

Provisioning

Thinking About All of Women's Work

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Cet article présente plusieurs façons de conceptualiser et de comptabiliser le travail des femmes et chacune des approches met en valeur certains aspects du travail des femmes. Toutefois, ces approches qui proviennent de différentes pratiques disciplinaires issues de cette tradition, ont dévoilé d'autres problèmes. L'article propose des dispositions qui prendraient en considération le travail des femmes qui s'avère plus nuancé, plus complexe, qui se situe dans le temps, qui donne de l'importance au but visé, à la diversité, aux revendications et au recours possible.

Local and transnational firms search for flexible workforces, cheaper goods, and more consumers and profits. Women in Canada and elsewhere find they are expected to respond to rising demand for flexible part-time, contract, and insecure jobs. At the same time they must also meet the demand for consistent contributions to parenting, household, mutual aid, and community work. "Women's work is never done" expresses the reality for all too many women, especially poor women. Invisibility adds to the tyranny of this endless work. Much of what women do is not considered work or not counted as valuable.

Seeing, counting, and valuing all the work women do is an important way to resist the invisibility yet endlessness of women's work. This article presents several ways of conceptualizing and accounting for the work women do. Each of these approaches highlights aspects of women's labour. Each comes from different disciplinary practices and address concerns that have arisen in that tradition, while uncovering other problems. The article ends by proposing the concept of provisioning as a way to think about all the work that women do in more nuanced, complex ways, that attends to the time, purpose, diversity, claims and possible entitlements. The concept of provisioning, used to date by some feminist economists (Nelson) may open up a more comprehensive understanding of what women actually do to acquire resources for meeting the responsibilities they carry for the well-

being of themselves and others, and for imagining different policy and practice possibilities. Our research intends to examine the multiple dimensions, costs and implications of provisioning in ways that extends the contributions that have been made to understand the paid, unpaid, caring and volunteer labour performed by women.

Paid Employment

Paid employment is the way that individuals and households are expected to acquire the resources they need to purchase the necessities of life. The majority of poor women have for centuries engaged in farm or market employment to bring money into the household. In the past few decades, however, girls and women of all classes are increasingly expected to do paid work in addition to fulfilling traditional female work expectations. Today, welfare policy, pension policy, daycare policies, and virtually all social and educational policies and benefits are designed to ensure that women participate in paid employment, promise rewards if they do, and make life difficult if they do not.

Yet paid employment is but one avenue used for achieving the goal of acquiring resources for life's necessities. There has been considerable research carried out in the '90s that document the multiple income strategies used by those who live in low-income households (Barndt; Goode and Maskovsky; Razavi). When considering these data it is important to remember that such strategies are commonly used in high-income households—it is just that the latter have more choice, more options available to them. For low-income households, like their high-income counterparts, patterns of employment changed during the '80s and '90s, under the powerful regulation of a new economic discourse of global economy, local restructuring, and the need for a flexible workforce that allows industry to quickly respond to changing international conditions (Beneria, Flora *et al.*). In many countries, Canada being

no exception, this process was marked by massive layoffs across many different types of employment sectors (Cohen). New hires were for jobs that were contract. This was key to ensuring that the workforce was flexible but it also marked the end to the ideas of a stable job or a career ladder—key assumptions in post WW II labour market policies (Bakker). People became contingent workers, moving from contract to contract as firms adapted a just-in-time approach to inventories. Although this new labour force has been billed as particularly attractive to women, giving them some time and work location flexibility (Gardiner), as well as work/non-work options, the majority of these jobs are dead-end, as well as short-term. Thus, frequently women are faced with the additional work of constantly looking for new contract jobs and reorganizing their caring responsibilities (de Wolff).

