

FLEXIBILITY AND GENDER IN THE E-SOCIETY: MARXIST THEORY APPLIED TO AT-HOME TELEWORK

Wilson, Melanie, University of Manchester, (Operations, Technology & Innovation Management), Manchester Business School, Booth Street West, Manchester M15 6PB. Melanie.wilson@manchester.ac.uk.

Anita, Greenhill, University of Manchester, (Operations, Technology & Innovation Management), Manchester Business School, Booth Street West, Manchester M15 6PB. a.greenhill@manchester.ac.uk.

Abstract

Our understanding of the e-society should incorporate the case of at-home teleworking because of its implications for the use of ubiquitous ICTs in the home environment, work relations and gender issues. Rhetoric surrounding the benefits of telework impinge on promises of increased freedom, reduced burden, and 'flexibility' from an employees perspective. In order to establish the validity of such claims it is important to examine how at-home telework entails a reconfiguration of the home-work boundary. The substantial impacts on women's role in the family such a renegotiation produces has implications for gender issues if we identify the oppression of women as located in the function they perform within the privatized family unit. By presenting a Marxist-inspired analysis of the family, explaining what constitutes women's oppression, how this relates to work outside the home, and what a vision of emancipation entails, we develop a critique of proposed advantages for women home workers. Not only do we question tele-working's ability to deliver on the promises made on its behalf; we show how this socio-technical innovation may in fact represent a regressive step. In conclusion, we underline the contribution of this paper to research on the societal concerns as an intersection of the working sphere and family life that are brought together by ICTs..

Keywords: ICTs, At-home Telework, Gender, Marxist, Flexibility

1 INTRODUCTION

In comprehending the e-society, it is important to find appropriate theoretical tools to evaluate the potential opportunities and threats that ubiquitous ICTs offer. With a focus on gender and technology, the main aim of this paper is to offer an alternative approach for interpreting e-society by describing how Marxist approaches concerning gender can be applied to the at-home telework phenomenon. As a Marxist approach is based on an historical materialist analysis of human society from primitive communism, through hunter-gather societies, the rise of class societies and specifically the development of capitalism, it offers us a broader perspective on the origins of women's oppression and the optimism that, since women's oppression is a historical development, it can be overcome. In this respect, Marxism differs from those Feminist analyses that are based on a view of patriarchy as an eternal feature of society. Alternatively, those analyses of gender relations as a reflection of natural ability are inherently conservative, and do not seek to alter the status quo for the benefit of women, or the oppressed in general. Marxism, by contrast has as its goal the development of an egalitarian society. Information Systems (IS) are in an area where issues of inequality abound including issues related to gender (Trauth 2002; Adam et al. 1994; Green et al. 1993; Grundy 1996; Adam et al. 2002; Wilson 2002, Wilson 2004). Whilst IS-oriented research writings found in organizational behaviour, science and technology studies and sociology have considered the issue of gender, there is little development of a Marxist approach. The issue of particular concern here is the impact on traditional gender roles in the family of at-home telework in the home environment and in work relationships. An important matter considered here is the implication of teleworking at home for women's ability to improve their disadvantaged situation, especially through collective actions. Due to this under-development it is necessary in this paper to limit the discussion to theoretical issues in order to pave the way for empirical research.

