

## Summary of Doctoral Research

### Living Insecurity – Precarious Employment and Midlife Women

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The research aimed to examine the intersection of three long term social developments – the growth of women’s participation in the workforce, the ageing of the workforce in line with population ageing, and the decline of secure, permanent employment in favour of precarious jobs. Two research questions emerged: How does feminisation and ageing of the workforce interact with, and shape a *precarised* labour market? How do the interactions between a feminised, ageing workforce and precarious employment construct new forms of social risks? Thirty-eight midlife women, in the age range 45 to 54, participated in the study, through extended, in-depth interviews and one focus group. The primary research was embedded within an extensive secondary research process involving interrogation of large data sets and a wide range of empirical and theoretical research literature in fields covering social policy, labour studies, social theory, and social welfare. An extensive investigation of relevant contemporary public policy was also undertaken for the study.

The key finding of the research is that the growth of precarious employment combined with reduced opportunities for secure employment creates new forms of social inequality and social stratification. As precarious jobs displace secure jobs, the avenues for occupational mobility have become narrower and opportunities for improvement of living standards more limited. Social risks of poverty and other forms of marginalisation, in the present and the future, thus accumulate. Secure jobs are heavily contested and women in midlife are not well-positioned in the contest. Old patterns of gendered occupational segregation have mutated into new forms of precarised occupational structures. (The terms ‘precarised’ and ‘precarisation’ are used in the study to denote a *process* of becoming more insecure and can apply to both people and structures). Midlife women searching for jobs in occupations consistent with their career background find that these are now the most heavily *precarised*. Past experience and educational qualifications do not necessarily assist in the contest and can instead, impose a barrier where flexibility and malleability are the premium traits sought by employers and perceived to be attributes of younger workers. New requirements for credentials in certain occupations also cut midlife women off from jobs they held in the past. The women who had lost permanent jobs within the last ten years, could find little purchase in the new labour market from their occupational background and skills.

A precarious job for women in mid-life is increasingly less likely to be a transitional phase to a better quality, more secure job. As the number of precarious jobs has increased relative to secure jobs, the division of labour is more tightly configured within occupational structures and the boundaries in occupational hierarchies are more rigid. A *precarised* worker is more likely to be viewed as an expendable and substitutable appendage in a work situation and less likely to be considered a worker who may have an interest in occupational progression with improved income and security. The fact of this dynamic is suggested by the significant number of women in the study who had been in the same precarious job within an organisation over a considerable period of time without opportunity for upward movement or a more secure position. While these jobs are unsatisfactory, perceptions that there are limited employment opportunities, often based on earlier job search efforts, mean that women stay in these jobs.

If they have prioritised caring at an earlier stage of life, women find themselves in a very disadvantageous position at the point, often well into their forties or fifties, when they need to find a job to support themselves and their families. The situation is especially dire following a divorce after the

age of 45 where there has been little preparation to be self-supporting through workforce participation. If they have had limited prior work experience and limited education or have only ever worked in precarious jobs, they are likely to face unemployment or relegation to particularly onerous occupations with little prospect of occupational mobility or improvement in their socio-economic status. Caring for elderly parents can also impact on women's working lives in midlife especially if they are already in precarious jobs. Elder care can solidify an already disadvantaged labour market position.

The system of social protection plays a double-edged part in the lives of many women in the study. It provides very basic income support for sole parents and the unemployed. However, it is a heavily conditional system and acts as a conduit for disadvantaged women into precarious jobs which they are required to accept under the terms and conditions of social security law. Rigorous job search requirements are attached to income support for the unemployed. As unemployment payments are below the poverty line, there is a necessity to take on whatever work is available. There is little encouragement or provision within social welfare for improvement in the long term occupational prospects of disadvantaged women trapped in precarious, low wage jobs. Support for education and training has a pragmatic and instrumental focus to place participants in work as quickly as possible. In addition, there is no accommodation or recognition within the social welfare system of women's past contributions such as raising a family. The age pension eligibility age will increase to 67 by 2023, which places a significant burden on disadvantaged women, such as those covered in this study, to continue in difficult employment which they may not be able to sustain to such an advanced age.

There are many examples in the study of abhorrent and dehumanising work conditions in precarious jobs as a result of labour commodification. Women report arduous performance requirements, surveillance and monitoring, competition with other workers, and little control over work schedules and hence income. A few report covert and overt intimidation, and unsafe conditions. There is little in the way of collective support mechanisms for most women in the study. Even where the job is less onerous, such as in a community organisation, hospital or university, there is a strong sense of commodification and lack of security. Labour commodification leads to the 'precarisation of existence' depending on protective factors in women's lives. At the worst end, there is a high level of social risk. It is encumbered in a distressing conflation between a precarious job and otherwise difficult life circumstances where mental and physical wellbeing is compromised through low income, anxiety and stress. The social welfare system abets labour commodification by driving disadvantaged women into the most precarious jobs. But even where there are other protective factors in women's lives, such as a partner or secure housing, precarious jobs are in various ways arduous, demoralising and stressful as well as antagonistic to family obligations.

The study identified social and economic injustice evidenced in the discriminatory employment practices, in the entrapment in dehumanising jobs, in the dualistic role of social security, and in the accumulating disadvantages in women's lives. The outcome is an odious form of social stratification based on the vulnerabilities of midlife women which were engendered within the context of labour market and social expectations of an earlier era. These vulnerabilities, constituted of personal characteristics and workforce background, form considerable barriers to employment and social equality under the terms and conditions of the new labour market.

This study contributes another layer of understanding of women's contemporary experience in the labour market by focusing on midlife women. It was clear that for a number of women, social and class status had changed over time as a result of parenting and job loss with factors such as the erosion of the value of education and age discrimination also coming into play. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to suggest that the gains of the 1970s and 1980s in opening opportunities for women have in more recent

years reverted to old patterns of gendered labour market divisions as a result of the forces of precarisation. This is noted by the widening of the gender wage gap and the decline of women's full time employment. However, where women have been able to maintain or improve their occupational status they have done well. These gains are noted by some scholars in improvements in the extent of vertical occupational segregation. Thus, it can be seen that there are forces supporting both continuity and change in women's labour market status in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.