

# “Choosing” Non-Standard Work in Southern Alberta

## A Qualitative Study

JANE BARTER MOULAISON

*Cet article est issu d'une recherche quantitative conduite par le « Womenspace Resource Centre », un petit centre de femmes qui dessert Lethbridge en Alberta et les régions environnantes. Cette étude a mis l'accent sur les motivations complexes qui poussent les femmes à « choisir » des arrangements de travail, non traditionnels. L'auteure plaide en faveur de l'importance de l'autonomie des femmes dans leur décision d'une carrière et elle les engage à se trouver un modèle de carrière qui ne serait pas entravée par des obligations familiales et communautaires.*

The problems associated with non-standard employment for women in Canada have been well documented and discussed (see for example Armstrong; Fudge; Phillips and Phillips; Townson; Vosko). A phenomenon driven by a new global economy, non-standard work represents, in many cases, a new instantiation of the familiar feminization of poverty as women's desire to balance career and family is exploited under market pressures aimed at efficiency and downsizing. This paper arises from qualitative research conducted through the Womenspace Resource Centre, a small women's centre serving Lethbridge, Alberta and the surrounding rural areas,<sup>1</sup> on the phenomenon of non-standard work within our context. This study focused on the complex motivations

that compelled women to “choose” non-standard working arrangements. What we had anticipated prior to the study was a clear demarcation between those who were involved in non-standard work voluntarily and those who were forced into it because there were no other kinds of working arrangements. What we discovered instead was how slippery the notion of choice was in most of the narratives we encountered. While some women spoke of the benefits that they accrued in a non-standard working arrangement as opposed to a traditional full-time and permanent job, most revealed the ambiguity inherent in their motivations as they were far more likely than their partners to be involved in non-standard working situations because they shouldered a disproportionate responsibility in caring for others.

In this article, the gendered nature of these motivations will be considered as I explore the theoretical difficulties that arise when considering women's “choice” in electing non-standard work. This is especially the case when we understand career choice to be characterized by independent and autonomous decision making. Few women whom we studied fit into such a model of autonomy in their careers, especially once they had become mothers.

In this article, I shall therefore argue for the importance of women's

increased autonomy in career decision-making, based upon the many stories of women's professional marginalization that arose within the qualitative study of women's experience of non-standard work in Southern Alberta. However, these stories also compel me to challenge a model of career autonomy which is unhampered by familial and communal obligation. In its stead, I will explore an alternate account of women's professional “choice” by drawing on the argument of feminist philosopher Jean Keller and her notion of autonomy as a “dialogical process.” This theoretical framework will help reveal the importance of women's collectivization and solidarity as they face the challenge of balancing family and work. This latter possibility was made evident by the very experience of our focus group research as women became conscious of their common exploitation within these working arrangements, while also becoming increasingly aware of their political and collective power to challenge the status quo.

### Defining Non-Standard Work

For the purpose of this article, non-standard work is employment which falls outside of the norm of the Standardized Employment Relationship (SER), a model of work which predominated within the post-war

era, but has fallen into greater decline since the early 1970s (Vosko). While economists question whether the SER was ever the norm within any period of labour, including the post-war boom, the SER plays an important role within current labour practices, as it *prescribes* the form of employment that all workers should seek to obtain. Federal and provincial social policies in such areas as Supports for Independence, Employment Insurance, labour legislation, and childcare subsidization programs all consider the 40-hour work week, with permanent salaries and benefits, to be the ideal to be obtained. As a result, many non-standard workers are unable to access such benefits and fall through the cracks of a system intended for male bread-winners within a post-war setting (Vosko). Such policies have the effect of marginalizing large numbers of workers, predominately women, from workers' benefits. It is therefore helpful to define non-standard workers by what they are not. Non-standard workers are those who, as defined by the Economic Council of Canada "differ from the traditional model," and who are therefore deprived of job permanency, regularity, and full-time hours. As such, these workers are generally excluded from such benefits as pensions, sick and compassionate leave, regular salary increments, job protection, and union representation. Such workers are also more likely to lack access to employment benefits such as Employment Insurance and parental benefits, Worker's Compensation, Canada Pension Plan, and childcare subsidies. In addition, non-standard workers are generally paid less than standardized workers, in spite of the fact that their job duties are proportionately equivalent to standardized workers.