Marxists begin with the position that every form of class society creates its own form of archetypal family and maintains the oppression of women at its centre (Vogel 1983). In 'traditional' family forms, women serve to care for the next and current generation of workers at minimal cost to society or the state. Further to this, although alternative family forms are on the increase, the traditional model is held up as the ideal to which we all should aspire. Marxists believe that the imposition of this model as the 'true' or proper family unit has implications for the formation and socialization of all women's identity. Central to a thorough liberation for women would be the creation of new family forms enabled by the provision of an alternative to the services provided within the privatized family: places where food is prepared, children cared for or washing done. Responsibility for children, the old and the sick, and ensuring adequate care outside the family for those who need it, would be taken by the whole community not by individual women (and men) within the home (German 2003). Starting with this alternative serves to put in context the misguided, even regressive nature of much of the rhetoric surrounding at-home teleworking. However, little is written about the societal costs of teleworking. We argue that at-home telework may be a regressive step. The proposition to re-situate women within the home distanciates women from the very point where they are potentially at their strongest and most able to radically change society, namely, at work. Uncritical acceptance associated with the benefits of telework for workers perpetuates, for women, the domination of housework, home responsibilities, isolation and powerlessness over paid work in the socialized public arena where collective resistance is possible.

In order to construct the case for a Marxist inspired approach to IS, the paper is organized as follows. The following section introduces the selected IS topic of at-home telework which will be subjected to a Marxist assessment of emancipation. This is followed by an explanation of employee-centred Marxist approaches to gender and IS with reference to labour process literature as well as cultural perspectives on the interrelationship of gender and technology. As the family is central to Marxist

analysis of women's oppression this argument is carried over to the fourth section of this paper which outlines the distinct features of a Marxist approach to women's twin roles as paid employees outside the home and as unpaid domestic workers in the home. Section five draws together the points made in the paper with a sustained Marxist critique of at-home telework. The contribution to the conference is summarized in the last section.

2 TELEWORK: A SOCIO-TECHNICAL ENSEMBLE

In this section we describe the chosen IS phenomenon for our critical approach, providing background information on telework and outlining the promises made on its behalf for women workers. The example of home-working, as a form of telework, magnifies the conflict of roles that women experience in attempting to equalize the work-life balance. The critical approach to IS adopted in this paper also contests claims made for teleworking's inevitably emancipatory potential for women by examining the implications of at-home teleworking on women's lives - specifically asking if and how such new work practices can result in amelioration of working conditions or even 'freedom'. The tradition initiated by Braverman (1974) presented a radical critique of the use of technology in organizations because of the potential for increased exploitation of the workers. For the IS researcher this implies an examination of the construction and use of IS to further increase the process of exploitation on the part of management and at the expense of employees (lengthening of the working day, reduction in working conditions, increased productivity, and so on). In this regard we would be hesitant to accept on face value any promises of flexibility, choice, or the emancipation for employees without scrutiny of their potentially detrimental effects. This critique has a strong gender dimension as many of the benefits will be particularly directed to women workers and their family responsibilities.

2.1 Background on Telework

'Telework', is defined as work that is carried out at a distance from the core organization through the medium of ICTs (Sullivan 2003). As Gray et al. (1993, p. 6) state, teleworking entails 'working remotely from an employer, or from a traditional place of work, for a significant proportion of work time. Teleworking may be on either a full-time or part-time basis (Tremblay 2002). The work often involves electronic processing of information, and always involves using telecommunications. The actual numbers of teleworkers employed full time to work at home is overall very small - about 2% of the UK labour force (TUC 2003) or just under 400,000 people (IES 2003). Despite the fact that the trend for tele-homeworkers is set to increase (TUC, 2003), few studies exist that have focused primarily on the employee's perspective, or gender, and the impact that these work practices have on the boundaries of home and work. Aside from gender issues dealt with in depth here, telework is said to include organizational benefits (improved productivity, improved employee retention, greater staffing flexibility, reduced office accommodation costs, greater resilience to disruption) and societal benefits (reduced pollution and urban congestion, provision of employment opportunities for rural areas, increased community stability, increased entrepreneurial activity) (Daniels et al, 2001). Industries where telework practices already exist are: manufacturing, electricity, gas and water, wholesale and retail, transport and storage, financial services, other business services, public administration, education, health and social work (Hogarth et al. 2000). IS-oriented work is almost exclusively non-manual labour (Felstead et al. 2002) and the occupations of potential interest include: managers and administrators, professionals, associate professionals and technical, clerical and secretarial. Marxists will be interested in how men and women experience the home-work balance differently as well as how individual socio-economic groups manage to overcome the renegotiation of boundaries.

