


Introduction to Special Collection: Women's agency at work

The Economic and
Labour Relations Review
2015, Vol. 26(3) 384–392
© The Author(s) 2015
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1035304615600347
elrr.sagepub.com
The SAGE logo consists of a circular emblem containing a stylized 'S' shape, followed by the word 'SAGE' in a bold, uppercase, sans-serif font.

Janet Sayers and Jane Parker

Massey University, New Zealand

Julie Douglas and Katherine Ravenswood

AUT University, New Zealand

Rae Cooper

University of Sydney, Australia

Abstract

This article introduces a Special Collection of four articles that highlight responses by working women collectively and individually to forces accelerated by the recent global crises. It draws out common themes from accounts of African women's responses to harassment at work, of the links between union representation and pay equity in Brazil and South Africa and of Australian women's quest for flexible and fair work/family arrangements. From these perspectives, the article sets out a five-point research agenda to help empower women's collective and individual agency in response to working conditions shaped by global economic and social forces.

JEL codes: J100

Keywords

Gender, industrial/employment relations policy, social movements, union organisation

Corresponding author:

Janet Sayers, School of Management, Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North 4442,
New Zealand.

Email: J.G.Sayers@massey.ac.nz

Introduction

The four research articles presented in this Special Collection emerged from a Call for Papers for a Stream at the Gender, Work and Organisation (GWO) Conference at Keele University in the United Kingdom in 2014 and was the result of a collective effort involving international relationships.¹ Participants were asked to consider working women's experiences and to focus on aspects of women's employment that engage with empowerment and their collective action in the context of developments in work organisation arising from the recent global financial crisis (GFC), and the accompanying political conservatism and associated austerity measures.

Under conditions of crisis, there is anxiety that women's access to and advancement in the workplace has become glacially slow, unspectacular, sometimes been arrested and, on occasion, even regressed (e.g. Cooper and Parker, 2012; Donnelly and Proctor-Thomson, 2012; New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2010, 2012). The challenges for women with regard to the GFC are compounded by their lives being inextricably interwoven with other spheres of life which accompany or exacerbate marginalisation: gendered aspects of union/collective bargaining, domestic contexts like caring responsibilities and public contexts, for example, poverty and poor housing (e.g. Cooper and Baird, 2009; Healy et al., 2006).

The aim of this Special Collection is to discuss the impact that recent forces have had on women, but more importantly, we want to reflect on women's collective agency – their responses to difficult circumstances. Specific contexts of particular relevance we initially identified in the Call for Papers included women's diverse working experiences across their 'intersectional' interests; sub-groups of women and/or minority groups; women in unorganised workplaces and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) whose voice is rarely heard in international journals; women's collective organisation outside of unions (e.g. through NGOs who represent and advocate for women and women's workplace experiences with and instead of unions); continued support for the central role unions play in collective regulation of women's working conditions and pay (e.g. by minimum standards, awards and industry agreements, national systems); political processes and their impact on working women, especially around issues to do with women's bodies; women's voices in unions including union leadership, union policies, roles and structures; the problems and possibilities for the construction of women's collectives in small workplaces, in informal work, and when working in private homes and/or for agencies; and finally, emerging developments in work and employment for women (e.g. increased non-standard and precarious work (Standing, 2011)).

Common themes

Each of the articles in this Special Collection engages with some aspect of the repercussions of the international forces which have helped trigger and continue to contribute to the challenges for working women. At the macro-level, the articles highlight synergies between women's experiences in diverse nation states and these states' particular institutional, regulatory and political arrangements (Connolly et al., 2012; Kirton and Greene, 2011). Women's experiences at work are, of course, multifarious. Representing this diversity is challenging, but the articles in this collection clearly demonstrate the necessity of

remaining focused on women as a group, despite our intersectional characteristics and interests. Women continue to have shared experiences and concerns around the ways our bodies are the subject of political policy and controversy and of organisational practices (Sayers and Jones, 2014a, 2014b).