### **Our Research**

This study on non-standard work began as a project of the local wom-

en's centre, the Womanspace Resource Centre, which serves the City of Lethbridge and the surrounding areas within Southern Alberta. Lethbridge, Alberta is a medium sized city, with a population of roughly 67,000 (Statistics Canada). Our research expanded into the rural areas of Lethbridge, and included focus groups within the two First Nations reserves in the area, the Peigan and

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the Blood reserves. In total, we interviewed 127 women, about ten per cent of whom were Aboriginal. Roughly one third of our interviewees were rural women. Our participants ranged in education level from having some high school to those holding PhDs. Our youngest participant was 18; our oldest 62. By far, the vast majority of women were in their 30s and 40s (roughly 60 per cent). About 40 per cent of the women were single.

### **Methodology**

We developed a research tool with an aim to assessing what we predicted would be a rather complex set of motivations. Utilizing qualitative research methods on a variety of participants, almost 130 in total, we sought primarily to listen to women's stories in hope of deciphering the nature of women's motivation in electing non-standard work. In allowing women to speak their own truths, we soon also discovered how

problematic the notion of "choice" was to women in these positions. More often than not, a set of cultural assumptions and ideologies, along with personal financial imperatives, converged to make the notion of choice, understood as autonomous decision-making, at best, a partial explanation. Qualitative research, loosely structured and engaged on the theme of women's concrete working conditions and perceptions thereof, enabled us to tease out not only the immediate economic causal factors, but also structural cycles of poverty, racism, and rather deep-seated beliefs about women's work and worth. In spite of the plurality of the participants, rural and urban, entrants into the labour force and seasoned workers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, we have found significant commonalities in the story.

Utilizing focus groups and individual interviews, we sought to sample as wide a variety of women as possible. The decision to engage in focus groups as a primary research tool was a deliberate one. We believed that women were experiencing a good deal of isolation in their experiences as non-standard workers. Consequently, we decided to afford the opportunity for these women who were often working within extremely alienating conditions to get together with other women to "make the connections" between their own experiences of work and those of others. We also held these focus groups within the community settings, wherever possible, thus allowing participants to feel a sense of "ownership" and empowerment over the groups' proceedings. The coming together of communities with similar experiences was also important in our approach to urban Aboriginal women. We believe that having several groups of predominately aboriginal women allowed these women to experience a cultural comfort level which might have otherwise been missed had we placed individual First Nations

women within predominately non-Aboriginal groups. Individual interviews were available for those who wished to maintain confidentiality.

### Types of Work

The women who were interviewed came from a wide variety of professions. Some were part-time workers

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in the non-profit sector; some were licensed childcare providers working from their homes; others were artists and craftspeople, classified as home-business owners. Others were teachers in a non-traditional setting, such as piano teachers, job sharers, sessional lecturers. Some were entrepreneurs; others worked for a family business. Some women were pioneers in Internet-based research; others were secret shoppers. Some were on-call, others permanent part-time. In short, there was no typical non-standard worker. However, what was typical was that the work that these women did as non-standard workers was generally due to the onerous demands of other commitments. Their non-standard working arrangements did not signal a lack of commitment to the work-force; rather, it often signalled a commitment to other values as well including family and meaningful work. Some of the women interviewed pieced together several jobs at once. The following are some accounts of the experiences of women and the inhumane hours

that many of them keep:

