

Precarization Tendencies in Women's Employment and The Agenda of Atypical Employment Models¹



September 2014

Where did we start from?

During the last couple of years, it has become further discernable that the state policies for promotion of women's employment are stubbornly revolving around certain policy axes. Those axes may be identified as "the introduction of flexible work and atypical forms of employment", "promotion of women's entre - preneurship", and "partial regulation and institutionalization of some casual jobs and working schemes that have particularly been associated with women". The tacid assumption, lying beneath that policy set, was that women's employment can be effectively increased through flexibilization, entrepreneurship and casual employment/income generating activities:

(1) It is constantly brought up that flexible work and atypical forms of employment are the fundamental tools in increasing the women's employment. Some of the policy initiatives that is taken up recently within this context have been regulations women employed in the public sector to work part time for up to 5 years after child birth, and those directing women in irregular and/or informal sectors to enter the work - force via temporary employment agencies. Furthermore, the argument that "women themselves would rather like to work flexibly" has become more and more commonplace. This argument, which has kept appearing in several different contexts, is based on the well-known fictive narrative of the "good mother", who wants to stay at home and take care of her children till s/he reaches school age. In view of that dis - course, what we need is the creation of real alternatives that allow for motherhood to be experienced as a personal choice, rather than this fiction naturalizing the withdrawal of women from all other areas of life once they become mothers, and placing upon them the unfair expectation of professing what are called "motherly duties". At this point, it is critically important that these forms of paid work, described by the term "flexible", and what are alternatively called atypical employment practices, are not forced upon people as obligations; but, are rather put in place as desirable alternatives in terms of attached employment and social security rights, career opportunities and income. Another indispensable precondition of instituting flexible employment as an alternative option is provision of accessible, institutionalized and high-quality care services to free women from familial burdens and support their choosing power.

(2) When it comes to the issue of increasing women's employment, we may also become aware of a dominant discourse and of attempts that focus on supporting women's entrepreneurship. Although women's entrepreneurship is an area that is immensely diversified in terms of services and initiatives, we may say that on a mass level it has mostly gone in the direction of trying to provide an answer to

¹ This article is written by Aslı Çoban with contributions from KEİG Platform.

women's search for income-generating activities, as the majority was unable to find any other paid employment alternative. Entrepreneurship promotion has thus come to be an area where low profile jobs such as homebased work and small-scale contract manufacturing are encouraged for women. At this point, we, as the Women's Labour and Employment Initiative (KEÍG) Platform, have already stated and shall continue to state our opinion that services and incentives with regards to women's entrepreneurship should rather be provided to women with high occupational profiles, or those who can be called opportunity entrepreneurs (women who know the sector, who have access to certain resources, etc.), and that women who are looking to become necessity entrepreneurs¹ should instead be directed into waged employment alternatives.

(3) On the other hand, another noteworthy policy direction has been passing partial resolutions in order to institutionalize already existing forms of employment belonging to women, who are inclined to work in a fragile, insecure, and non-continuous manner. Some new social security regulations were prepared with the suggested target of covering women domestic workers in the social security system; there is state support for the formation of cooperatives amongst women working in the agricultural sector, as well as women doing home-based work; a cash transfer system for familial care of elderly and handicapped provided some women carers in families a quasi-employment status. In view of the precarious work status of domestic workers, home-based working women, home-based women cooperatives, family care workers, employment status appears as a problematic issue and the rights and benefits attached to employment status are not accessible. There is clearly an urgent need for regulations that enable the recognition of and thus support for the employment status of workers on a legal basis. It is important that these regulations also aim to strengthen the worker and occupational identities of these employees.

The Risk of Precarization...

