

Widening Women's Work in ICT (WWW-ICT)

Big bureaucratic companies, so it is frequently argued, are now being replaced by lean and flexible organisations. The new knowledge economy relies on information-intensive industries, such as finance, and innovation-intensive industries, such as biotechnology and software. These transformations have re-configured the workplace, so that flexibility and teamwork are now all important. Equally, employment relations have been transformed, becoming more individualised and involving more informal relationships between managers and employees. In this novel environment, human resource managers and business studies theorists tell us that what really matters to companies is their human capital: men and women are assets which contribute directly to the company's competitive position.

While some scholars tend to qualify these arguments, others have gone further and also suggested that such new workplace arrangements make it easier for more women and minorities to enter the ranks of management. Thus some years ago a leading feminist academic, Joan Acker, expressed the hope that less hierarchical organisations, based on teamwork and flexible time arrangements, might offer possibilities for accommodating non-work aspects of life and reducing the disadvantages for women in paid work.

If Acker's arguments are correct, the Information and Communication Technology sector should be much more woman-friendly than

traditional employment. In Ireland the information technology sector certainly now employs many women, with women now comprising 30 per cent of the sector workforce. But how do these women perceive their employment opportunities in the new 'flexible' organisations? What are the factors that they perceive as hindrances or stimuli to their career progression in such organisations?

The ERC has investigated these questions in a European-funded project called 'Widening Women's Work in ICT' (WWW-ICT). The project has involved six other teams across Europe. Researchers gathered qualitative data through analysis of individual professional biographies and case studies of firms.

The research results suggest that much of the enthusiasm expressed by the literature is unfounded. Certainly the growth of the IT industry in Ireland has provided many Irish women with the opportunity to enter innovative organisations and to do challenging jobs. The research also confirms that in the IT industry working times and work arrangements are flexible and interpersonal relations are informal. However, these features do not necessarily benefit women.

All the interviewees appreciated the flexibility of working time, but for women – and only for women – this becomes a double-edged sword. Managers conceptualise the amount of time people spend at work as the main indicator of employees' commitment and even pro-

ductivity. Consequently, if women use the flexible hours to facilitate childcare commitments, then they are seen as not really committed – even if in fact they are actually just as productive as those who work physically longer hours.

Furthermore, when women are both mothers and workers, reconciling these two roles is not any easier by the employment relations of the industry. The employment relationship is individualised so there are no agreed guidelines on women's rights to flexible hours. Equally there is no formal framework within which career and wage progression can occur, and progression on the career ladder relies to a large extent on the subjective judgements of employees' managers. In this informal structure such judgements become largely unquestionable, not least because they are based on uneven power relations.

The research does not suggest that ICT companies are explicitly discriminating against women. However, the growing presence of women at the workplace has not led to any recognition of the gendered nature of work. As a consequence, Irish software companies are failing to accommodate women in the industry. Since diversity is not recognised, it is not a topic of management concern. The depth of the problem is shown by the fact that the industry has not developed any policy to deal with women workers, especially those with family commitments.

New ERC Projects

Globalisation and transnational migrant workers in the Dublin labour market.

Today, in Dublin workplaces, you are more likely to hear Spanish or Bengali spoken than Irish. Accounts of the 'Celtic Tiger' have focused primarily on changes *within* Ireland. Only a few studies on foreign direct investments have related such changes to global economic dynamics. In this context, one very under-researched aspect is the labour market: there is only one study published by O'Riain in 1999 that explores the crucial role of high skill Irish emigration – and subsequent return migration – in the economic resurgence. Furthermore, while heated debates have spurred on the themes of multi-culturalism, identity and social exclusion, there is virtually no research on migration and employment. This is somewhat paradoxical given that one component of the Celtic Tiger has been its ability to tap new global sources of labour.

Funded under the auspices of the Institute for International Integration Studies, the ERC has started a new project that explores the ways in which the labour market of the Dublin region has become globalised. It aims to examine the role of migrant workers in the local labour market, focusing in particular on (a) professionals in Information Technology; (b) professionals in the medical sector and (c) workers in catering and hotels.

The projects will explore the theme of transnational migration from three main perspectives. First, it will provide an account of the ways in which migrant workers perceive their current job in terms of overall employment

perspective. An increasingly large number of scholars argue that the new professionals and managers, the so-called "symbolic analysts", can work anywhere in the world. Nonetheless, such arguments have not been subjected to empirical examination. Arguably, low skill migrants have always had a similar understanding of their work. It is apparent that how people see their current employment affects how they work, their readiness to undertake further training, etc. Second, the project explores the ways in which employers utilise migrant labour in the three sectors selected. The investigation will seek to shed light on the relationships between the use of migrant workers and employers' overall human resource strategy. It will look at the implications of the presence of migrant workforce on training and organisation of career development. This aspect also reflects company's overall strategies of innovation and their reliance on foreign workers and new migration chains. Third, the project will consider wider regulatory dilemmas and issues of social cohesion connected to the increasing circulation of workers. These dilemmas concern the recognition of qualifications at European level but also the coherence of migration policies. Another important issue concerns the welfare state.

This new ERC research intends therefore to relate issues of migration and ethnicity to issues of social class and social hierar-

Recent ERC Publications

Boucher, G and Collins G (2003) **Hav- ing One's Cake And Being Eaten Too: Irish Neo-Liberal Corporatism** *Review of Social Economy* September 2003

Boucher, G **Tiers of Engagement by Universities in their Region's Devel- opment**, *Regional Studies*, Vol. 37, 9, pp. 887-897, December 2003 (with Cheryl Conway and Els Van der Meer).

Collins, G and Wickham J, (2004), **'Inclusion or exploitation? Irish women enter the labour force'** *Gen- der, Work and Organization* 11, 1 26- 46.

Collins, G (2004), **The Economic Case for Mergers: Old, New, Bor- rowed, and Blue**. *Journal of Economic Issues* 37 no 4, pp. 987-998

Greco, L (2003) **'Institutional and industrial changes in the Italian South: The case of Brindisi,'** *Modern Italy*, 8(2), 2003, pp. 187-201.

Wickham J and Collins G (2004) **"The Call Centre: A Nursery for New Forms of Work Organisation?,"** *Service Industries Journal*, January 2004 issue - Volume 24 Number 1.

Wickham J **'Understanding techno- logical and organisational change'**, in M. Heitor, E. Lorenz and B. Lundvall (eds.), *Towards a Learning Society: Innovation and competence building with social cohesion for Europe*, Lon- don: Edward Elgar, 2003, pp. 101-121.

Wickham J **Book review:** D. O'Hearn, *The Atlantic economy: Britain, the US and Ireland*, in *British Journal of Soci- ology* 54.3 (September 2003): 422-423.

Seminars 2004

Monday 12th January Proinnsias Breathnach (Department of Geography, National University of Ireland, Maynooth) **Occupational change and social polarisation in the post-Fordist informational economy: evidence from Ireland.**

Monday 26th January Gerry Boucher (ERC and Department of Sociology, Trinity College, Dublin) **The flexibility of the European Social Model in Smaller European countries.**

Seminars are held in the IIS Seminar Room, 6th floor, Arts Building, from 5 to 6 pm