*Well, I have three jobs right now.... I do accounting for three companies and as well help my husband run the pub. My brother is a commercial sales rep, so I do sewing for him as well, so he’ll drop off, you know, eight hundred work shirts at a time or a hundred pairs of coveralls or whatever to do sewing on. So I do that on the side. I’m very busy. My husband has since hired a housekeeper... I mean I work 12 to 18 hours a day. So yeah, I’m looking to downsize a lot, because I have a four year old at home, and a three-year-old grandson that we baby-sit as well, so it gets a bit crazy. (Sadie)<sup>2</sup>*

*I recently took a job as a car saleswoman.... I’m also a secret shopper with two companies pretending to shop or evaluate service. I also do some accounting for my in-laws and get paid for answering surveys on the Internet. I do whatever I can to make a little money. (Kay)*

These stories spoke to an incredible willingness on the part of women to make great personal sacrifice for the sake of their families. While not all the women interviewed were mothers, the vast majority was, or was involved in non-standard work while caring for their children, who were now grown. For the purpose of this essay, I will focus upon the motivation of those women who were involved in non-standard work as a means providing greater flexibility for caring for their children.

### “Choice” and Caring Work

Sociologists of work, when studying the phenomenon of non-standard employment, often distinguish between voluntary and involuntary non-standard workers. However, upon inspection of women’s narratives, one comes to see how the notion of choice, within this context, is

a problematic one. As feminist theorists have amply pointed out, women’s role as caregiver is one that is dictated by a set of cultural norms and social pressures.

Most societies reinforce female altruism towards family and children far more than male altruism. If women “naturally” choose to specialize in care, why do societies develop coercive rule and practices that make it difficult for them to do otherwise (Badgett and Folbre)?

Because of the disproportionate pressure upon women to care for others, many feminists argue that caring, rather than being an essential female virtue, is instead a device employed within a patriarchal society which diminishes women’s freedom and autonomy.<sup>3</sup> In our study, there were many women for whom the question of autonomy in “choosing” non-standard work became a relevant one, and we were at times faced with accounts which revealed particular family dynamics in which women’s professional lives were suddenly regarded as trivial once she became a mother. While this is a familiar story, it would seem that for many of these women non-standard work was a way of accommodating demands that they be available for caring for the family while still generating an income. That is to say, the “new workplace,” combined with old gender ideology about the value of women’s work, seemed to combine to keep women in a position which had few rewards: on the one hand, her work was being marginalized, while on the other, she often experienced tremendous pressure to compensate for her (perceived) failure to attend as thoroughly as she ought to have (according to those around her) to the needs of her children.

*I found the support hardest from my husband, because all of a sudden, my job didn’t mean as much because really I should be home taking care of my daughter and if I do choose to go to work then I have to find a way of doing all the*

*extras. Like if I want to go there for an extra day to do something in the classroom or go for a staff meeting or something, it's always up to me ... and I get the comments like, "You're only teaching kindergarten." Like nothing I'm doing is of value.* (Fern)

It became apparent in many of the stories that we heard that the expectations for women to compromise their professional and personal well-being for the sake of their families was high indeed, and dictated perhaps, above all, by the demand that they be home for their children. We spoke with some women who sacrificed financial security, benefits, social recognition, and even health for the sake of a more flexible work-week. Betty, a dental assistant, left full-time work when her children were born and, unable to secure regular part-time work, became a helper in the lunch assistant program in her children's school as well as working in a restaurant.

*The wages are really minimal. It's quite a step down from what I used to do. Coming from a \$25-an-hour job to a \$7-[an-hour job]—it's like, "what am I doing here?"* (Betty)

Nancy, a registered nurse, was unconcerned by the lapsing of her professional credentials, and was willing to take on lower paying work for the sake of flexibility.

I graduated from nursing pregnant and worked part-time. We wanted to have kids and I wanted to be home so I take part-time work. We'll stick to this until the children are in school (youngest one year old). I let my certification lapse, so I'll have to take a six month course to get back into nursing, but I can always get a job as a Nurse's Aide.

