



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

**Author/s:**

Churchill, B;Ravn, S;Craig, L

**Title:**

Gendered and Generational Inequalities in the Gig Economy Era

**Date:**

2019-12-02

**Citation:**

Churchill, B., Ravn, S. & Craig, L. (2019). Gendered and Generational Inequalities in the Gig Economy Era. *Journal of Sociology*, 4 (55), pp.627-636. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783319893754>.

**Persistent Link:**

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/251853>

**Title**

Gendered and generational inequalities in the gig economy era

**Authors**

Dr Brendan Churchill

Dr Signe Ravn

Professor Lyn Craig

School of Social and Political Sciences

**Article information**

Published in the *Journal of Sociology*, 55(4):627-636

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783319893754>

**Contract**

Contact corresponding author [Brendan.Churchill@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:Brendan.Churchill@unimelb.edu.au) for a final proof copy.

## Introduction

Over the last few decades, there has been a radical transformation of Australia's labour market and education sectors, with intersecting implications for gender and generational inequalities. First, the composition of the labour force has changed. There has been a significant increase in women's participation in paid work, which has been driven by the changing industrial landscape as well as a significant expansion of higher education opportunities for women. At the same time, there has been a steady decline in full-time youth employment. Youth unemployment has become a persistent problem for governments since the late 1980s and 1990s and has only worsened since the Global Financial Crisis (Denny & Churchill 2014). Primary industry and the manufacturing sectors, once reliant upon unskilled labour, in particular young people who left school early, have waned and there has been a countervailing growth in service industries that require professional, skilled workers (Cuervo & Wyn 2011). Not only has the composition of the labour market changed, so too has its characteristics. New jobs have different conditions to the old. The contemporary labour market is increasingly characterised by what Guy Standing (2011) calls precarious work. Precarious work is "uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which employees bear the risks of work (as opposed to businesses and government) and received limited benefits and statutory protections" (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018: 1). It is often described as contingent or non-regular work or referred to as 'alternative work arrangements' or 'flexible staffing arrangements' (Kalleberg 2018: 12). Examples of precarious work include temporary work; contract work, including independent contractors; part-time work with a desire for more hours; work with irregular hours; casual work and own-account self-employed workers (Kalleberg 2018: 12). The growth in precarious work is a result of structural changes which have eroded the standard employment arrangements that emerged in the post-war period (Kalleberg 2018). These changes have given rise to what is being termed 'the gig economy': a new way of organising economic activity, where workers are not hired on a permanent basis but for shorter or longer term 'gigs'. This reconfigures labour markets and can on the one hand be seen to encourage a new, digital form of entrepreneurship and provide new opportunities for flexible work patterns. However, especially in a flexible, deregulated economy like Australia it also exposes individuals to greater financial risks and social insecurities which can deepen existing inequalities. Younger generations are arriving to a labour market in which 'work' has increasingly been replaced by 'gigs' and 'tasks' and this kind of highly casualised, non-standard employment is having a spill-over effect on their

non-working lives, which are increasingly disrupted by these social changes. This is what we term the gig economy era. In many ways, it is an extension and continuation of the neoliberal forces which have created the ‘new precariat’ (Standing 2011), for whom insecure and non-standard employment has become the norm. The introduction to this special issue, *Gender and Generational Inequalities in the Gig Economy*, begins by mapping the context and configurations that have led to this era and its impact upon young men and women and introduces the articles contained in this issue. It concludes with a discussion of future avenues for research.

### *Gendered revolutions in education and work*

In tandem with the developments described above, Australia and other Western nations have experienced what Claudia Goldin (2003) described as a ‘quiet revolution’ in women’s social and economic participation. This ‘quiet revolution’ has seen an increase in the participation rates of women in education and employment over the last five decades. The quiet revolution which begun in the 1970s and early 1980s and was driven largely by the earliest born Baby Boomers and their successors who made small but significant gains over time, building to a small but revolutionary shift. These shifts were aided in part by educational policies aimed at closing the gender gap to ensure women’s equal participation in education at all levels (Connell 2011).