2.2 Flexibility in the e-society

A highly contested and valued-laden term (Benner, 2002), flexibility of labour is also seen as an important focus for research on work and organizations in the Information Society (Voudouri, 2004). There is a trend to distinguish between functional (internal) flexibility - referring to the training of employees to allow them to adjust to the needs of the firm - and numerical (external) flexibility - the ability of firms to be flexible about the numbers of people engaged in employment (Voudouri, 2004). The former includes the implications of workers' skills, work organization and job prospects, this is of greatest significance for us: work organization; the latter concerns the implications of ICT for changing organizational forms, and for employment relations and employment protection. (Voudouri, 2004). However, Benner (2002) argues that it is more useful to distinguish between flexible work (the activities workers perform) and flexible employment (the contractual relationship between employer and employee). In the writings on telework, these distinctions appear to be disregarded, and we focus on the way in which 'flexibility' is sold as a benefit to home (especially women) workers, where it refers to the dividing lines of time and space that normally separate the paid work sphere from the unpaid labour carried out in the home.

2.3 Telework as beneficial and emancipatory for women

According to the tele-work literature, employees can expect reduced commuting time and costs (Papalexandris and Kramar 1997; Di Martino and Wirth 1990; Ward and Shabha 2001) leading to reduced stress and a better quality of life (Huws 1993). The appeal of a greater sense of freedom with increased leisure time, as well as more contact with children and sustained membership in non-work communities (Tremblay 2002) make the claims for telework appear superficially attractive. On the other hand, absence from the employing organization brings the cost of 'invisibility'. The improved working conditions of employees is said to bring benefits to the organization; managers see workers as more productive than on-site staff due to fewer interruptions, less motivation problems, reduced travel time, greater job satisfaction (Huws 1993) and a reduction in turnover and absenteeism (Frolick et al. 1993; Bricknell 1996). Formerly excluded employment groups, such as disabled people and women tied to the home through family responsibilities are now offered 'inclusion' within the labour force (Daniels et al. 2001). Interestingly, a substantial gender and teleworking survey of freelance workers stated that 'the relationship between domestic and economic circumstances and behaviour is much more complex, and cannot simply be 'read off' from a worker's gender' (Huws et al, 1996, p.72). In exploring the vision that home telework could assist women by breaking down gender defined roles, Huws et al (1996) concluded that the telework arrangement is conducive to a breakdown of traditional role separation, yet telework is not a sufficient condition alone. Hence the persistence of the traditional male breadwinner / female housewife model, with women bearing the greatest proportion of the responsibility for childcare.

Daniels et al. (2001, table 1) summarize stated benefits of telework as: the chance to remain in work despite moving home, becoming ill or taking on family care roles, more time for home and family, reduced commuting, greater job autonomy, less disturbance whilst working and more flexible hours. Later in the paper we will be subjecting these hypothesized benefits and costs to a Marxist critique. In relation to IS and organizations, a critical approach implicitly challenges views of organizations which do not seek to explore the contradictions emanating from their conflictual nature (Spencer 2000). Hence we will offer an explanation of the Marxist position on both women's oppression and the labour process and in so doing make reference to the claims made on behalf of teleworking.

3 MARXISM, GENDER AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS

In this section we will build on existing IS research into gender and technology that examines the negative relationship of women to IS from an anti-determinist standpoint. We argue for a cultural perspective which, because of its view of existent gender relations as historically and geographically specific, is able to overcome the problems associated with essentialist and determinist views (Wilson 2002; Wilson 2004). We will highlight the distinct contribution of Marxism to the topic which leads to novel approaches and insights.

