

Reference

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Leah F. Vosko (2011)

Managing the Margins: Gender, Citizenship and the International Regulation of Precarious Employment
Oxford University Press.

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Background

Leah Vosko is a widely-cited international authority on gender and insecure work. Her 2011 book *Managing the Margins: Gender, Citizenship and the International Regulation of Precarious Employment* focuses upon the growth in job insecurity, its gendered nature and the failures of regulatory approaches to adapt effectively to these changed conditions.

Internationally since the 1980s, but especially since the economic crisis of 2008, precarious employment has increased as a proportion of all work. The English-speaking countries have been strongly affected, although to varying degrees. In Australia insecure work is particularly common, with 40 per cent of employees in insecure work (ACTU 2011); and in the USA the majority of employees lack job security. Insecure work is somewhat less common in Canada (Vosko 2010: 76); and in the UK only about 5.15 per cent of employees are in fixed-term, agency, seasonal and casual employment.¹

In general, non-permanent staff have fewer labour market rights, less protection against unfair dismissal and no entitlements to redundancy payments. They receive lower pay and often no entitlements to paid holidays. Again there are international variations in the rights and benefits temporary workers receive.² At the time when Vosko was writing her 2011 book union density had been in decline for a decade in the USA, UK and Australia (though remaining more stable in Canada and New Zealand).

Insecure work is one of the conditions that defines many employees as 'vulnerable workers'; a high proportion of whom are migrants, members of ethnic minorities and/or indigenous people (TUC 2008). Casual and temporary workers are known to have poorer health and safety outcomes. However, highly educated, well-qualified people in professional occupations are increasingly obliged to

accept work that is casual, fixed-term or insecure. The majority of both 'vulnerable workers' and 'insecure professionals' are women. For example, around 64 per cent of people in insecure work in Australia are women (Vosko 2010: 107).

The Scope of the Book

This is a wide-ranging, densely packed, scholarly and ambitious publication. It examines job insecurity in late-capitalist countries, its gendered nature and the extent to which it is successfully regulated. The main focus is on English-speaking nations, particularly Australia. Also included are the EU 15, and at times the whole OECD. Vosko also pays close attention to the plight of 'third country nationals' — economic migrants coming from poorer countries to these richer host nations.

In conducting the research for this project during a 10-year period between 1999 and 2009, Vosko used a mix of research methods and primary and secondary written sources. She interviewed 25 experts from the European Commission, unions in Australia, Canada and the UK and a Dutch senior politician with responsibility for international affairs. The major focus is on primary source materials: national government documents and primary statistical sources from Australia, Canada, the United States, United Kingdom and to a lesser extent Denmark, France and Ireland. She also reviewed European Union treaties, resolutions, reports, white papers and directives. The other major source is relevant International Labour Organisation (ILO) and United Nations documents covering more than a century between 1906 and 2009. She has also condensed many theoretical and historical writings about women at work.

Key Concepts

In defining who insecure workers are, Vosko includes casual, seasonal, agency workers, self-employed sole traders and employees who have multiple part-time jobs: anyone who experiences uncertainty about their future employment.

Vosko (2010: 2) notes that terms such as 'precarious', 'contingent' and 'atypical' employment are often used interchangeably, as if precariousness was an inevitable feature of 'non standard' work. Since much 'atypical' work, especially part-time employment, is presented as the result of free choice, women's job insecurity is often regarded as voluntary and hence unproblematic. In Australia, only a minority of part-time employees (approximately 29 per cent) are on permanent contracts, and the majority are casuals. Insecure work is one of the reasons for the continuing gender pay gap.

As Vosko notes, there is no need for part-time and other forms of 'non-standard' employment to be insecure and sub-standard. Vosko points out that in many nations a high proportion of part-time jobs are permanent and part-timers have the same or equivalent entitlements to social and labour protection as full-timers. She also notes that many 'standard' jobs have become less secure, with restructurings, downsizings and redundancies now common in positions once regarded as permanent. A central theme of this book is that full-time jobs (the 'standard employment relationship', or SER) are not necessarily the solution

to the problem of labour market insecurity. Now that the SER is in steep decline it is no longer appropriate to talk about non-standard and 'atypical'.

The SER was the normative model of employment for several decades after World War II. The ascent of this model coincided with the postwar boom, buoyed by the optimism of Keynesian economic theory and supported by capital, organised labour and governments. The aim was to create a loyal, committed workforce and the conditions for steady long-term growth (Vosko 2010: 3–6).

The SER allowed for a full working week of 35 hours (in France and Canada), 37.5 hours (in New Zealand) or 40 hours (in the USA). Wages and salaries were intended adequately to support a male worker, a wife and children. Under the SER, employees also received a range of benefits such as paid holidays, and in the USA, health insurance. Standard employment was 'permanent', with protections against unfair dismissal in most late-capitalist countries (but not in the USA).

As Vosko also notes (2010: 6–9), the SER has been extensively criticised for the ways in which it has helped to reproduce gender inequalities. A feature of the SER is that men, and especially married men with children, are more likely to be treated as standard, core workers. Married women with children are more likely to be seen as 'atypical' and abnormal, as if unpaid caring activities were an irrational aberration, not an essential feature of social life.