In 1982, just 12.6 percent of young men aged between 25 and 34 years of age held a tertiary qualification compared to just eight percent of women in the same age group. By the end of the 1980s, these figures had increased only slightly to 14.6 percent for young men and 10.8 percent for young women. During the 1990s this changed, however, and by the end of the Millennium, more young women than young men held a tertiary qualification, demonstrating the significant change that had occurred during the period. By 2018, young women’s attainment of higher qualifications exceeded men’s by about ten percent: 40 percent of young women aged between 25 and 34 years of age held a tertiary qualification compared to 32.4 percent of young men (ABS 2018). As these statistics demonstrate, younger generations of women have benefited from the gains their predecessors have made as they were “...better able to predict what their future lifetime employment would be...they increased their investments in formal schooling, majored in career-oriented subjects, and continued on to professional and graduate schools in far greater numbers” (Goldin 2003: 18).

While women's educational attainment now outmatches men's, this has not translated into gender equity in the labour market. While women's labour force participation in Australia has experienced its own revolution, moving from 49.5 percent in the late 1970s and early 1980s to 60.5 percent in 2018, women's participation still remains ten percent lower than men's overall participation rate (ABS 2018). Young unmarried women have barely made any progress in terms of participation in the labour market over the last five decades, but this perhaps reflects their dominance in the education system. Younger married women, however, have increased their participation rate from 55 percent in 1978 to 74 percent in 2018, which is also indicative of wider shifts about women's roles in Australian society. The divide between young men and women, however, remains. For recent graduates, the gender pay gap is around five percent and this gap is wider at later career stages averaging around 18% for the working population (WGEA 2019). There are also gender disparities in graduate employment rates and status. Recent male graduates are more likely to be in full-time jobs than are recent women graduates, who are twice as likely as their male equivalents to be in part-time jobs (WGEA 2019). What these huge increases in the participation of women in paid labour indicate is that there has been a "transformation of our society... [in which] we now expect women to work for most of their lives – to behave like men in this respect...they are expected to – and often want to – work outside the home (Pocock 2016: 150). The implication is that education does little to temper the perverse gender order of the labour market. Yet educating girls was hailed as the surest route to gender equality and economic security for women (Bergmann, 2005). The gap between that hope and current reality is wide.

### *Great unmet expectations*

Despite significant gains in recent decades, it appears as if young women and, increasingly, their young male counterparts will not capitalise on the progress made before them, arriving to a labour market that does not want them nor has room for them. This sentiment has only exacerbated since the Global Financial Crisis and the ensuing Great Recession which has seen young people's economic opportunities have significantly disappeared (Denny and Churchill 2014; Craig, Churchill and Wong 2018).

This economic and social stagnation is the central characteristic of modern life for young people. As Zygmunt Bauman (2011, p. 6) observes, "...the present-day newcomers to adult

life confront expectations falling – and much too steeply and abrupt for any hope for a gentle descent”. This, he notes, is in contrast to previous eras awash with “rising expectations” in which there was “...bright, dazzling light at the end of every one of the few tunnels which their predecessors might have been forced to pass through in the course of their lives” (Bauman 2011, p. 2) . For Bauman, and for a number of other sociologists researching youth (e.g., Woodman & Wyn 2015; Furlong & Cartmel 2007, Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2017), the conditions for this generation of are not only considerably worse than previous generations but these conditions appear to be the new normal, rather than a brief moment in the lives of young people. Young people today are very likely to be the first generation since the Second World War that will not experience upward mobility – that is, improving upon the life chances of their parents’ generation who “expected the inter-generational ‘reproduction of success’ to go on beating their own records as easily as they themselves” (Bauman 2011, p. 2).

The expectation that this younger generation will do better than previous generations because of education is sown into the intergenerational contract (Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2017). Investment in education, especially a tertiary qualification, was and still is seen as worthwhile endeavour for many young people and their parents. This is reinforced by the state and has become a normative pathway for young people post-school education. However, what this means is that “[t]here are simply too many people wanting to make the same life journeys that depend on educational and occupational success highlighting the social limits to individual freedom” (Brown, Lauder and Ashton 2011: 135). This is what Brown and colleagues call the “social congestion in the competition for decent jobs”. The declines in labour force participation amongst younger men and women over the last four decades, as levels of education in Australia and in other Liberal welfare regimes like the United States and United Kingdom have significantly risen, has left some to suggest that the promise of human capital theory is broken (Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2017).