3.1 Marxism and a cultural perspective of gender and IS

There is evidence of an increasing range of studies on both the gender differences in relation to computerized IS (Grundy 1996). However, the under-theorization of the role of gender and IS (Adam et al. 2002) has only recently been addressed in IS research. The legacy of the liberal feminist 'add-more-women' approach (Grundy 1996) still lingers in relation to information technology usage. This is a problematic position as it assumes 'success' is constituted by the victory of computer systems projects and thus embeds a managerialist slant but also because it is technologically determinist through its unquestioning acceptance of the appropriateness of the technology (Van Zoonen 1992, p. 14). This is a limited emancipatory agenda. Those who have attempted a theorization of women's situation in relation to IS (for examples: MacKinnon et al. 1993; Adam and Green 2001; Adam et al. 2002; Wilson 2002, Wilson 2004) share the understanding that technology is made more explicable by analysing it as a cultural artefact, and therefore historically and materially contingent. Explanations of women's participation in IS which reject sexist, essentialist and deterministic arguments and explanations are based on the role of socialization in creating gender difference. Girls are socialized into having an orientation towards activities related to home creation, child rearing and care of others as part of their preparation for womanhood. Socialization is an all encompassing process in two respects. Firstly, it affects both men and women, differently but symmetrically. Secondly, women and men internalize the views of society and (resistance aside) are shaped by it. Notions about the natural place of women in society are not only held by men.

A Marxist critique of liberal feminism centres on the latter's recourse to the term 'patriarchy' which tends to imply a universality that obscures the contingent and localized character of gender roles. Patriarchy is used to describe the 'masculinist project of the domination and control of women and nature' (Wajcman 1991, p. 17). However, the imposition of a 'strong notion of a universal "patriarchy" or "gender patterns" is problematic.' (Alvesson and Billing 1997, p. 4). Patriarchy can also be viewed as a sort of conspiracy theory, perceiving and articulating the presence of an intentional oppression of all women by all men (German 1986). Currently and historically this ignores the diversity of interests (especially of class) amongst men, as well as the moments of solidarity between male and female workers when they are engaged in improving women workers' conditions (German 1986). The reliance on a theory of patriarchy necessitates a vision of women's oppression as an eternal feature of society and falls prey to biological determinism and essentialism which universalizes the experience of women (Grosz 1995). In contrast, a social constructivist approach to gender states that the term 'human nature' is in fact a generalization from observations of human behaviour, since there is always a tendency to read off from one's immediate reality, the natural state of the world.

3.2 Agency and self-emancipation: IS and women users

To combat fatalism of these approaches effort must be made to avoid concentrating on women only as victims of patriarchy and consequently treating them as mere objects of history. Instead, Marxists focus on where women are strongest, in the unions at the height of struggles. The broad and rich history of working-class women's struggles has many peaks of struggle from which we can gain a clearer view of emancipation (Cliff 1984; Louie 2001; Naples 2002; Ehrenreich and Russel

Hochschild 2003). The many examples of women agitating collectively to change society - and in so doing changing themselves - serves to emphasize the fact that isolation in the home constitutes a step away from freedom for women and represents a retreat into the home both physically and ideologically. The question of agency and self-emancipation is key to a Marxist approach and so we assume an active agency on the part of employee and users with respect to IS development and use. An important E-society matter considered here is the implication of teleworking at home for women's ability to improve their disadvantaged situation, especially through collective actions. Whilst Greene and Kirton (2003) argue that ICTs offer the potential for trade unions to become more inclusive of under-represented groups whose participation in activism has been restricted in the past, such an observation does not necessarily contradict the negative effects of increased placement of women in the home.