The speed and scope of globalization, it is argued, was possible because of the advent of information technology which meant that even if workers were not mobile, their labour was. This did mean that those with certain technical skills could command good salaries but, as in the “old economy,” information technology also spun off bad jobs—many of which were taken up by women (Anderson). Another result was that certain types of work could now be done in the home. The advantages of this needs to be counter-balanced against the costs that women carry in terms of balancing yet another type of work carried out in the home, along with its attendant isolation, and lack of benefits. Not surprisingly, the incomes women make continue to be low, while sources and amount of income are unstable (Luxton; Saraswati). The expectations placed on women to be employed, and the insecurity of the types of jobs available to them, are important for understanding why women negotiate responsibilities and build community in the ways that they do.

The Underground Economy and Informal Work

The existence of an underground economy is well-documented (Donath; Himmelweit) albeit it is associated in the minds of many with Third World economies. An underground economy, and its associated informal labour market, thrives in Canada but for obvious reasons its size and scope are difficult to estimate. Attempts made to document it tend to be associated with studies of low-income households, but such economic activity occurs across all income levels. However, as in other areas of research, upper-income households have not been scruti-

nized under the research lens as closely as those living in poverty. With that reservation in mind, the limited data that do exist suggest that in Canada the underground economy, estimated at two to three per cent of Gross Domestic Product takes the form of such activities as skill exchanges and bartering, as well as informal arrangements amongst women for services such as babysitting (Waring).

Paid work accounts for the financial value of women's work but leaves out diversity of work and suggests a very narrow purpose of work. The informal economy begins to account for more diverse types of women's work and

broader purposes, but it is often invisible. Nor is it clear how much time it takes up, especially when conducted inside the home. Moreover its invisibility means it cannot serve as a basis for claims on public service such as pensions or social insurance.

Household and Domestic Work

The household and domestic work done by women has been the site of a rich and diverse scholarship, as well as political debates (Matthews 1987; Porter and Kauppi 1996). Some took the form of documenting the tasks done, the time devoted to these tasks, the skills required to do them, their value when translated into monetary terms, and their contribution to GDP. The sheer

amount and dollar worth of this work is no longer questioned. However, a reservation frequently noted, even by those promoting a research approach that documents the dollar value of unpaid work, is that the labor market value of such work is low (Waring). Thus, the translations, while high in terms of hours, are consistently low in terms of the monetary market worth of the work. The critique arising from this debate is what is pertinent to this paper. Namely, work that is associated with the household, the private realm, is undervalued.

Another thread in domestic work scholarship stems from its historic connection with labour policies and immigration regulations designed to bring into Canada people, mainly women, who are able to fulfill the local demand for domestic servants (Anderson). Historically, in the Canadian context, these women came disproportionately from the Caribbean and, more recently, from South Asia. Such domestic work policies are one arena within which anti-racist critiques have developed. Through such policies and practices Canada traffics in a global care chain of women migrants whose wages are important sources of foreign exchange to their home economies and whose labour meets the domestic demands of Canadian

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households. Feminist scholars as well as childcare advocates have connected this to Canada lack of a national childcare policy (Arat-Koc; McWatt and Neysmith).

Caring Work

Since Janet Finch and Dulcie Groves published their much-quoted volume *A Labour of Love: Women, Work and Caring* in 1983 research and theory on caring labour has expanded (Armstrong and Armstrong 2004). The

literature now addresses the range of activities, working conditions, relationships, tasks and difficulties when caring labour is performed by paid and unpaid carers in households and community (Neysmith; Perrons).

One of the initial distinctions about caring work is still fundamental to current debates, namely, they argued that a distinction needs to be made between caring for and caring about. Caring *for* speaks to physical and concrete activities including feeding, cleaning, and attending to needs of others, while caring *about* captures the rela-

tional and emotional work. The importance of this distinction lies in the challenge it raises for assumptions that equate the expectation that women will care for others if they care about them. It is this assumption that undergirds social policies and practices that center women as responsible for ensuring the care of dependents. At the same time the state, as well as men, eschew such responsibilities, while reaping the benefits of putting their time, energy and capital resources elsewhere. This critique is not limited to Canada. It has proved to be an important lens when examining a range of social policies whether these be in progressive countries such as Sweden or welfare laggards such as the U.S. (Gottfried and Reese). The provision of services to children and old people have been particularly critiqued by feminists for their gender bias about caring labour.