The articles encompass both developed and developing countries including Australia, South Africa, Brazil, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Within these local and specific contexts, researchers have considered how women and their agents are engaging with wider international forces. Jacobs, Brahic and Olaiya set their study within the coercive labour conditions that exist in the east African agribusiness (cut flower) global supply chain; Ledwith and Munakamwe's comparative study of the gender pay gaps in Brazil and South Africa focuses on the absence of women leaders in the collective bargaining process; Williamson's article on the progress of paid parental leave (PPL) in Australia assesses its progress post-2011 through the confusing political and economic policy environment of the Abbott regime; and Williamson, Cooper and Baird's article engages with how Australian women teachers are currently arranging and negotiating their caring responsibilities through the 'flexible work' mechanism of job-sharing.

The articles are all empirically based and draw on diverse sets of methods, both quantitative and/or qualitative. Case-based research means that women's voices can be heard as they discuss their experiences of job-sharing and sexual harassment, and important theoretical developments are signalled in these articles (discussed below). Quantitative studies enable macro trends to be identified and analysed, for example, the gender pay gap and how this might be connected to a lack of women in union leadership roles and in collective bargaining processes. Mixed-methods research involving analysis of documents and media artefacts and interviews is used to discuss the muddled response of the Abbott regime as it reacted to political and business lobbying on the issue of PPL in Australia. Methods that enable the cacophony of political, business, union and other stakeholders to be represented and understood will be important to future research on contemporary women's work experiences in emerging global conditions.

One hope for this Special Collection was that it will provide an opportunity for researchers to examine how women, both collectively and individually, can influence their own workplace situations – how women are harnessing their agency to improve their working lives and that of other people. Previously, work in this vein has emphasised women's work–life balance arrangements (Gregory and Milner, 2009; Ravenswood and Markey, 2011), intersectional identities (e.g. as young ethnic women), industry/sectorial and occupational location in the workplace and gendered and ethnic inequality regimes in the workplace (Acker, 2006). The articles here extend this literature. Several articles demonstrate how women articulate their agency in terms of their workplace progress and influence given their personal and immediate environmental challenges and gender dynamics. The work of Jacobs et al. exemplifies how feminist action research can assist vulnerable east African working women and work against the sexual harassment that has become an intrinsic part of their labour process, and from which European and other consumers benefit. Ledwith and Munakamwe emphasise that women's active involvement in collective bargaining is essential to closing the pay gap, and they highlight the need for more women to take leadership roles in union movements. Williamson's article

on Australia's PPL policies (Australia along with the United States of America has a comparatively poor record of supporting working new parents) illustrates the politicised nature of women's working rights and how women and their supporters struggle in an contextually conditioned fashion for this most basic of human rights. Similarly, the contextually complex ways in which job-sharing is enacted and experienced by women and their employers is discussed by Williamson et al. to show that job-sharing is highly differentiated and needs to be understood through the larger forces of flexibilisation of the labour market while also highlighting the everyday unpaid work women do to make job-sharing functional.

The four articles illustrate that women's agency is enacted within structuring forces of a gendered and ideologically prescribed political economy. Whatever claims that can be made about women's agency or 'progress' need to be made carefully. Women's struggles continue on many fronts as they try and interact with larger economic and political forces that seem to want to keep them marginalised from safe well-paid and secure work. Each of the articles showcased here throws light on the ways that women struggle to enact individual and collective agency in patriarchal and confusing dynamic structures which deliberately frame themselves as being in constant crisis (Castells, 2013 [2009]). The articles in this Collection contribute to an understanding of the impacts on women since 2007 of emerging economic and labour market policy and associated practices, and also, importantly, how women are responding through struggle.

Collection

In this section, we provide a brief overview of each article in the Collection and highlight its synergies with the Collection's overall aims and highlight continuities between articles. In the final section, we suggest an agenda for further research.