Marxists agree that family responsibilities play a crucial role in shaping women's employment opportunities. Women form a significant part of the workforce but they come to the labour market carrying the burden of women's oppression with lower earnings than men over a lifetime and constituting the bulk of part-time workers (Sutcliffe 2001). The lack of availability and high cost of childcare means that the majority of working class women with young children are forced to 'choose' between living at home on benefits while caring for their children or working inconvenient shifts that suit their partners' work patterns. Evidently, some women experience better conditions than this. However, for every career woman on a high salary, with car, house and nanny or *au pair*, there are many more in low paid work with few of the material advantages that can help lessen the burden of women's oppression (Ehrenreich and Russel Hochschild, 2003). For those without access to this type of 'alternative' to the double burden imposed by family duties, at-home teleworking is offered as a potential solution. For those with more means at their disposal, it seems to offer the allure of autonomy and control. Ironically, such technical fixes to the social problem of incompatible responsibilities, with the allure of 'flexibility', 'choice' and 'autonomy', may ultimately serve to take women back into more traditional and oppressive roles.

By only emphasizing the beneficial aspects for society, organizations and individuals of at-home telework its advocates neglect the negative impact of a return to the home for working women. For example, Robey and Jin (2004, p. 151) claim that 'work is increasingly mediated by technologies that potentially liberate workers from specific places and times.' Teleworking, it is argued, will bring benefits to those (predominantly women) workers who struggle with the double burden of responsibilities of paid work and family care. The benefits are realized by the offer of 'flexibility' (Daniels et al. 2000; Sturgeon 1996; Huws 1993) which will remove those barriers that stand in the way of easier management of this burden. Conversely, others have been sceptical regarding the potential for (women's) emancipation through teleworking precisely because of their traditional home responsibilities (Adam and Green, 1998). The critical response to the legacy of traditional roles in the family is fully investigated in the next section.

4 MARXISM AND THE CENTRALITY OF THE FAMILY

In this section we describe in more detail the Marxist position concerning women's oppression to show the materialist explanation for the current state of affairs, as well offering as ideas for liberation.

4.1 Function and origins of the privatized family

The heart of our critique of at-home telework as a response to women's double burden of work and family responsibilities is constituted around the Marxist view of the family as central to women's oppression. The privatized heterosexual family within capitalist society is underpinned by the need to

ensure workers meet the physical and mental requirements of paid labour, and to bring up the next generation of workers (German 2003). Today women increasingly work outside the home while continuing their role as wife and mother. However, evidence continues to confirm that males' at-home obligations remain traditionally defined - women with children are likely to work half as much again at home as at their workplace (Perin 1998; Huws 1993). For Marxists, the prime beneficiaries are companies, given their priority to profit (Acker 1994). The role of wife and mother shapes women's attitudes to work outside the home (Colgan and Ledwith 1996), and the duties of child care (rather than servicing male needs) is by far the most influential factor in shaping women's working lives (German, 1986). The value of this ideological by-product of the family for the capitalist class should not be underestimated (Davies 1982). Ideologically, it has also created a split in the working class, encouraging men to identify with certain values of the exploiters (German 1986). Still more importantly for the current research on at-home teleworking is the condemnation by Marxists of any retreat by women into the family, 'the isolation of women in the home could cut them off from wider social movements. Their oppression reduced their ability to struggle against the system much of the time, and so opened them up to conservative views of society.' (Harman 1984, p. 6).

4.2 Marxism and agency: going out to work as a pre-condition for liberation

The theory of self-emancipation central to Marxism means that going out to work offers the only opportunity for women to change themselves in the process of changing their conditions. Working outside the home increases egalitarian attitudes amongst those women and their male partners (Cliff 1984). This means that, for Marxists, the focus of their attentions are upon the workplace and the important struggles where women are more likely to win the support of men such as strikes rather than issues such as cuts in welfare, the fight for equal pay, abortion rights and unionization which have been largely neglected (German 1988). Marx and Engels argued that women's incorporation into social production was a pre-condition for their liberation. The involvement of women in work outside the home has constituted a crucial component in women's struggles (Cliff 1984). The strength and confidence come from the gains obtained through workplace participation: economic independence, a possibility of social worth, and collective action. The forms and locations of this success should make us wary of any technologically enabled 'solutions' to women's situation, such as at-home telework, which represent a return to women's ideological and physical isolation in the home. Isolation leads to a sense of powerlessness. If women only worked at home as housewives the picture would be grim. In relation to teleworking, if women's place in the home is privileged over other roles there is a danger that this will lead them away from the potential to improve their lot, individually or collectively – but especially the latter.