Some of the analytical strength in the literature on caring stems from the fact that it has also been developed simultaneously in several disciplines (Williams). Unfortunately, it seems from the shape of debates arising in various aspects of this scholarship, that these streams have not been talking much to each other. For instance, although social policies are concerned with social justice and health services are dominated by healthcare professionals, both

the ethics of healthcare practice and home-care policies continue to be little influenced by the now sophisticated literature on the ethics of care and/or the feminist critiques of caring labour (Neysmith).

Two aspects from this rich body of literature we find particularly useful: (1) Caring research has highlighted the importance of social relations in the production of quality care work. Whether paid or unpaid, the work is accomplished through social relationships. If, as Foucault argued, such relations are the capillaries of power, research on caring suggests that they are also the arteries of care. Feminist scholars have taken pains to point out that these arteries are not exclusively embodied in female kin which, as noted above, seems to be an assumption in current social policies around care of dependents. Political scientist Nancy Fraser's universal care-giver model elucidated what a gender neutral policy might look like. (2) The examination of caring labour has exposed assumptions about definitions of time. Most jobs are defined in terms of hours of work and frequently are paid accordingly. "Time is Money" is a colloquialism that highlights the connection between the two in industrialized society. The clash has been documented in development literature (Adam 2002), frequently invoking the idea that adherence to clock time is an indicator of progress while other concepts of time are remnants of old cultural practices. In Canada the time clash is visible in home-care services where the care work has been broken down into a series of tasks. For instance, a bath is allocated 20 minutes. The in-joke status of this referent in home-care circles works as humour because everyone knows that giving a bath, its very possibility and the time required to accomplish it, is dependent upon the quality of the caregiver care/recipient relationship. Clock time and caring work are not necessarily compatible. They may not always be contradictory but to bind the two together into a job description conflates the market economy with what some have called the "other economy" of caring (Donath).

Volunteer and Community Work

These terms are considered together because they are frequently conflated. Volunteering is considered an important avenue for making a contribution to one's community. In 1997 Statistics Canada released an important document that estimated the amount of time that Canadians contributed to various types of volunteering. The results supported those found in earlier less systematic studies, namely, that the patterns between men and women differed; higher-income groups undertook voluntary work that was quite different from that of lower income Canadians, older people volunteered more than people of working age, among others. The critique of the survey was that it only captured formally structured volunteer activities (Neysmith and Reitsma-Street 2000). People who work irregular hours, have childcare respon-

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sibilities, work multiple jobs in order to make ends meet, who are recent immigrants etc. seldom belong to formal volunteer organizations. They also frequently do not define the volunteer work that they do as volunteer work. The language does not capture how they see this work

In research done by the authors of this paper even when participants clearly understood that the work they were doing could be classified as volunteer work, the amount of work was consistently underestimated (Reitsma-Street and Neysmith). The authors emerged from this foray into volunteer work with the concern that the concept rendered invisible much of the work that women in poor communities were doing. As a result, such work would never appear on surveys such as that done by Statistics Canada. Indeed these women would fall into that category of not doing volunteer work and, by default, not contributing to community well-being. Thus once again a concept, and the tools used to operationalize it, fail to capture an important dimension of women's lives.

The critique goes beyond noting that the concept of volunteering is a poor fit for the work that women do outside of their family and paid work commitments. Another dimension that arises is around the concept of community. On the one hand, the term can be rather ethereal. On the other, it can be almost prosaic, limited to understandings of geography and local groups. At the time of writing community is a contested concept. The point to be made here is that whatever the debates about how to identify community, who belongs, or where the boundaries are drawn, community does not exist without people making it happen. Women, poor and wealthy, put much time, energy, and resources into their community work. They care for and about others beyond the household based on a collective, historical sense of what is important to preserve and struggle for.