The article by Jacobs, Brahic and Olaiya, 'Sexual harassment in an east African agribusiness supply chain', discusses the intransigent problem of workplace violence against women, specifically sexual harassment. In their empirical study, which included 62 farms across four countries, located within global supply chains, the authors show how sexual harassment in the cut flower and seedling export industry is endemic in the labour process. It is fostered by coercive employment conditions, especially for the most vulnerable workers in this sector – casual and temporary women workers. This article makes several key contributions. First, it adds to the growing number of studies and policy documents on precarious workers (e.g. International Labour Organization (ILO), 2012; Standing, 2011) and unequivocally shows how labour marginalisation relates to sexual violence. Second, the article provides a rare and necessary study of the rapidly developing economies of Africa, and demonstrates a direct connection between what happens there and Western developed economies. It thus highlights the necessity for developing women's employment collective movements that are transnational. Third, the research provides a model for feminist action research and affirms the possibilities for women's research which can facilitate new forms of collectivism and mobilisation, enabling vulnerable women and victims of employment violence to have a voice.

Ledwith and Munakamwe's article 'Gender, union leadership and collective bargaining: Brazil and South Africa' shares the concern of others in this Collection for

precarious women workers – those not being well served by unions that lack gender equality in their institutional structures. Their comparative study suggests a direct relationship between the severity of the gender pay gap and the degree to which unions incorporate women into leadership structures. This is an important finding because it supports the need for unions to proactively facilitate women's collectives, as well as to encourage their leadership through recruiting able women into positions of power and influence if unions are to have integrity and success in defending workers in vulnerable situations in the future. How unions achieve this can be debated, but gender equality in unions is necessary to fulfil their basic *raison d'être*.

Sue Williamson's article, 'A case study of regulatory confusion: Paid parental leave and public servants', provides an in-depth examination of Australia's PPL policies since 2011 and illustrates how employment policies that could benefit women relate to wider political agendas. PPL reform is a confusing hot mess in Australia, and is vigorously debated between political and employment stakeholders. 'Improving' PPL provision has been a platform used to gain support for the current Liberal/National Coalition government led by Tony Abbott but has been opposed by many within the union movement who distrust the overall ideological thrust of his government's employment policies. The article traces the controversies that have arisen around PPL in recent years and draws attention to the role that conservative political ideology (associated with 'family policy') plays when interwoven with employment policy that would benefit working women. PPL is politicised as PPL discourse supports or detracts from a political party's support for the 'family'. This article makes an important contribution because it demonstrates empirically the way in which employment policies that could improve the working lives of women are eroded in the context of wider political ideologies and local politics. It explores the dilemma, particularly for women in public sector employment where the employer is also the guardian of budgetary austerity and the industrial regulator, of whether to rely on legislative reform or on collective bargaining for the delivery of the arrangements essential for equitably combining paid and family work.

Finally, Williamson, Cooper and Baird's article, 'Job-sharing among teachers: Positive, negative (and unintended) consequences', examines women's experiences of job-sharing in Australia and provides an insight into the ways in which women try and make the much-vaunted reality of employment flexibility work for them, by exploring both the positive and the negative outcomes of job-sharing. Job-sharing is a form of part-time work often undertaken to allow the combination of paid and family work, but this study illustrates the need to differentiate between quality part-time work (more likely to be permanent) and job-sharing arrangements where workers are on temporary contracts. For more precarious employees, job-sharing is not necessarily 'quality' flexible work. The authors identify the need to address the policy dilemma that protecting the job security of formerly full-time employees seeking a temporary reduction in hours may be predicated on the creation of insecure temporary positions for their job-share partners. The article concludes by reinforcing the potential of job-sharing to disrupt the gendered rhythms of work that make full-time work often problematic for people with caring responsibilities. The researchers argue that when men use job-sharing more, this potential might be more fully realised. The article also provides insights into how women respond to increasing opportunities and demands for employment flexibility. The researchers reinforce the notion that

flexibility is a double-edged sword for women and, as with childcare provision, the word ‘quality’ (as in permanent, affordable, safe, accessible and reliable) is the essential precursor to any descriptive employment word used in labour market flexibility policy and practice.

The present Collection only scrapes the surface of what could and needs to be done. Without research that critically engages with the contemporary political and economic milieu, which is framed in media research/educational institutions as ‘crisis’, women’s progress will stall or slide backwards. As ever, women’s progress will only occur through struggle, and in the following section, we set out some beachheads for this struggle indicated through the four articles discussed above.