4.3 Unpaid work in the family: the home as haven and prison

Marx and Engels described the family as a haven in a heartless world, yet a place where people were socialized into continuing with their roles (Engels 1978). Building on their work, Cliff (1984) outlines the contradictory nature of the working class family as both haven and prison. Despite its oppressive side, in the face of no viable alternatives, the family is societally embraced as it does provide some form of haven in a capitalist world. Whilst the home offers men an escape from the alienation of paid labour, the home is the very site of housewives' alienated situation (Cliff 1984). The dual aspect of the family and home as refuge and site of unpaid labour is extremely significant for at-home telework prospects. When history has offered an opportunity, Marxists have condemned the drudgery of 'domestic slavery' (Stites 1978) and have attempted to socialize domestic labour and childcare (through maternity homes, nurseries, kindergartens, schools, communal dining rooms, communal laundries, and mending centres) as the only way for women to be truly liberated. Marxists are against moves to enable housework and the unpaid labour carried out in the home to continue – it is altogether a move in the wrong direction. In addition, moving paid work into the home is likely to

have negative consequences for the role of the home as a haven from alienation resulting in the – construction of a double disadvantage.

5 TELEWORKING: A MARXIST CRITIQUE

In this next section, we apply a Marxist critique to the claims made on behalf of the technology and in doing so make comparison to the Marxist agenda for women's liberation in order to contextualize the claims of amelioration for (women) employees' working lives. Our focused critique concerns a list of benefits to individuals identified by Daniels et al. (2001). This list largely concerns promises of flexible working hours and the option to work from home, and the opportunity to raise a family while pursuing a career (Sturgeon 1996). Indeed, this is summed up by one of the most cited writers on the subject (Huws 1993, p. 45), 'the ability to combine work harmoniously with the demands of raising a family is often the main advantage of teleworking'. By contrast, application of the Marxist analysis of the family leads to the following critique of hypothesized benefits for women to be delivered by telework.

5.1 Anti-determinism: Cultural perspective of gender and IS

Focus on workers' employment experience in the teleworking phenomenon challenges the dominant ideology that technology always constitutes the best answer to social problems. In line with existing writing on gender and IS that deals with the disadvantaged relationship of women and IS from an anti-determinist standpoint, we have furthered the case for a cultural perspective to overcome the problems associated with essentialism and determinism. An analysis of this relationship as a cultural one also requires its consideration in both its historical and material contingency. For Marxists, the exploitation of some people by others, the existence of an oppressive state and the subordination of women to men in the nuclear family are products of human history and therefore capable of being changed. In analysing women's oppression and disadvantaged position at work the Marxist focus is on the use made by capitalists of low paid workers. At-home telework has many overlapping themes with that of part time work (IES 2003). The need for women to accept low paid part time work is due to a lack of choice about at-home responsibilities. The capitalists have benefited two-fold in that the burden of ensuring the refreshment and replenishment of the next generation of workers is provided for free in the privatized home. At the same time this can be used to drive down wages through part time work – the ideological battering ram of the domination of housework and home responsibilities over a social role within the workplace.