Yet the stories that we have heard thus far are, in many ways, the successful ones. The women cited above each had husbands who were the primary breadwinners and experi-

enced a level of financial security. However, many of the women we interviewed found that their years of sacrifice of career and personal finances for their children had devastating consequences. Many separated and divorced women spoke of their difficulty making ends meet, and had little money left over to save for retirement or to form a cushion in the event of an emergency. Many of the women expressed concern for their financial future, and found it difficult to plan ahead:

*Mary: I have no Canadian Pension Plan, I have nothing—I never did. When I get old, there's nothing there. And I've been raising my children and staying home and going and looking after grandma and cleaning houses and making money under the table and whatever, but I'm going to have no money when I'm sixty-five or whatever. I think there used to be something for when a woman stays at home with her children. Look at my mum, my mum's in the same situation ... she has nothing. The whole mindset of her ... I don't know, of her family, I guess, 'cause it wasn't just her generation, was you have kids and that's it, you stay home. And then I grew up thinking the same thing.*

Given the serious disadvantages to women and non-standard work, one might be tempted to argue that women should abandon the impossible pursuit of attempting to forge "flexible work" in order to care for family. Indeed, many feminist theorists have scrutinized women's role as primary caregiver as one which is itself aimed marginalizing women economically and professionally, and call for a systematic redistribution of caring labour (see, for example, MacKinnon; Chodorow; Okin). I suggest that the problem is not women's desire to care for others in itself. Many of these women, in fact, assert that caring for family is humanizing, cherished, and to be protected at all

cost. It is what makes life valuable. As some of our focus group participants indicated:

*It was to have time for the children, during the time they're growing up, time that will never be there again.* (Maria)

*And that is a benefit of working out of your home, if you have children.... I know with me, even if I worked a lot of hours, I wanted to be home for my teenage daughters, when they came home from school, I was at least in my office and they would come down and sit in the office with me, and I would take a break and we'd talk about their day, and it's nice to be able to do that when you work a non-typical job. You might have to make it up in the middle of the night, but the thing is you're there for your children more in lots of other ways.* (Brenda)

Qualitative study resists imposing a utopian solution upon the anguaries of women's lives. If gendered assumptions about women's caring

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labour are to be challenged, perhaps it is best done by those, who understand the vexing and persistent imperative that many women share—to sacrifice for their children, but who are also willing to challenge an ethic of care with an account of personal empowerment that might chal-

lenge women to envisage the possibility of demanding adequate support from one's workplace and society in order to fulfill their many obligations.<sup>4</sup>

Such an account of empowerment, indeed of *autonomy*, differs in important respects from the modern picture of the disengaged self as an autonomous professional. Mothers who make career choices are rarely able to

not as an isolated monad, but in continued dialogue with those who are willing to challenge, question and critique her decisions, while acknowledging that the individual herself is best able to judge for the appropriate response or course of action.

In this way, Jean Keller's conception of autonomy in relationship is most instructive. Navigating one's familial obligations and one's work

First Nations women and rural women, allowed a greater level of openness about the problems that these women faced in their employment situation. It was in these cases that we were able to see how individualistic notions of worker's autonomy were seriously inadequate. For both Aboriginal women and rural women who were studied, the context of communal hardship miti-

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do so without considering the consequences that such decisions will have upon their children, and while one might rail at the injustice or disparity of this reality when compared with that of many fathers, the solution is not necessarily to adopt the masculine model of autonomous careerism. Instead, what our narratives may point out is a possibility of conceiving autonomy in work as a dialogical process where a worker bases her career decisions upon the web of relations in which she exists and from which she draws meaning and fulfillment, but that also *evaluates* such decisions relative to her own self-respect.