The Third Shift

This term is frequently invoked to capture the multiple work demands that women juggle (Hochschild). It stands in counterpoint to definitions that categorize people as being in the labour force (employed or unemployed) or not. Women might work one shift of a day in a paid job and another shift at home, but at any given time while visibly in any of these named options, at the same time they are caring for children, elderly members of the family, maintaining an irregular contract job and participating in community work. The scope and time commitments, as well as the organization of these different aspects of a woman's life, also change over time. Thus, the word "shift" captures the dynamics as well as the flow and shuffling of work demands. The work and its conditions in one shifts affects that of others. Furthermore, the work is not sequenced. Frequently shifts are occurring at the same time, making different demands and requiring different sets of skills.

The term captures the dimension that some of the other concepts do not. For instance, very different and multiple types of activities can be occurring within one unit of time. Research and theorizing about work need to account for this. Secondly, there is work involved in negotiating among the demands made of women within and between the different shifts.

Provisioning

Each of the foregoing ways of thinking about the work that women do is useful in addressing some aspects of the problem and each has been successful in opening up hitherto unexplored dimensions of work. However, working with a variety of strands from different traditions presents a challenge to weaving a coherent explanation of the meaning of women's work with the explanatory power that can become the foundation for resistance and transformation. Provisioning is a concept we are introducing into research on women, poverty and communities to see if it opens new doors to thinking comprehensively yet succinctly about all the work women do. Provisioning refers to the multiple tasks, time required and relational dimensions of women's work in the context of the purposes for which the work is done. Debates on provisioning aim to explicate how the work women do is valued, and by whom, and what impact these value decisions have on claims for the resources required to perform adequate provisioning for households, community and society.

The following short case summary captures some of the multi-dimensionality of women's work that demands description, interpretation and explanation. The woman, named Ms. A., has been employed and aims to get a job again. She is continuously engaged in household and caring work, and wishes to give back volunteer work to the communities that have helped her.

Her current limited financial resources constrain her options and make it necessary for her to take far more time and energy to garner resources for herself, her children, and others she cares for. Her poverty increases the difficulty of all the work she, and the many other poor women like her, do. As the case highlights, living in poverty also increase the invisibility of the work of women like Ms A. because it robs them of a language for describing this work with words that are valued.

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Ms. A, is in her 30s and mother of three children. She left her last husband following years of abuse and now claims welfare. She had been an educational assistant before and wants to do similar work after upgrading her education. She is also seeing a counsellor about the abuse and her addictions because "I've got to be able to function properly." For the past year her children had to live with relatives but she sees them "all the time," and she visits the relatives and workers who are taking care for her children. With the help of an agency working with abused women, she recently became eligible for a place in public housing

gotten really close again. And you know they want to come around so it's kind of a drag." Ms. A. also hopes to volunteer at a thrift shop for women and for another organization that helped her over the years as she says: "I'd like to give some back you know."

In our research we are using the concept of provisioning in furthering the goal of exposing and documenting the complexity and sheer amount of different types of work that women like Ms. A. do on a daily basis (Neysmith and Reitsma-Street 2003). We define provisioning as the work of securing resources and providing the necessities of life

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and now has more space so her eldest child can live with her half time. Ms. A receives a single persons shelter allowance and monthly welfare of just over \$500 per month as if she is single and employable and as if "her kids still do not count" even though she directly provides for them part of the time.

It is a "long climb back" she says to establish a household. She spends careful, anxious hours trying to figure out what she is eligible for and negotiating with her various counsellors and welfare workers—eight in the last year, as well as teachers, parents, and volunteers from various churches and food banks. It takes skill to do "what is needed to be done": to get adequate food and clothing for herself and the children; to find furniture for the bedrooms; to obtain medical care coverage for her children; to accompany her son to a friend's birthday party and watch daughter play ball on the street as "that doesn't cost anything"; to find free dental care. She is paying for a phone that she can't afford but needs so she can call her children, welfare and various workers, and pursue leads to paid work.