5.2 Increased alienation versus 'flexibility', 'choice' and 'autonomy'

By looking to writings and records of demands made by women and men for the amelioration of women's situation from the highpoint of struggle Marxists have a benchmark against which to compare claims – such as flexibility, choice and autonomy. These three terms imply that there are a set of alternatives on offer for work and home responsibilities. Evidently, with no real acceptable alternatives for childcare or other family duties there is little real choice on offer. Home-working may be the only option for managing childcare and work. Likewise, flexibility is seen as a benefit since it enables women to deal with their double burden and can be alternatively interpreted as reinforcing a view of women as 'always available for others' – even when struck by illness. Furthermore, Jenkins (2004) has shown how, in the case of part-time female workers, flexibility is restrictive and offers little opportunity for career development. The extent to which employees can exercise autonomy will vary but will not necessarily decrease the routinisation of tasks. Indeed, Dimitrova (2003) states that some managers use extensive supervisory procedures to counter-act the inability to observe workers directly.

5.3 Commuting and more time for family

The criteria by which telework is assessed as an advance or progress will be judged in a capitalist framework according to rates of exploitation (length of working day in relation to rewards and rate of profit). Whilst the prospect of less commuting by working remotely may be appealing, this 'technical fix' obscures the complexity of the problem. Furthermore, managers are likely to attempt to exploit the hours retrieved and there are restrictions about when activities can happen. The ability to control hours of work must come at the expense of a working day without boundaries. The employees potentially are expected to be always available to the organization. The claim that the chance to remain at home to work for an organization will lead to workers having more time for family relations ignores the fact that these activities may be mutually exclusive and lead to increased conflict between work and home. If childcare is going on simultaneously with other work then there may be increased or different disturbance (from family and community members) whilst working. This too would negate those claims of teleworking as a solution to the distraction of the office. One cannot promote increased contact with family and community without equally allowing for unsolicited contact. If the family represents a refuge from loneliness and some limited respite from the alienation of capitalism, then it follows that bringing the lower levels of IS work into the home will signify the potential loss of one of the positive aspects of the home/family. There is clear evidence here of the traditional view of family roles critiqued in the paper: the care of children is unquestioningly the prerogative of women in the home within a structure of the capitalist, privatized family (Massey 1994). Traditional home responsibilities severely reduce the potential for emancipation through occupations such as teleworking (Adam and Green 1998).

5.4 Nature of work and (in)visibility

The rhetoric of 'inclusion' rings especially hollow for two reasons: the absence from the host organization brings a cost of 'invisibility' from the reward system operated by management; isolation in the home guards against traditional ways of collectively organizing in the workplace for resistance. Isolation leads to a sense of powerlessness. The managerialist view of work underpinning the promises is evident: work is largely portrayed as an individual rather than collective act, since interaction with other tasks and workers is overlooked. In addition, the meaning of work for employees is limited to the perfunctory execution of tasks for the organization; other activities, such as socialising, satisfaction, sense of worth are thereby relegated in significance or even deemed dysfunctional. There is an implicit work ethic underlying the benefits for individuals: work must occur no matter what else happens in the individual's life (including sickness). As for opportunities for women to overcome their situation, the view of work as an individual, functional act underestimates the social purpose of work in the workplace. From the aspect of managements' response to employees, the significance of presence and visibility of employees for recognition of their efforts is ignored, although 'invisibility' has historically played a negative role in women's career prospects, as the example of part-time (especially) women workers has consistently shown. This invisibility also impinges on employees' subjectivity and sense of belonging (and security).

5.5 Agency and opportunities for collective action

Work has a social attraction (Hochschild 1997) that is partly constituted by the potential for collective activity. However, this opportunity is undermined by at-home telework, making it increasingly difficult for agencies to organize to protect employees' welfare (Bibby 2003), and for people to organize themselves. The additional difficulties in organizing workers who are disparate and whose sense of collective identity is likely to be weaker than in older forms of work has been noted (Danford et al. 2003). Even if the withdrawal from socialized labour within an organization does not affect the economic independence of women, homework will certainly curtail to potential

for collective action. In respect of strategies for effecting real change for women, as we have seen, the gains made in women's situation in the second half of the 20th Century, have largely been a result of the increasing presence of women in the labour force (Papalexandris and Kramar 2002). Further to this practical consideration, telework may be a regressive step ideologically. Talk of improved working conditions of telework when observed from a Marxist perspective is turned on its head, for at-home telework is likely to contribute to the distancing of women from the very point where they are potentially strongest (economic independence, a possibility of social worth, and collective action) and able to radically change society, in the collective at work.