Philosopher Jean Keller, drawing on the work of Betty Myers, encourages women not to forswear autonomy in favour of an ethic of care, but rather to redefine autonomy so that one's relationships are adequately considered as one makes life decisions. This "dialogical account of autonomy" has important consequences for women as they make career decisions (161). A woman must critically assess whether the kinds of professional and economic sacrifices she is making in caring for others will diminish or distort her self respect. Keller also suggests that a woman may navigate such questions best,

through dialogue with others not only promises to undermine the isolation so typical of non-standard workers and caregivers, but it also promises to advance a woman's autonomy as she is confronted with another's viewpoint. Keller's description is helpful for women reflecting upon their financial and professional careers:

When faced with a ... major decision to make about the course of our lives, we frequently turn to a friend to help us envisage a variety of solutions, to the problem at hand and to imagine the likely results of carrying them out, for we are aware of the limitations of our own thinking. Engaging in these decisions helps to solidify the friendship; it can also help the agent make decisions that are more autonomous, for her friend might help her see, and weigh the relative merits of, options she might not have otherwise considered. (161)

One of the surprising results of the research that we conducted within the focus groups was that participants began to challenge and to question one another. Some of the women came to the focus groups with friends. These groups, particularly among

gated reflection on the problems of non-standard work as it was reflected in women's lives, and opened up some more general concerns such as the erosion of traditional ways of life and sustainable communities:

Among First Nations women, a theme that commonly came up was a concern for the future. Work and career were not isolated from considerations of the needs of the community. Meaningful and healing work was therefore considered to be of utmost importance. Concern for the role of men within Aboriginal communities was pronounced among the women interviewed. The concern over poverty and lack of meaningful employment was a communal one for Native women: it included men as well. Any solutions aimed at fixing the lot of women were misdirected if they ignored the needs of men.

*I think another thing you're going to find in a community like this is that a lot of women hold the jobs ... a lot of them hold the director's jobs. Because they're more keen to be educated than the men are. See, we took away the roles of the men a long time ago because they couldn't hunt any more. (Sadie)*

Many women within the rural ar-

cas had very little access to non-standard work, apart from their own self-innovation. Women's entrepreneurial skills are often considerable within the rural economy; however, the demise of the family farm and the crisis of rural Albertan communities have taken their toll on small rural businesses. Women entrepreneurs in rural areas are doubly constrained: by an economy focused on urban areas, and by the lack of alternative flexible work, so vital not only for agriculturally-based communities. The changes affecting the family farm and the demise of rural towns in Canada contributed to the anxiety of many of our research participants. Verna, an entrepreneur, who owns a small flower shop in a town where its small hospital's closure seems likely, put it this way:

*As a small business owner, I worry a lot about the hospital closing. I have already seen business go down. [The hospital] is one of the main local plants within our town. Many people come from out of town to work here, and when they are putting in twelve-hour shifts, they are also spending their money here and contributing to the local economy. (Verna)*

These brief examples from rural and Aboriginal communities speak to the problem of conceiving career related choices in an overly individualistic way. Responsibility, in such a context, extends beyond the immediate family and toward the community. In these cases, the obligation of care for women becomes even more formidable as such women are integral in the maintenance of communities through extended family and community. However, we rarely heard these obligations interpreted as burdensome; instead these formed the very heart of women's identity and mission. A notion of women's autonomy in relation respects the significance that rural and Aboriginal women ascribe to their communities, while it challenges these women

also to care for themselves. Likewise, the women who perceived non-standard work as a limited, yet beneficial possibility, which provided the flexibility that they desired in order to care for their children should not be critiqued (as our social policies have done so) for failing to live up to a male model of unencumbered worker. Nor should she be punished by not having access to benefits standard workers have.

### **Conclusion: Dialogue, Autonomy and Political Process**

Women's traditional role as caregiver has all too often been exploited for the gains of others, the market notwithstanding. Yet the solution is not to turn to a patriarchal model of unencumbered and autonomous worker. Neither is it meekly to accept that it is the lot of women to sacrifice themselves to the point of financial and professional ruin for their children. There is an alternative to these extremes. This involves the expansion of protection of non-standard workers. However, such reform is contingent upon the challenging of the assumption that flexibility is, in itself, a benefit. Women in non-standard work arrangements work proportionately the same amount as other workers and are entitled to real benefits and protection, and women workers and those in solidarity with them must demand them.