Besides setting up a new household and working to get her children back to live with her full-time, Ms. A is finishing high school. She is also thinking about the future, and trying to put money away for her children so they can have the opportunity to do "whatever they're gifted at." Yet, she worries that she cannot provide. She hears "the clock is ticking" and is worried that she may be one of those in British Columbia who will be cut off welfare because of the two-year limits in the new laws and she won't find a job that pays enough to provide for herself or her children. Thus she wonders if it is right to have children if she cannot afford them, stating "If I don't have enough food for them, and I can't support them that way then I wonder if I'm doing the right thing. But we've really

to those for whom one has relationships of responsibility. This definition speaks to a range of specific activities that are never finished, must be performed regularly, and require energy and attention. Provisioning includes paid employment and unpaid household and caring work. It takes place in the three spheres of market, household, and community, and shifts between them. Provisioning activities cannot be isolated or separated from the context of social relationships in diverse times and spaces because provisioning consists of those daily activities performed to ensure the survival and well-being of oneself and others. Both the activities and the relationships may be voluntary or prescribed. The point is that the activities are necessary; without them people would not survive.

Preliminary analysis (Neysmith, Reitsma-Street, Aronson, Baker Collins and Porter) of 67 qualitative interviews conducted with women living on low or insecure incomes in five communities indicate women engage in a complex pattern of provisioning for a variety of relationships using a range of activities including:

- Domestic household services
- Caring labour especially for kin, but also ex-spouses, friends, and others
- Employment and bartering
- Claims making for services from family, agencies, and the state
- Innovative, manipulative and illegal pursuits including not telling the truth and creating stories to account for poverty
- Creation of time as a resource through multi-tasking and using time rather than money as a resource.

A key finding is women on low, insecure incomes face many contradictions and nearly impossible situations as

they try to provide. They report they could not fulfill their provisioning obligations without the support of informal community and formal state resources. The community and others, however, also become a site of obligations and responsibility for provisioning as well. Our future research agenda is to understand the dimensions and costs of provisioning; to identify relationships between provisioning and community; and to account for conditions that affect the relationships between women and their communities as they engage in provisioning work.

Concluding Comments

Dominant understandings of women's work are limited to the two solitudes of family and the market. If it occurs in the former it is named caring; if in the latter, it is employment. Theories of social networks that are depicted as pathways to connect the two solitudes and build social capital have been limited to formal engagement in organized voluntary activities or leisure activities such as sport. Feminists have critiqued such gender-blind depictions of work and social capital (Rankin). Missed were, for example, the networks that women develop to meet the multiple demands of caring for children. These are face-to-face relationships of relative equality that foster trust as well as forming the basis for collective action.

However, the private/public split continues to mark both research and theory about the many types of work that women do. Within such discourses Ms. A. is silenced. Because she at this moment is not the primary caregiver of her children, and not holding a full-time job, she gets categorized as "not working" on both counts. Yet her days are filled with the work of provisioning for herself with part-time employment and welfare assistance, attending to the multiple tasks that need to be done before the children come home, reciprocating in-kind some of the resources made available to her by others, and planning for the future of those for whom she has responsibility.

We argue that the concept of provisioning is more robust than other available terms for revealing aspects of the work performed by Ms. A and all women. Articulating the community and policy implications of provisioning has a particular urgency to those who live in the midst of the increasing poverty, instability, regulations, and penalties that accompany decreases in public supports in Canada and elsewhere (Goode and Maskovsky; Luxton; Neysmith). Frequently employment and dependent-care policies have actually pitted differentially located groups of women against each other (Fraser). The concept of provisioning is useful in laying out the dynamics of the options and strategies used by women to secure resources for themselves and others. Women who live on limited, insecure incomes need a more solid conceptual basis that makes visible all the

work they do, and values it. Without provisioning, women cannot provide for themselves and others, nor accumulate what is required to sustain households and community in the future.

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