5.6 Socio-economic groups: class differences

Women from different classes experience the home-work divide and family constraints and burdens differently. Given the discrepancy in work situations and family life between professional and working class women areas of investigation for research include the access to at-home telework, how the problems and solutions in relation to telework are variously perceived and varying impacts. The prior arrangements of housework and childcare due to disposal income disparity would also be of interest. Further, we will increasingly find at-home teleworkers carrying out clerical work, often involving the transaction processing functions at the bottom end of an organization's work ranking Webster (1996). It is unlikely that telework will remedy differences in access and conditions, as suggested by Felstead et al. (2002). Tele-working is especially an option for middle-class professionals, yet the double burden is usually managed by paying for the labour of others in the home (usually working class women). Hence, uncritical acceptance associated with the benefits of telework for workers constitutes a means of assisting the domination of housework, home responsibilities, isolation and powerlessness over paid work in the socialized public arena where collective resistance is possible.

6 CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTION OF PAPER

In order to prepare for empirical research in this paper we have outlined a critique of telework claims. Providing a background on telework as a socio-technical ensemble and focusing on flexibility issues we provided a theoretical examination of stated benefits and emancipatory potential. This was achieved through a delineation of the Marxist, cultural approach to gender and IS, incorporating a strong humanist argument for the agency of individuals and the need for self-emancipation. The optimism of the Marxist agenda is based on an understanding of the historically specific nature of women's oppression, located in the rise of class society and later in the privatized capitalist family. In this respect, the argument for the necessity of women's continuing socialized work outside of the family arena to engage in self emancipation from the strength of a collective was made. In addition, the space for telework is described in relation to the unpaid work and emotional comfort of the home. These points were systematically applied to at home telework.. The inescapable alienated nature of work under capitalism limits claims for flexibility, choice and autonomy. Equally, the option for more time with family underestimates the control of such choices by management; the unrealistic goal of carrying out paid work simultaneously with caring roles is flawed and based on traditionalist values. Women's invisibility at work is a problem both for reward opportunities and ability to engage in collective action – a situation which telework would not ameliorate. And finally, a Marxist approach means a focus on the distinct conditions and experience of women from different classes.

Marxism is consistently mis-represented as a mechanistic, deterministic theory where human, individual consciousness played no constructive part. However, a closer reading of the actual texts (especially Engels, 1978) reveals a far more humanist and dynamic view of emancipation where human agency and self emancipation are the keys to changing society. By describing how humanist

Marxist approaches concerning gender can be applied to the at-home telework phenomenon, we have advanced an alternative approach for interpreting e-society and thereby offered a means by which to evaluate the potential opportunities and threats that ubiquitous ICTs offer. As Marxism is based on an historical materialist analysis of the rise of women's oppression, it offers a much higher viewpoint from which to analyse claims for 'freedom' on behalf of women. Underpinning the claims to choice and flexibility is a rather traditional view of family roles: not just that it is women who often take on the care responsibilities but that this is within a privatized family, where societal responsibility for childcare is minimal. Locating women's oppression within their role in the privatized family unit means critiquing 'solutions' that take women back into the home and out of the public sphere. In this regard, we would have to be skeptical about the appropriateness of ICT interventions in the development of the E-society. The Marxist approach raises the stakes in relation to issue of liberation and in this regard the progressive or regressive nature of telework is examined by assessing the extent to which it offers women an opportunity to engage in a collective fight for a better society. This points to a research agenda that includes examination of teleworkers' involvement in agencies such as workplace trade unions (Greene and Kirton 2003).

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