Further research

The general themes underlying this collection of research articles pinpoint at least six areas for further research attention. First, there is a need for more politically engaged feminist research, especially considering the clear evidence uncovered through these empirical articles of the connections between public policy that affects the working conditions of women and precarious work. Research can help silenced women’s voices be heard (also see Cooper and Parker, 2012) and researchers need to continue to work even harder and with even more courage and conviction as researcher-activists even though it is becoming more difficult to be critical scholars in many university research environments.

Second, the issue of sexual violence underlines the ways in which women’s bodies remain a focus of government employment ideology, policy and organisational practice. Engagement with feminist theories to critically deconstruct the formulation and enactment of government and institutional policy and practice is needed to ensure that attention remains focused on improving diverse women’s lives through understanding the dynamics of employment policy in relation to the ways that female biology is the central object through which policies of control are formulated, albeit often unconsciously.

Third, there is need for research investigating ways women’s experiences in developing and developed economies are inter-related. The issues facing women are frequently cross-national concerns; increasing precariousness and vulnerability is connected not only to working conditions but also discourses around the control of women generally. The fate of women in developed and developing economies is intertwined.

Fourth, several of the articles affirm the importance of unions for women’s empowerment. More research is clearly needed on women’s leadership, not only in terms of reflecting numerical progress in unions, but of women’s leadership styles and concerns so that the present hegemonies are problematised and improved rather than replicated. Also, in relation to collective organising, alternative forms of action need examination. Women in this collection of articles can be seen to be acting collectively through unions, but also within work organisations (e.g. around issues of significance like parental leave and job-sharing) and through drawing together because they share a common problem (sexual harassment) in concert with researchers. Further research on alternative forms of collective organising is needed (e.g. collective action through social movements and social media campaigns). In particular and considering the challenges being experienced

by unions in neo-liberal hegemonies, the nexus points between unions and other forms of collectivism need to be researched. Would it benefit unions and the women they represent to work more collaboratively with social movements like eco-feminism for example?

Fifth, we contend that there needs to be more work on the gender wage gap in different industries, as well as some serious attention paid to the assumptions that underpin labour market flexibility and its impact on women at the macro labour market level. Recent research published on the gender pay gap in European Union countries shows there has been a visible albeit marginal improvement between 2005 and 2012 (European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 2015). Further research is needed to understand in more depth the gender pay gap in a range of countries in relation to employment issues like unemployment, under-employment and multiple job-holding, as well as broader social issues like poverty and housing. Flexibility is a key issue for women as the articles in this collection have shown: women want flexibility but they can also be injured by it. Studies are needed that are sensitive to various ways that women's ways of working are reflected by and interact with statistical forms of measuring labour market outcomes like the gender pay gap. Incorporating qualitative empirics will help 'flesh out' and corroborate (or not) the broad themes proposed by more quantitative approaches. The gender pay gap, for instance, is considered by some to have stagnated and even widened in the context of individualistic/neo-liberal policy, yet this observation is not necessarily confirmed in recent studies. In New Zealand, for instance, progress in narrowing the gap has been poor since the dismantling of the more collectivist and centralised award system. Finally, as part of the research agenda we have outlined above, a further symposium would help to continue examination and highlighting of the issues/themes encapsulated in this Collection. It would also help emphasise the glacial/even negative pace of change in some areas on a number of 'women's' issues at work and women's collective responses. Overall, this Special Collection indicates the necessity for research to continue into women's work – not only the ways in which 'women's work' is constantly being reconfigured but also how women have continued to struggle for a quality life for themselves and their families in the heightened difficult circumstances triggered by the economic crises since 2007.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. The Conference stream was convened by the authors, assisted by Gil Kirton (Queen Mary University, London), Sue Ledwith (Ruskin College, Oxford) and Lise Lotte Hansen (Roskilde University, Denmark). Selected articles presented at the Conference, all of them based on empirical material, were then 'crafted' by the authors for this Special Collection. The authors thank the anonymous referees of all articles, including this introduction.

References

- Acker J (2006) Inequality regimes: gender, class and race in organizations. *Gender & Society* 20(4): 441–464.