In order to frame all of our evaluations with regards to the aforementioned general policy headings and choices, and to systematize our warnings and propositions accordingly, research study has been conducted. This study, titled "The Relationship between Precarity, Precarious Employment and Atypical Employment in the Work Life," aims to emphasize the very real risk facing women and women's groups as the atypical forms of work, brought to our attention with the assertion that they can increase women's employment rates, become prevalent and dominant. The risk here is that as these atypical forms of work become widespread, women may easily get stuck in 'bad jobs' – in other words, women face the risk of experiencing precarization in their work life. As we draw your attention to this risk, we hope to open up the issue of the quality of employment to discussion, as something that is as important as increasing women's employment rates quantitatively. Here, we are aware of the presence of important lessons to be drawn from the experiences of other countries where women's employment rates were raised drastically by way of spreading "temporary, part-time, and small-scale own-account work." When we look at the definition of precarity that threatens to take hold once the "flexible and atypical" forms of work that have been encouraged in order to increase women's employment rates completely dominate the field of women's employment, we see that 5 separate characteristics are present all at once:

- (1) the person who enters the labour market has no alternative other than accepting the job being proposed;
- (2) this job does not carry the employee out of the conditions of poverty;
- (3) it is difficult for the person to take any life decisions regarding the future, as they are faced with many uncertainties;

(4) working conditions are poor in terms of health and security;

(5) the employee has no chance of getting organized and/or being represented with her worker identity in any way. Precarity, which is defined with reference to the very current characteristics of bad jobs, and bad employment relations, is especially intense when it comes to certain employment and working relationships (Rossman, 2013):

Precarious work relations include direct “temporary” contracts (which can become “permanently” temporary), “seasonal” contracts (which can flourish year round), agency work and other forms of outsourced, indirect, third party or “triangular” relationships which obscure the relationship with the real employer; bogus self-employment as “independent contractors”, abusive “apprenticeships”, “internships” and “training” schemes; and the transformation of employment contracts into commercial contracts, through, for example, the creation of “cooperatives”, as in the Brazilian and Colombian sugar, palm oil and banana sectors (Rossman, 2013:25).

Spain is one of the countries that has achieved an increase in the rate of women’s employment mostly by way of generalizing temporary work. In Netherlands, this increase was achieved by way of supporting part-time work, while in Italy the strategy was to institutionalize many special employment statuses– including self-employment. We believe that it is possible to make important deductions for the situation in Turkey by looking at these kinds of prior examples, since Turkey is about to follow a similar path with them. This is why we find it important to try to answer the question as to whether support for atypical employment resulted in the precarization of women’s employment in the above-mentioned countries.

How did Women’s Employment Rates Rise in Spain, Italy and the Netherlands?

Employment rates of women in these countries have risen significantly since the 70’s. Amongst policies that encouraging work-life balance in order to increase women’s employment rates, child care services are what is of most vital importance for women. Yet, we see that these services have been developed more slowly vis a vis the policies supporting women’s employment increase. Thus, it has been the weight of care work within the household, which includes caring for children, that has constituted the greatest disadvantage for women’s inclusion in the labour market – especially since this kind of work is usually seen as the responsibility of women.

The result of this disadvantage has been that women,

(1) have a work life with intervals in the periods when their familial responsibilities increase like marriage and child birth, sickness and accidents in family.

(2) Are considered secondary in the labour market due to assumed primacy of household roles in their lives.

This fragile participation in labour market displayed by women has directed them towards atypical and flexible forms of labour concentrated in the secondary segments of the market.

Not only does this situation determine the working conditions of individual women within the work force, but it also dictates the general perceptions and attitudes of the state and of employers with regards to the position and competence of women – as a category – within the labour market. Moreover, this also results in a decline in women’s negotiating powers within the labour market, and produces institutional continuity in labour relations and policies regarding the labour market over time.

In this environment, atypical forms of employment and flexibilization have been established based on what are considered disadvantages for certain groups within the labour force (women, youth, immigrants, etc.), and it has spread as these groups became part of the work force.

When we look at these different countries, we see, for instance, that in Spain when women entered the work force and had to deal with the lack of care services, they tried to make up for this lack by way of grandmother care or by care labour of immigrant women for their children. Another method that women chose to manage this situation has been to postpone the age of first child birth. Casual employment and temporary work became widespread in the country simultaneously with the great increases that took place in women's employment rates. Temporary work quickly became prevalent amongst women, as well as in the youth and immigrant populations; and, as it has been impossible to limit its spread despite all the precautionary measures taken, Spain has come to have one of the highest rates of temporary work and casual employment in all of Europe.