The SER is not responsible for creating gender divisions at work: it has simply absorbed and reinforced existing gender inequalities (Vosko 2010: 7). Women have long been used as temporary workers, barred from professional work in the inter-war depression if they married, but recruited into every part of the labour market in two world wars (Briar 1997). However, as Vosko notes, the SER has helped maintain the 'male breadwinner' model of employment and women's temporary and marginal position in the paid workforce.

This division between SER and non-SER jobs has helped maintain men's relatively privileged position both in the paid workforce and the family, although, as Vosko (2010: 77) points out, in all of the English-speaking countries and the EU 15 nations women work as many total hours per week as men.³ Women still perform two thirds of the work that is unpaid. The SER has reinforced the economic dependency of wives on husbands. Indeed one of the assumptions underpinning the SER has been that women can be supported within the family and do not need regular employment and a living wage. In practice, however, men have never been obliged to share their earnings with their wives or partners.

Women need adequate and predictable earnings today more than ever. The average male wage has declined, and the wellbeing of two-parent families now depends on women's incomes. Furthermore, relationships are less stable than they once were and there are increasing numbers of women-headed families due to separation. Women have lower average hourly earnings than men, and their lower pay means fewer opportunities to save to cover time spent between jobs.

Vosko describes the main current forms of marginal and insecure work. Women are over-represented amongst sole trader self-employed people, and often their self-employment is simply a disguised form of insecure and marginal employment, lacking labour rights, health and safety provisions and social entitlements as well as job security (Vosko 2010: 170–1). Temporary agency workers,

many of them migrant women, are at risk of severe exploitation, partly because there can be a lack of clarity about who their employer is.

Vosko points out that insecure work has serious implications for women, including work intensification, difficulty in taking breaks and limited access to maternity leave, maternity pay and redundancy pay. Temporary workers are less likely to be in unions and more likely to lack collective power to negotiate with employers, bargain for improved pay and other benefits or to insist on healthy and safe working conditions. Migrant women are especially likely to be in insecure work with poor conditions.

In addition, Vosko employs the concept of citizenship. She uses this partly to argue, as writers such as Ruth Lister (1997) have done, that work and welfare policies and practices that create economic dependence of adults on their partners take away women's full citizenship within their own nation-state. However, Vosko also uses the concept of citizenship to critique the disadvantaged position of women migrants, and in so doing she critiques the concept of national citizenship.

Managing the Margins

Internationally, job security has been undermined by free trade agreements and by structural adjustment policies since the 1980s. Employers in richer nations, thrown into competition with poorer countries, have cut labour costs, partly through the increasing use of casual and temporary work contracts.

Despite these international trends, the policy and legislative frameworks of individual nations make an important difference. So too do some of the international agreements, directives and regulations to which nations are a party, provided these are enforced. A central aim of Vosko's book is to describe a number of responses to the growth in insecure work from unions, state and federal governments and international bodies such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the European Union (EU).

In her chapter 'Regulating the Employment Relationship', Vosko argues that the responses to the growth of job insecurity by governments and international agencies have been inadequate. For example, since 1999, when the International Labour Organisation (ILO) made its declaration on 'decent work' under which workers are entitled to 'conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity, in which rights are protected and adequate remuneration and social coverage is provided', job security has continued to decline.

This book shifts the debate about job security towards a new paradigm. Vosko concludes that although temporary work is a problem, a full return to the SER (even if it was a realistic option) is not the solution. Attempts to recreate it simply perpetuate inequalities based on gender, nationality and ethnicity. Vosko argues in her final chapter that a re-imagining is required: one that moves beyond the shortcomings of the SER and the employer-employee relationship more generally. The tantalising vision Vosko presents is one of *all* work (including family caregiving) providing a basis for citizenship and associated social and economic rights. Though this is not mapped out in terms of practicalities, Vosko points to

the necessity for a feminist political economy model to inform current debates and future planning.

Intended Audience

This is an important and highly informative resource for academics and for senior policy makers working at state, federal and international levels. Its useful statistics, tables, lists of primary sources and analysis of what does and does not help precarious workers can be utilised by activists in the field.

It is not an introductory book for readers new to the topic areas. However, as part of the advisory group of the Gender and Work database, Vosko also has input into more accessible resources, aimed at employees and their unions (see <http://www.genderwork.ca/>).

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Notes

1. In 2011, 1,566,000 temporary workers were in casual or temporary contracts out of 29,130,000 employees in the UK. This does not include people at risk of redundancy. Nevertheless, since 2010, job insecurity has grown markedly, especially in the public and voluntary sectors.
2. For example, in the United Kingdom, under legislation that came into force in October 2011, temporary workers qualify after 12 weeks with the same employer for the same conditions as permanent staff, including improved maternity rights. This contrasts with Australia, where non-permanent employees lack a range of entitlements (ACTU 2011).
3. Except in Australia, where women's total hours of work exceed those of men.

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