- Castells M (2013 [2009]) *Communication Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Connolly J, Rooney T and Whitehouse G (2012) Tracking pay equity: the impact of regulatory change on the dissemination and sustainability of equal remuneration decisions. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 54(2): 114–130.
- Cooper R and Baird M (2009) Australian women: getting to equality? In: Catalyst Australia Staff (ed.) *Equality Speaks: Challenges for a Fair Society*. Sydney, NSW: Catalyst, pp. 57–67.
- Cooper R and Parker J (2012) Women, work and collectivism. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 54(2): 107–113.
- Donnelly N and Proctor-Thomson S (2012) The role of ‘voice’ in matters of ‘choice’: flexible work outcomes for women in the New Zealand Public Services. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 54(2): 182–203.
- European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) (2015) Gender Equality Index 2015: measuring gender equality in the European Union 2005–2012. Available at: <http://eige.europa.eu/content/news-article/eige-launches-gender-equality-index-2015-marginal-improvements-in-gender-equali> (accessed 20 June).
- Gregory A and Milner S (2009) Trade unions and work–life balance: changing times in France and the UK. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 47(1): 122–146.
- Healy G, Hansen LL and Ledwith S (2006) Editorial: still uncovering gender in industrial relations. *Industrial Relations Journal* 37(4): 290–298.
- International Labour Organization (ILO) (2012) *From Precarious Work to Decent Work: Outcome Document to the Workers’ Symposium on Policies and Regulations to Combat Precarious Employment*. Geneva: ILO (Bureau for Workers’ Activities).
- Kirton G and Greene AM (2011) Diversity management meets downsizing: the case of a government department. *Employee Relations* 33(5): 22–39.
- New Zealand Human Rights Commission (2010) *New Zealand Census of Women’s Participation – 2010*. Wellington: HRC. Available at: <http://www.neon.org.nz/documents/womensCensus/HRC-Womens-Census2010.pdf> (accessed 20 June 2015).
- New Zealand Human Rights Commission (2012) *New Zealand Census of Women’s Participation – 2012*. Wellington: HRC. Available at: <http://www.hrc.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/web-census.pdf> (accessed 20 June 2015).
- Ravenswood K and Markey R (2011) The role of unions in achieving a family-friendly workplace. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 53(4): 486–503.
- Sayers J and Jones D (2014a) Truth scribbled in blood: work, menstruation and poetry. *Gender, Work and Organization* 22(4): 94–111.
- Sayers J and Jones D (2014b) Fifty shades of outrage: women’s collective online action, embodiment and emotions. *Labour and Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work* 24(4): 272–285.
- Standing G (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. USA: Bloomsbury Academic.

Author biographies

Janet Sayers is a Senior Lecturer at Massey University, New Zealand. Her research includes analysis of the contradictions of service work, new technology uptake by entrepreneurial micro-businesses and diversity management. Her methods include applying critical theory to business issues, and using satire in critical analysis.

Jane Parker is Professor of Employment Relations and Human Resource Management at Massey University, having previously worked at University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST), Warwick and Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Her research

focuses on comparative employment relations, equality in work organisations and employee voice and consultation. She is currently co-leading a research team on the Living Wage in New Zealand, and co-working on an International Labour Organization (ILO)-funded project on employment policy in Nauru.

Julie Douglas is a Senior Lecturer at the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. Her broad research focus is on ethics and the social justice impacts of business environments. She is researching the factors that determine the labour market position of an occupation, including the political environment and the social construction of gender, profession, skill and power. She is also interested in employment relations, the living wage and unions.

Katherine Ravenswood is a Senior Lecturer in Management at AUT University, New Zealand. Her research, based in the discipline of employment relations, has strong industry links and a core focus on gender and diversity in work. Specific projects have investigated legal careers for women, productivity and regulation, productivity and employee voice and paid/unpaid care work.

Rae Cooper is Associate Dean, Undergraduate Business, and an Associate Professor in the University of Sydney Business School, Australia. Her research in employment relations focuses on flexible work and careers, women and leadership and bargaining and negotiation. She has published over 40 academic pieces in leading journals and major collections, and is a regular speaker and commentator on employment issues. Her public offices include Director, Family Planning NSW, Chair, Board of Directors, Australian Hearing, Deputy Chair Premier's Expert Advisory Council on Women, Director, NSW TAFE Commission and Director, NSW Rural Assistance Authority.