In Italy, we see that women have had discontinuous careers, chosen part time work, looked for solutions such as grandmother care or care labour of immigrant women in their efforts to reconcile their roles in work and family. Here, we observe a coexistence of temporary, irregular, casual, flexible employment and self-employment. Attempts to legally regulate uncontrollably fluctuating types of work and employment statuses in the labour market practice, have resulted in a complex system of employment relations. In this system, many different work and employment statuses and relations are defined on a legal and administrative level. The effort to include forms of non-standard employment in the employment and social security system has also failed.

In Netherlands, the institutional child care and early child education services are mostly part-time, and eligibility is tied to employment criteria. This creates a serious care deficit, which is a problem for women in labour market. It is usually women themselves who try to close this gap by working part time, particularly in jobs known as "very small jobs" or "mini-jobs". Due to the system of universal basic income guarantee, alternatively known as citizen's income, and a variety of social welfare mechanisms within the Scandinavian system, rates of working poor is limited. In recent years, there has also been an increase in temporary employment, temporary employment agency employment, and self-employment in Netherlands.

In short, when we look at the general outline of the situations that have emerged in Spain, Netherlands, and Italy after they have attempted to increase women's employment rates essentially by way of temporary, part-time and self-employment, we see that the common result has been the creation of a labour market where women are largely disadvantaged. It is therefore important to examine the kinds of disadvantages produced by these policies adopted for increasing women's employment rates.

The Disadvantages of the Strategy of Increasing Women's Employment through Temporary Employment Schemes

The main argument in favour of promoting temporary employment schemes is that contracts based on temporary employment relations increase the efficiency of the functioning of the labour force market by way of;

(1) Facilitating transition from school to work,

(2) Enabling entry into the labour market in countries where occupational education and training is meagre at best,

(3) Allowing for efficient screening in order to match up the demands of the employer and the requirements of the job with the desires and talents of the work force,

(4) Raising the rates of entry into and exit from unemployment², and thus lowering long-term unemployment rates.

It has become evident, however, that all forms of temporary employment (working directly under a fixed term contract, working through temporary employment agencies, on-call work, seasonal work, casual employment, working with probation periods) contribute to segmentation in the labour force market, and thus limit the ability, especially of women – with the exception of a small, professional group – to transition into other forms of employment or better jobs. The only way in which it is possible to explain how some forms of temporary employment can indeed increase the efficiency of the labour force market is by looking at how it allows very young, recent graduates to gain work experience and receive on-the-job training. Here, temporary employment does indeed help in terms of screening, and matching up employers with employees; but this is the only condition under which the reasoning provided for temporary employment in general is actually the case. When it comes to women who are of a certain age, on the other hand, it is highly probable that the five basic characteristics of precarization shall emerge during temporary employment. For this group, temporary work imposes itself as a form of employment with no other alternative, and it lowers the chance they have to move into better jobs in the coming years. It also creates uncertainties with regards to the future, due to lack of job security and irregularity of earnings. It results in a disadvantaged work life in general, especially with regards to social security, and work and workers' health and safety. It definitely does not contribute to human capital (and may instead result in a loss in this area), and it limits the possibility of labour organizing. In short, we may say that for women, temporary employment immensely raises the risk of becoming confined within lower market segments where there is a concentration of precarized forms of work and employment.

Another characteristic of temporary labour is that it encourages numerical flexibility for businesses and for the labour force market in general, and thus prevents the implementation of other kinds of flexible work schemes. Numerical flexibility is the form of flexibility that is easiest to apply in the managerial sense; and so it usually blocks forms of internal flexibility known as more secure models of flexible work organization (or rather, flexicurity). As has been seen in the examples of Netherlands and Italy, regulations aiming at legally ameliorating the conditions of employment under direct fixed term contracts may result in the spread of other temporary and/or atypical forms of work (such as employment through temporary employment agencies and self-employment) across the entire labour market. International norms calling for an equalizing of the working conditions and job securities of temporary and permanent workers, on the other hand, may end up causing a deterioration in the conditions of those working under permanent contracts, as has been seen in the example of Spain. As a result, what temporary employment creates in both the labour market and in employers themselves is its own permanence – which is a state that they do not wish to give up, and a kind of resistance towards administrative-legal regulations. Temporary employment mostly emerges in the form of irregular employment, and it is based on the discontinuity in career, where there are certain periods of interruption in work life. In many models, a great majority of employees are unable to take advantage of unemployment insurance payments during the periods in which they are unemployed, and they are only able to keep up their social security accounts with their own contributions – and this, in the best

