribution - shows that and how minors in Switzerland experience labor exploitation in a variety of ways and at the same time addresses methodological problems associated with research on illegal and precarious working conditions.

Contribution 7: Low-wage work

Nathalie Amstutz, Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz, Hochschule für Wirtschaft

The organisation of gainful employment and care work, but also of other time qualities such as recreation time or political time (Haug 2022), takes place in contexts of low-wage work, where women and migrants are overrepresented, in specific framework conditions: low wages, often flexible working time arrangements, little participation in decision making, hardly any professional mobility and only few training opportunities, possible shift work and scarce recreation time. With the presupposition of 'low-wage work', labour market regimes presuppose material and social inequalities as a fixed component of the organisation of work.

The current discussion on increasing working time and part-time work to cushion the labour shortage is still based on the common time concept, which only distinguishes between gainful employment and leisure time. This equation of working time with gainful employment time, of 'non-gainful employment time' with 'leisure time', as laid down in the Swiss Labour Code, assigns unpaid work and care work to the periphery around gainful employment. The contribution presents results from interviews with people in the low-wage sector and focuses on discursive formations of the interviewees' concepts of time and their shaping of care and non-working time. The article is based on new results of an SNSF-funded research project at the FHNW (School of Business, School of Social Work) on work without formal qualification requirements (AofQ).