This special issue sheds light on the intersection of these developments: the changing labour market, the (stalled) progress of women’s workforce participation and gender equality and the ‘broken promise’ of human capital theory for younger generations. It focuses on the contemporary challenges for young people in general and young women in particular, posing questions about how this state of affairs has evolved, and the implications for gender and generational equity in Australia and beyond. This special issue builds upon a symposium

hosted at the University of Melbourne in November 2018, funded by the School of Social and Political Sciences. Some of the papers presented at this workshop are included in this special issue and they are complemented by additional articles received in response to a special call for papers. The issue includes a mix of approaches, including quantitative and qualitative approaches as well as novel methodological and theoretical contributions. The majority of the papers are Australian-focused, but the issue does include contributions from Europe, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

From the papers included in this special issue of the Journal, three main themes or dimensions of the 'gig economy era' emerge. First, the transition from education to work for younger generations is becoming increasingly uncertain because of the weakened link between human capital investment and employment outcomes. As some of the research in this issue highlights, this experience is no longer confined to young people without tertiary qualifications as it may have been once in the past. Second, the uncertainty of the education-to-work nexus and precarious work in general is having a significant impact upon how young people construct their identity and imagine their futures, which is heavily classed and gendered. This is related to the third theme – young women, many of whom, as the articles in this special issue show, are hopeful about the opportunities in the gig economy era and into the future, but find that the gains in education do not necessarily advantage them in the current labour market, forcing them not only into gig or gig-like work but also highly gendered roles at home.

We begin with a set of papers investigating gendered inequalities through young women's engagement with education. First, the paper by Ravn & Churchill sheds light on the future prospects for a group of young people we hear little about in the contemporary landscape where the majority of young people complete upper secondary education and almost every second continue to complete tertiary education (Churchill et al. 2014): young Australian women who have left the education system before finishing upper secondary education. When young people 'falling behind' in the education system is the topic, focus is often on a perceived 'crisis of masculinity' (Roberts 2014) as the reason for why young men are overrepresented amongst those who leave school early (Lamb et al, 2015). However, there is good reason to investigate the prospects for young women specifically as the highly gender-segregated Australian labour market and policies that encourage women to be primary carers pose particular, gendered barriers. Through a mixed methods analysis that combines HILDA

household survey data and qualitative interview data Ravn & Churchill analyse how young women without upper secondary qualifications fare in the labour market and how they make choices for their future. What they find is both a perceived but also statistically significant tension between the value of further educational qualifications on the one hand and ‘real’ labour market experience on the other. Through this the analysis demonstrates how *not* continuing with education also can be an active choice rather than a result of ‘not making it’ in school. The mixed methods analysis also identifies a schism between work and care; between statistical realities and individual expectations. According to the survey data, care work will take up a central part in many of the young women’s lives, either through the types of qualifications and jobs they are aiming for, or as unpaid care work in the home. However, in the qualitative data these were not futures that many envisioned. Most participants saw themselves as active in the labour market; as individuals who are willing to take responsibility and ‘make pathways’ for themselves, in line with neoliberal policies. The futures available to them may not be seen as ‘attractive’, neither by themselves or by policy-makers.

Continuing the theme on young women in education, Alan France, Tepora Pukepuke, Lucy Cowie, David Mayeda and Marilyn Chetty’s paper shifts the focus from Australia to discuss the imagined futures of young women Aotearoa/New Zealand. The study provides a nice contrast, beyond the country differences, to Ravn and Churchill’s paper by focusing on women in the tertiary education system. The paper combines qualitative interviews with women from diverse backgrounds with a Bourdeusian framework to study how the women navigate university, what resources they have available and where they envision themselves going. Also, novel is their use of the *Kaupapa Māori* methodology when engaging with Māori students. The paper focuses on three cases; women with three very different cultural and social backgrounds and the findings reiterate just how important educational investment has become for the current, young generation, especially women, and the emotional and financial dimensions of this investment. In fact, the effort and energy to maintain this investment means, as the authors note, that for some students, “thinking or ‘imagining’ the future beyond the ‘here and now’ remains a struggle”. Importantly, this paper demonstrates the need to think about the concept of ‘imagined futures’ in a reflexive way to include how the past and present and the accumulation of experiences shape young women’s future imaginings and choices.

With the paper by Jenny Chesters and Johanna Wyn we move on to consider the link between education and work for young people in the contemporary labour market. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from the *Life Patterns* study in Australia, they ask how many educational qualifications young people need to secure what the authors term meaningful work, i.e., work that is in the field of study and/or is seen as satisfying. The authors analyse how young people are faring 11 years after finishing secondary school and their findings are confirming what the international literature has suggested: education is no longer a guarantee for job security in the form of a permanent job; in fact, young people with VET qualifications had greater odds of permanent employment than university graduates. However, those with VET qualifications or a BA degree were less likely than postgraduates to be employed in a job within their field of study and less likely to be satisfied with their job. This leads to the paradox where “those with secure jobs do not necessarily find them meaningful, whereas those with meaningful jobs are not necessarily in secure employment”. The analysis demonstrates how the link between education and work is severely weakened, also in Australia and it poses questions about the current youth policies and the emphasis on education and ‘human capital’ as the key to national as well as individual prosperity.

