

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

KAREN D. HUGHES *Female Enterprise in the New Economy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005, i-xiii, 252 p., index.

In the wake of cutbacks during the last ten years, financial restraint, and the neo-liberal agenda, governments have been encouraging people to become entrepreneurs. Self-employment and small business ownership have been touted as the way to provide employment for displaced and disadvantaged workers, and to increase economic development in many regions. In the book *Female Enterprise in the New Economy*, Karen Hughes, who is an associate professor of Women Studies and adjunct professor of Sociology at the University of Alberta, investigates “women’s self-employment and small business ownership in Canada, examining recent trends and considering the economic, personal and policy consequences of this type of work for women” (6). She does this within the context of the “new” economy, whereby non-standard, contingent, and precarious work is quickly becoming the norm. In order to do this, Hughes sets out a methodological framework that combines quantitative measures with qualitative interviews to tackle questions about how self-employed women take up this form of work, their level of job satisfaction, risk and stability, and policy implications.

Current survey data on the self-employed is available, compiled by agencies such as Statistics Canada. As Hughes points out, this data is only the starting point from which to explore work. For this book she uses primary and secondary data, as well as quantitative and qualitative. This approach allows her to see the trends which need interrogating (through secondary analysis of Census data and the like) and to question and enrich them with in-depth interviews of 61 self-employed Albertan women. In doing so, she provides the reader with a tightly knit empirical presentation of female self-employment and small-business ownership.

To begin her exploration, Hughes wants to enter the debate about whether or not people are pulled or pushed into self-employment. As she shows, the current consensus is that most self-employed people are not “pushed” into this work by events such as unemployment but are “pulled” by the desire for such experiences as control and independence. Hughes asks whether or not this is the case for self-employed women. Her answer is a qualified yes. While most of her respondents did enter self-employment voluntarily, there is still a sizable contingent in her sample who were forced to do so. What is interesting in Hughes’ examination is that the understanding of being forced is different than it appeared in previous analyses. For example,

citing “control over the work environment” has usually been assumed to be a pull mechanism, in which the desire for this control in some instances is a result of a negative work environment that forced some women to look for alternative forms of work. In her study, Hughes provides a more nuanced approach to how women decide on forms of work than the way they were depicted previously. She rightly challenges preconceived notions about understandings of motivations that can be applied not only to the case of women’s self-employment but women and work more generally.

From this information, Hughes develops a typology for her respondents. They are categorised as either solo workers or employers, and either voluntary or forced self-employed. Using this as the basis for the remaining discussion, Hughes discusses intrinsic and extrinsic factors which influence work. While many of the concerns, such as independence and income, are similar regardless of where the self-employed women fall in the typology, how respondents talk about these issues is dependent upon the type of self-employment they do, and whether or not they entered self-employment voluntarily. For example, in interviews solo self-employed workers saw independence as not having to deal with bosses and supervisors, while independence for employers meant being able to shape and build their businesses (90-91). When it comes to financial security, Hughes shows that the forced solo self-employed are less satisfied with their income than voluntary employers (122). By providing this detailed discussion of the various aspects of self-employed work, Hughes demonstrates the heterogeneity among female entrepreneurs which tends to be overlooked in large-scale surveys.

The final goal of this book is to critique existing government policy as it pertains to self-employed workers. Using the experiences of her respondents, Hughes shows how government policy has focused on the start-up of self-employed work, but does not offer ongoing support. Of particular interest is the lack of a social safety net available to self-employed women. As a self-employed person, one has little or no access to programmes which benefit the average Canadian worker. Self-employed women cannot take part in maternity/paternity leave under Employment Insurance and for them to take part in training programmes (often vital to remain current in their fields) carries a great financial burden. In this respect, as Hughes states, governments’ unwillingness to address the labour and social policies which leave self-employed women (and men as well) without a safety net has created an atmosphere of “growing individualisation of risk” (187).

If this book has a minor failing, it lies in the author’s inability to provide a fully reflexive account of her research. As Hughes points out, researchers need to be cognisant of their role as constructors and filters of knowledge. I sometimes had the impression that the author was too reticent. Occasionally, I wondered how she had come upon a particular topic or interacted with her subjects, but this does not often detract from the presentation of her findings.

Karen Hughes has accomplished much of what she has set out to do in this book. Quantitative survey research is enriched by in-depth interviews with self-employed women. She has tried to overcome the recurring trend within the sociology of work to dichotomise the attitudes and experiences of work. Despite using dichotomous typologies at times, Hughes still demonstrates that dichotomous does not necessarily mean black and white. Her analysis of women's self-employed work is detailed, comprehensive, and rich. This book would interest anyone who wishes to explore the issues surrounding women's work and how those who are doing precarious work get involved and make sense of what they are doing.

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