² The rate of those who were unemployed a year ago, but are currently employed is called “the rate of exit from unemployment,” while the rate of those who were employed a year ago, but are currently unemployed is called “the rate of entry into unemployment”

case scenario. The necessity of having to find a new job as soon as possible may result on the part of the temporarily employed accepting jobs that they actually do not want.

Temporary employment creates a very competitive labour market for those on temporary employment contracts. It sometimes becomes a must for employees to procure the necessary investments, education and production environment and equipment themselves in order to preserve and even boost their skills and abilities and to maintain their competence in the private sector.. Temporary employees are less able to attend the training programs organized in workplaces in comparison to permanent employees. They thus have to somehow obtain their skill trainings either by way of public services or from the private sector. This means that they need extra time and resources. That context of temporary employment is likely to result in a cycle of bad jobs that is hard to break.

Temporary employment provides grounds in a de facto manner for employers to be able to fire employees in the case of marriage or child birth. It allows employers to circumvent the laws forbidding discrimination in this area. Although there is no such a study focused on the case of women whose contracts are not renewed after child birth, it is commonly expressed that this is a prevalent practice, and that temporary employment is institutionalizing gender-based discrimination.

The Disadvantages of the Strategy for Increasing Women's Employment Rates by Promoting Part-Time Employment

The argument that part-time work “especially allows for women to be able to manage both work and familial responsibilities at once” is commonly used in defending this form of employment. Part-time work is thus presented as something that is desired, a preference for employees, and especially for women employees. Two separate objections must be made to this claim. As may be observed, policy mix used in regulation of care services targeting child, sick, handicapped and elderly (including institutional care, work leave policies, and financial incentives and transfers) are being molded according to the demands of employees and of the market. However, women's demands raised on the grounds of their responsibilities regarding care and the family may also be interpreted as a demand for the development of effective care policy mixes, rather than a demand for part-time employment. What in practice, seeing family responsibilities as women's demand for part-time employment without even considering providing an effective care policy mix ends up becoming is a public policy that openly rejects women's full-time participation in the work life. For women who work part-time, the two main reasons they do so is that they are unable to find full-time employment and that they have familial responsibilities. Again, when we look at the countries where part time employment is dominant for women, we commonly see a deficit in services and support for family members in need of care. Secondly, part-time work signifies bad work and employment conditions, low income and an inability to benefit from the social security system. Part time jobs mostly emerge as temporary employment, and thus they also include the disadvantages associated with temporary employment as well.

Especially in situations where part-time work has become the norm for women, we see that women who are part-timers continue to seek other complementary income generation ways to support their incomes. In countries like Spain, where part-time employment is prevalent, and the Netherlands where it has become dominant, it may be observed that the number of women with second jobs has exceeded that of men. This situation is enough to demonstrate that part-time employment (or self-employment) is not in and of itself a true preference, that it does not provide enough income for a decent life.

Moreover, emergence of the regulations allowing for part-time employees to work overtime completely invalidates all the arguments in favour of part-time work as something that facilitates

managing work and family life together. Part-time employment has thus become one of the exploitative forms of flexibility in the work life.