The paper by Björn Högberg, Mattias Strandh and Anna Baranowska-Rataj looks at another facet of the gig economy era’s labour market – temporary contracts, and whether they, as the authors observe, are “dead-ends, or [whether they] function as stepping-stones to standard employment”. This is one of the central questions for sociologists interested in the ‘gig economy era’, as this is more or less defined by the proliferation of temporary contracts. In the article, the authors are concerned with the role of employment protective legislation in shaping young people’s pathways from temporary to more permanent employment and the vocational specificity of education systems. Using harmonised data from the *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions*, they find some interesting differences between European countries, for example, in Sweden there high rates of temporary employment among young people, but they also have a high probability of moving into permanent employment, however, in France where temporary employment is also high for young people, temporary contracts are not likely to result in permanent jobs. This is in part because temporary contracts in Sweden are seen as stepping-stones to more secure work. They also find that where there is stricter employment protection legislation for regular jobs, which “reflects the costs and inconveniences” of terminating someone in a permanent job as well stricter employment legislation for temporary jobs, the risk of young people losing a

temporary jobs is much lower, but their ability to move into to a permanent job is also lessened. This means that young people might become ‘stuck’ in these kinds of temporary jobs, which has significant implications for their livelihoods.

David Farrugia continues the focus on the world of work but takes a very different approach than Högberg *et al.* Based on a large, qualitative study this article investigates how young people living in areas of high unemployment in Australia form identities as workers. Farrugia draws on theories of post-Fordism as well as Beverley Skeggs’ (2011) work to argue that what is given value, and creates value, in the current labour market has changed and that workers today are increasingly required to invest their selves in work; to see work as an arena for self-realisation rather than just a means for making a salary. The paper pursues some of the inequalities produced through these processes by identifying particular, classed differences in the formation of worker identities. For instance, while young people with middle-class backgrounds spoke of their *passion* for certain types of work as that which made them of value to a workplace, young people with working-class backgrounds emphasised their *skills* or *personal attributes*. And while middle-class youth defined success in terms of personal growth and development, working-class youth emphasised social mobility, becoming ‘something’ and material rewards alongside such notions of self-realisation. However, in today’s labour market, characterised by increasing precarity, and in areas of high youth unemployment in particular, these aspirations are not always easy or even possible to realise, and the article demonstrates the consequences in terms of anxiety and stress. When ‘the working self’ is where one demonstrates value as a person, not being given the opportunity to do this erodes the self. In that sense, the costs of periods of unemployment are not ‘just’ material but deeply personal.

In the article by Robert MacDonald and Andreas Giazitzoglu, the labour market dynamics examined in the preceding papers are put into a historical perspective. MacDonald and Giazitzoglu argue that despite the excitement and attention surrounding the gig economy in recent times, researchers and policymakers should look back to the previous eras to understand the contemporary conundrum of the gig economy for young people. Drawing on some of MacDonald’s earlier research, the authors describe how young people in the 1980s turned to entrepreneurialism and self-employment just to avoid un- and under-employment.

While this obviously happened without digital platforms and other technologies available to contemporary 'gig workers', it is no different to the motivations for working in the gig economy for young people today. The authors use recent quantitative data to show that just under a third of young people work in the gig economy because a lack of alternative forms of employment and in this way the gig economy might be seen as "a relative improvement on other forms of contemporary work". The risk, Macdonald and Giazitzoglu argue, is that for young people the gig economy might exacerbate the casualisation of the workforce already underway and might 'trap' young people in a "series of low-paid, insecure, dead-end jobs". The authors argue that researchers and policymakers need to think about the gig economy as a "specific example of a wider, more general experience and process of precarity" and that while there may be some (relative) winners and losers, the future for all young people is much less certain than previous generations.

