

**CENTRE FOR GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES**

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**Whither Work?
A Comparative Analysis of Women and Work in the Commonwealth
Caribbean and Canada
in the New Era of Globalization**

Ann B. Denis ©

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Working Paper No. six is the result of a public lecture delivered on March 8, 2001 by Professor Ann Denis in CGDS's celebration of International Women's Day. Ann Denis is a professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at the University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. For the academic year 2000-2001 the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, Cave Hill hosted Professor Denis as a Visiting Research Fellow.

Using a feminist perspective Professor Denis examines what economists and policy makers mean by work, and questions the way that this definition is reconfigured in this new phase of globalisation in both the Commonwealth Caribbean and Canada. She critiques the widely held but overly restrictive definition which equates work with revenue generating activity and argues for a more all encompassing and reality-based definition. She proposes a feminist definition that exceeds the boundaries of what is commonly understood as work. This new definition incorporates women's un-remunerated reproductive and caring labour in the home and community.

The paper also examines women's work in globalisation in the two countries and emphasizes the historical and societal restrictions and impositions that shape women's contemporary experiences of economic activity. The paper makes a critical contribution to our understanding of women's economic activities nationally and internationally.

KEY WORDS

Work, women's work, gender and the economy, female labour - Caribbean, female labour force participation - Canada, labour force participation, sociology of work, globalisation, women's economic activity.

Introduction

I am honoured to have been invited to address you tonight as part of the worldwide celebration of International Women's Day, and I would like to thank Dr. Eudine Barriteau and the Centre for Gender and Development Studies at UWI, Cave Hill for offering me this privilege.

Why do we choose to celebrate certain events or groups by having a day (or a week, a month, a year or even a decade) in their honour? In some cases, such as a national independence day or a day commemorating a national hero, this is a gesture celebrating widely acknowledged achievements. Other 'days' (weeks, months etc.) seem, however, intended to bring to public attention a group which normally is relatively less prestigious, less powerful, the "other" rather than the norm. Thus we have "Labour Day" and "Secretary's Day" - but no "Boss's Day". This is the year of the volunteer, and the child, the aged, the disabled have all previously had their years, but not the adult or the able-bodied. That we mark "International Women's Day" is perhaps a sign that women remain "other", a group whose concerns and accomplishments must be marked by a special day because they are not an integral part of what is taken for granted as important in the society.

This brings me to the meaning of "work", the theme of my presentation this evening. I will begin by exploring with you what "work" includes, proposing a feminist definition which goes well beyond the boundaries of what I learned about as "work" when I studied sociology at university in the 1960s, boundaries which remain widely taken for granted to this day both in everyday parlance and in the speciality field of the sociology of work. The more limited conceptualisation which I am rejecting has led to pronouncements on the reduced work week and even to Jeremy Rifkin, in 1995, entitling

a book *the end of work*. I will argue that, if one uses the more encompassing and reality-based conceptualisation of work that feminists propose, to imagine “the end of work” is ludicrous when speaking of women, and, in an equitable world, should be equally ludicrous when speaking of men. After this discussion of the meaning of work, I will then briefly define what globalization is. Next I will highlight some of what we know about patterns of women’s work, both paid and unpaid, in Barbados and in Canada, noting re-configurations which have occurred as the impact of globalization has increased. Globalization has been equated both with homogenisation and with polarisation. We will comment on the merits of these contradictory lenses, as we examine women’s work in Barbados, in Canada, and in a comparison between the two societies. In conclusion we will reflect on whether our analysis of women’s work in Barbados and in Canada suggests that International Women’s Day is an example of the celebration of widely acknowledged achievements, or, instead, of a token acknowledgement of those who, whatever their accomplishments, remain among the less powerful, the “other”, rather than the “we” who define these societies.

What is work?

Everyone knows what work is - or do we? In modern industrial (or post industrial) societies “work” is typically equated, in both scholarly and popular conceptualisations, with revenue-producing activities. This is consistent with the Marxist concept of work only referring to “productive” activities, meaning those which have value in exchange transactions and which can generate surplus value or profit. It is also consistent with the ILO definition of “being employed”, which has been adopted by the Barbados Statistical Service and refers to those who performed a minimum of an hour’s work during the previous week for *pay or profit* (Barbados, n.d.: 9). Apparently for many