Within our focus groups, one of the happiest effects of our study was the unsolicited consciousness-raising of women around their entitlements as workers, which began with a heightened awareness of their common situation. To cite but a few examples which arose spontaneously from our conversations:

*Yeah. Well, look how much a waitress is paid. Because that's what women are supposed to do: wait on you. Or housekeepers, or daycare workers.... Those people should be getting paid big bucks, and they're not, because it's seen as*

*something that women do for free. (Corinne)*

*Then your children start getting jobs, and they are only making 25 cents less than you are and they get benefits. (Laughing) It's hard to believe, my son's first job at "Toys R Us" paid better than anywhere else. He knew where to go. When my 16-year-old son can walk into retail store and get \$6.50 an hour plus benefits and he never ever worked before—and I can walk in and probably get the same. (Eileen)*

*How many men our age are working for seven bucks an hour? Not many I don't think. (Gina)*

Such questions and critiques are essential to the process of building women's professional autonomy-in-relation. And yet, such questions are thwarted by the very structure of non-standard work, which is characterized by lack of continuity and isolation. The challenge that is before feminist theorists and those who seek to challenge the exploitation of women's caring labour may not necessarily be to argue on behalf of a one-size-fits all solution, so much as it is to create the critical space where such an up-building of women's autonomy as workers and as caregivers might take place, quite possibly to the detriment to the present reality the "new workplace" itself. It is in such a space that choice might become a meaningful term for female workers and caregivers.

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<sup>1</sup>The author wishes to acknowledge the work of the women of Womanspace Resource Centre on the women and non-standard work

project. I am particularly grateful to Jacki Woodworth, who conducted the focus groups, Lisa Lambert who continues to lobby for policy change on behalf of female non-standard workers in Alberta, and Dorothy McKenna, who administered the project. I am also grateful to Status of Women Canada and Alberta Community Development who provided funding for this project. For more information on the women and non-standard work project, contact womanspace@telusplanet.net.

<sup>2</sup>In order to protect the privacy of the participants, all names included in this research document are pseudonyms given by the researcher.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Susan Sherwin on *feminist* as opposed to *feminine* ethics. "Feminists have reason ... to be cautious about the place of caring in their approach to ethics; it is necessary to be wary of the implications of gender traits within a sexist culture.... Within dominance relations, those who are assigned the subordinate position, that is, those with less power, have special reason to be sensitive to the emotional pulse of others, to see things in relational terms, and to be pleasing and compliant. Thus the nurturing and caring at which women excel are, among other things, the survival skills of an oppressed group that lives in the close contact with its oppressors" (16). Barbara Houston speaks about the way in which women's subordination is internalized and through an ethic of care: "Given women's history of oppression, given the unjust distribution of responsibility for caring, we might reasonably expect, among women, that the pathological use of an ethics of care will be as common as the nonpathological uses of it. Oppression, as we are reminded, is not only external, but internal. We should expect that women are a damaged people and susceptible to a use of the ethics of care that will entrench their subordination, or at the least, not challenge it" (122).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Badgett and Folbre's scrutiny of women's ethic of

care: "The assumption that women have a greater responsibility than men to subordinate themselves to the needs of children and family is in some respects analogous to binding women's feet. It restricts their mobility, their independence and their productivity" (341).

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## About Shirley Greer:

Shirley Greer's art appears on page 108 of this issue.

Shirley Greer is a printmaker and textile artist who pursued a formal art education in her mid-fifties. She graduated from Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Corner Brook, Newfoundland, with a BFA in 2003, winning the University medal for academic excellence. She was the NL winner of BMO's *1<sup>st</sup> Art!* Competition in 2003, and her work has been shown in galleries in NL, NB and ON.

"I am a printmaker and installation artist. My art is all about process—memories, ideas and techniques. I create multiples with variations, blending my art and my life. I tend to work intuitively, and find that social equality, memory, and loss all creep into my imagery. I am a female Newfoundland artist who pursued a formal art education after raising my family, and these things all influence and direct my art."