Brendan Churchill and Lyn Craig share MacDonald and Giazitzoglu's focus on the gig economy but take us back to the present day and switch the focus to gender. In their article, they draw upon data from the *Making it Work in the Gig Economy* survey, one of the first datasets in Australia, to profile men and women who secure work from digital platforms. Like MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, they contend that the gig economy is very similar to precarious and non-standard work found in the wider economy, and this is reflected in the types of work men and women source from the digital platforms. The article identifies some interesting gendered differences in the ways in which men and women participate in the gig economy. Like the young people in MacDonald and Giazitzoglu's study, men and women in Churchill and Craig's study seem to turn to the gig economy because alternative employment options were not attractive, but there are some subtle gendered differences in how this takes place. In the case of men, being active in 'gig work' was about expanding or supplementing their earnings from other types of jobs, while for women, the reasons were much more diverse, reflecting the challenges for women balancing work and care. They also found that around one-in-five women described the money earned from the gig economy as a source of income while they looked for more permanent work, which suggests that working in the gig economy was not sustainable financially despite the options it presented.

The last two articles in the Special Issue focus on the non-work dimension of the gig economy era, and the spill-over effects of precarious and non-standard work on young people's broader lives. First, the paper by Dan Woodman and Julia Cook investigates how

young adult, middle class, heterosexual couples manage and coordinate their time and their lives in the context of non-standard work patterns becoming more common. The article draws on interview and digital diary data with participants who all have experience with non-standard work hours, and the study is embedded in the *Life Patterns* project that Chesters and Wyn's article also utilised. In the paper Woodman and Cook find that the young men in the study aspired to partnerships with wives or girlfriends in which there was an equitable division of labour. However, in reality these relationships were hard to achieve, and this was so even before the birth of a child. For Woodman and Cook, the conditions which have led to the gig economy have created unforeseen consequences for women, who have become 'time and motion' experts within their relationships. This, they contend, becomes another burden upon women who are already trying to manage work and care responsibilities. In that sense, the gig economy era does not only seem to cement already precarious conditions for women in the work sphere, it also adds to the unequal sharing of unpaid work by leaving women with yet another organisational task to manage.

The last article in the special issue by Elizabeth Hill, Marian Baird, Ariadne Vromen, Rae Cooper, Zoe Meers and Elspeth Probyn examines the present workplace experiences, imagined work futures and family formation intentions of young women and men aged between 16 and 40. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from the *Australian Women's Working Futures* project, this paper foregrounds the largely ignored question of gender in the 'Future of Work' debates, by detailing how young people imagine their future work and family needs. In contrast to previous research, Hill and colleagues find convergence in the aspirations and imagined futures of young men and women who both envision an egalitarian future, in which there is an equitable gender division of paid and unpaid labour. They also find some divergence in the views of young men and women with and without children in the role of policy in shaping these futures. Importantly, the article highlights the challenges of work and family in the gig economy era, finding that the lack of adequate policy surrounding work and care responsibilities in the present is very much impacting upon young women's future desires.

### **Future research avenues**

This special issue has brought together some very timely and innovative papers that span the sociologies of work and employment, education and gender and generations. It is the first

special issue of the Journal of Sociology to bring together research paper that consider how these various sociological sub-disciplines and the key issues within them intersect. Future research should build upon this work to further highlight generational and gendered inequalities within the wider context of demographic, economic and social change. While the research presented in this special issue has focussed on dimensions of class and to a limited extent ethnicity, future research could incorporate these dimensions and others into the themes identified in this issue in a more integrative way to make for a more intersectional approach. Such efforts will be important given the debates and concerns around the future of work and the related debates about the futures of education and gender equality, for example, which will have significant impacts upon younger generations of men and women from different backgrounds. Sociology as a discipline is well placed to play a key role in these shaping and informing these debates.

### **Acknowledgements**

The editors would like to thank the authors of the special issue for their contributions and the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, for the funding the workshop.

### **References**

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2018) 'Education and Work, Australia, Cat. 6227.0.
- Bauman, Z. (2016) *Chronicle of Crisis: 2011-2016*. London: Social Europe.
- Bergmann, B. 2005. *The economic emergence of women*. 2nd ed. New York: Basic Books.
- Bessant, J., Farthing, R & Watts, R. 2017, *The Precarious Generation: A Political Economy of Young People*, Routledge, London.
- Brown, P., Lauder, H. & Ashton, D. (2011) *The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs and Incomes*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Connell, R. W. (2011) *Confronting Equality: Gender, Knowledge and Global Change*. London: Polity.
- Craig, L., B. Churchill, and M. Wong, M. (2018) 'Youth, