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No Guarantees

The Experiences of Women in
Casual Work

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades there has been a growing number of casual workers in New Zealand. Many of these workers are not adequately counted in statistics and little is known about the nature of their work or the impact this has on their lives. It is assumed that the majority of these casual workers are women (Davidson and Bray, 1994, Else, 1996, Shirley, 1996)

This thesis examines the experiences of women in casual work. The primary source of data for this thesis is twelve indepth interviews with women involved in casual work. The women were encouraged to tell their own stories and relate their experiences. The thesis examines why these women are in casual work and examines what, if any, choice was available to the women.

The research investigates the working conditions of the women's casual work. It then looks at the impact that casual work has on the women's personal lives. The women relate experiences which show how casual work has affected their finances, their health and their families.

The thesis highlights how the different circumstances of each woman governs the extent to which casual work affects them. The results showed that while casual work was a positive experience for some women, it was a negative experience for others who were more vulnerable to the insecurity casual work can bring. Generally those women who were not reliant on the income from their casual work to provide for the needs of themselves and their family had more power to negotiate better conditions of work than women who relied on the casual work to provide a basic household income. The degree of need was also a predicator of the negative impact casual work had on the personal life of some women.

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Secondly I want to acknowledge all the hard work that Mike O'Brien has put into encouraging me and structuring my work. His knowledge, continuing support and patience have enabled me to complete this research. Thank you Mike.

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DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

A GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED IN THIS RESEARCH

Many of the terms used in this research either possess more than one definition or have not been ascribed a universal definition in the past. To aid clarity of understanding and to prevent misinterpretation I am outlining here the definitions of various terms and phrases that are utilised in this research. Some of these definitions have been sourced from various institutions and organisations while others are my own working definitions. These are not ultimate definitions of the terms or phrases but merely represent the manner in which such terms and phrases are used in this research.

A few of the terms used in this research are too complicated to be sufficiently addressed in table format. These terms are explored first in greater depth. The remainder of the terms follow those of women, work and casualisation.

CONCEPTS

Women

In this research the concept of 'woman' will be interpreted as the sex, in a physical sense only, of woman as opposed to man. This does not entail all the gender roles or characteristics that are attributed to each gender. It is merely a statement of biological sex. The sex of all participants in this research was self defined by the participants as female.

Work

'Work', the noun, should be defined as;

1 the application of mental or physical effort to a purpose; the use of energy.

2 a task to be undertaken.(Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1992;1412)

However, the concept in general usage today has been altered by the application of a caveat 'for pay or monetary recompense' after such a definition. That is to say that 'work' is often only called 'work' if it is done for pay. So pervasive is this understanding

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of work that the Government of India stated that '[a] man or woman...producing or making something only for the domestic consumption of the household and not for sale....is not a worker' (cited in Waring 1996). This is a deviance from the original meaning of the word.

The result of this has been the emergence of the phrase 'unpaid work' to refer to work which is undertaken without monetary reward. A countermeasure to this need to define work conducted in the home or elsewhere for no pay (the majority of which is carried out by women) as 'unpaid' has been, in turn, to define work done for money as 'paid' work. This places the onus on paid work to define itself as a subset of 'work', rather than allowing it to claim the concept for its exclusive use, therefore undermining other forms of work.

Since this is a feminist piece of research, I view it as necessary to continue this line of action of referring to work undertaken for monetary compensation as 'paid work'. Therefore where work is referred to as simply 'work' it encompasses the full meaning of the concept as paid and unpaid work. However, for the purpose of ease where 'work' is incorporated in a phrase, such as 'casual work', 'part-time work' or 'full-time work', it is allowed to be modified by the preceding word and takes on the contextual meaning of 'paid work'. I recognise that this may in some circumstances lead to slight confusion but I deem it necessary given the theoretical perspective of this research.

Casualisation

The concept of casualisation has arisen from the increasing number of people who are employed in casual work positions. Casual work is defined as paid work which has no set number of hours and which can vary from week to week. Casual work hours are often handed out on a week to week basis where the worker is unsure of which hours they will be expected to work in a fortnight's time. A casual worker may be expected to make themselves available to work whichever hours they are allocated regardless of personal convenience or inconvenience.

The 'casualisation of labour' refers, therefore, to the increasing percentage of the labour force that is employed on such a basis.

On occasions the term 'casualisation of labour' has been used to incorporate the increasing number of people who are employed not only in casual, but also part-time, contract and piecemeal positions. In this research I shall focus on casual work positions but it must be acknowledged that some literature (see Shirley 1996) interprets the concept in a broader context.

DEFINITIONS

These are the definitions of terms used in this thesis. These are not definitive definitions but relate only to the context of terms in this piece of research.

Casual Work	Work which may or may not be ongoing where the number of hours worked (and sometimes the timing of those hours) varies from week to week with little or no guarantee of a maximum or minimum number of hours to be worked each week.
Casualisation of Labour	This term refers to the trend of the increased percentage of jobs in the overall job market which are defined as 'casual work'.
Contract Work	Work where an individual is treated as a company and is contracted to do a certain amount or piece of work for a set price. The contractor is treated as self employed.
Employed	The definition of employed used includes all people aged 15 and over in employment for pay, profit or payment in kind, or those people who worked unpaid in a family business (Statistics New Zealand (SNZ) Website: http://www.stats.govt.nz).
Hours Worked	Hours worked exclude unpaid work other than work performed in a family business and unpaid overtime. Hours worked in all jobs are counted, not just the main job (SNZ).
Household	A household consists of either one person who usually resides alone or two or more people who usually reside together and share facilities (such as eating facilities, cooking facilities, bathroom and toilet facilities, a living area) (SNZ).
Intensification	The shortening of shifts (fewer hours per shift) which allows employees to work harder for a shorter period of time and cuts down on the number of paid work breaks.
Labour force	The labour force consists of people aged 15 years and over who regularly work for one or more hours per week for financial gain, or as an unpaid workers in a family business. Also included are

people who are unemployed, actively seeking and available to work either full-time or part-time work (SNZ, <http://www.stats.govt.nz>).

Labour Force Participation Rate	The labour force participation rate is the percentage of the population aged 15 years or over who were either employed or unemployed and seeking work (SNZ).
Labour Force Status	Labour force status is the position of all people aged 15 and over in relation to the labour market (SNZ).
Overemployment	When a individual is employed to work more hours than they desire or need.
Part-time Work	Regular ongoing employment of 1-29 hours per week where the conditions of permanent work are also met.
Permanent Work	Regular ongoing work with the same employer where the days and hours worked remain the same week to week (or fortnightly or monthly).
Primary Labour Force	Labour force concentrated in the primary labour sector and characterised by what are traditionally viewed as low-skilled and low paid jobs which require relatively little training and offer relatively poor wages and conditions (Marshall 1994).
Secondary Labour Force	Labour force concentrated in the secondary labour sector and characterised by what are traditionally viewed as higher grade, higher status jobs and better paid jobs (compared to those for the primary labour force) with better terms and conditions (ibid).
Underemployment	When a individual is not employed to work as many hours as they desire or need.
Unpaid Work	Unpaid work includes activities which are undertaken either for persons living in the same household as the respondent; or for persons outside of the respondent's household for which the performance of those activities is not paid (SNZ).

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Work Force Includes all those people in the labour force and also all those aged 15 and over who are involved in or seeking unpaid work.

PERSONAL PROFILE

HELLO

Before entering into this research I would like to provide you with a picture of who I am and to situate myself both alongside and in this research. I shall start by giving you my biographical details and then I shall explain my relationship to this particular topic.

I am a young Pakeha women in my mid twenties. I come from a lower middle class, pakeha, nuclear family with two siblings, although at any given time a number of 'extras' are included within the family circle. I spent most of my formative years in a small New Zealand town of about 2,500 inhabitants with a strong Maori population. I am now married and although I live in a city I have come to appreciate the strong sense of community that can be found in small town New Zealand more than I ever did while I lived there.

I studied for my BA in Spanish and political studies at Auckland University. It was during my time at this institution that I became exposed to explicit feminist theoretical teaching. I learnt (although hesitantly at first) from this teaching and consequently adjusted my world view to incorporate my new understanding. In 1996 I embarked on a Master of Arts degree in Social Policy at Massey University. By this stage I had fostered a deep desire for equality and social justice. This arose from both my Christian and my feminist beliefs.

While studying for the first year of this degree I became interested in issues pertaining to women and work and the changing nature of work. I had had personal experience in casual work before I started this thesis and the power imbalance I experienced had frustrated me. However I heard that casual work was supposed to be a positive thing for women. There is a dearth of information on this issue and thus a thesis came to be.

Since embarking on this thesis I have taken up a position of casual employment. I believed that my prior knowledge of the problems that could arise out of such a position would enable me to protect myself. I found that this was not the case. While my knowledge of labour force issues and the rights of a casual employee do probably

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clothe me with slightly more power than I may otherwise have possessed, the greater understanding I have of both the assumptions and concepts involved in casual work and the impact that this casual work can have on the rest of my life brings me immense frustration. This demonstrates that research and knowledge alone are impotent unless they are used to educate and promote social change. I pray that in some small way this thesis may work towards this.