It may be said that the application of regulations regarding temporary and part-time employment in a manner that prevents a loss of employment rights and benefits is the only example of a practice where part-time employment has actually been effective in creating a balance between life at work and life outside work

The Disadvantages of the Strategy of Increasing Women's Employment Rates by Promoting Self-Employment

Self-employment, i.e. micro and small-scale business entrepreneurships and income-generating activities, is one of the popular solutions in state policy discourse and practice for increasing women's employment. Self-employment and especially sub-sections of self-employment, practiced by self-employed without employing others, or those who work for a single client on order-based manner, is pretty vulnerable to precarization. Although there are claims that self-employment has become a thing of the past due to economic development and growing scale economics, serious dynamics supporting this kind of employment are definitely present in our day. Those working in domestic services, those home-based workers, and those working in project-based jobs are amongst the new-generation of self-employed. The position of those working in household services or of home-based workers is quite fragile within the labour force market, and it has already been examined at length by feminist scholars. Furthermore, there are also other micro economic tendencies towards substituting waged employees with own-account workers in view of the legal and administrative regulations that support status of waged employees with non-standard employment contracts and due to managerial pursuits of achieving more numerical flexibility for businesses. The example of Netherlands is telling in that vein, since improvement of rights of agency workers was reportedly generated a managerial urge to replace those workers with own-account workers in return.

Again, when own-account worker work for a single business and employer, the relation between parties is an employment relation rather than a business relation; and tend to be very exploitative for the worker, except for a small professional minority with high and rare qualifications. During periods of economic crisis, prevalence of unemployment pushes some segments of unemployed into seeking chances in self-employment and small business development. . Majority of those groups enter these kinds of income-generating activities not because they have some kind of business idea or resource, but rather because of their general lack of other means. Hence, they usually end up exiting the market in a short period of time and under quite bad conditions. That group is named necessity entrepreneurs. Although there is a great variety in forms of employment within the category of self-employment, necessity entrepreneurs have certain common characteristics – which are the fact that these employees cannot take advantage of rights that arise from the working condition, they are marked by fragile labour relations, and they exhibit a tendency for self-exploitation. This situation renders the wide support for self-employment under the guise of encouraging women's entrepreneurship quite problematic. There are allegations that self-employment and entrepreneurship can make balancing work and family life easier for women. However, it is quite clear that these claims are completely bogus in the face of the phenomenon of intense self-exploitation that marks these kinds of job.

As a result, we may say that in countries where there is a prevalence of precarious employment statuses such as temporary and part-time employment, as well as self-employment, it is evident that these forms of employment are dominated by women. In cases where these forms of employment show internal variations, women work in even worse conditions. For women, entering atypical forms

of employment that show a tendency towards precarization becomes a factor that makes it the transition into better jobs much harder. These forms of employment render the insecure models of flexibility quite widespread and permanent. Once this kind of prevalence emerges, it is quite difficult to limit precarious atypical employment – as has been demonstrated the examples from other countries.

By way of conclusion...

State policies aiming to create a mass scale increase in women's employment need to refrain from seeing the issue of women's employment solely on quantitative terms and start setting standards and targets for quality of jobs and employment of women. The state ought to prepare projections and be able to foresee the middle and long term outcomes of the policies it adopts. Only doing this, accountability of state for its employment policies can be ensured.

Concomitantly, outcomes of the women's employment policies drawing upon flexibilisation and supporting atypical employment schemes are not far from being predictable in light of the experiences of other countries.

First and foremost, it is important that the atypical forms of employment do not become dominant, but are rather kept as alternatives for women. The main prerequisite for that status is to free women from familial labour burden to an acceptable degree and raise their bargaining power as workers. That requires provision of adequate and accessible care services. Instead of reducing women to being secondary groups within the work force by citing the pretext of "their responsibilities in motherhood and other domestic roles", what must be done is to pass legal regulations that shall ensure that men share these responsibilities equally with women. The legal regulations must then be implemented, and adequate, accessible, high-quality care services must be provided in order to allow women to shape their work and family lives according to their own choices but not according to their familial "necessities".

Birth and maternity leaves should also be made an item of monitoring in order to understand how far in practice women benefit from them.

It is important to include women and women's organizations in the process of policy development rather than speculating on "women's will". (5) It is necessary to regularly monitor the share of involuntary women part-timers, the number of women part-timers settling for their employment status due to familial burdens, and because they are unable to find full-time employment. The poverty levels of women employed as temporary and part-time workers, share of working poor among them and the poverty risk this category of women workers face must also be tracked, and this figures should be made subject to employment policy targeting. It is also necessary to track how gender-based wage differences are, and how these change, between men and women, and between men and women working with atypical employment schemes.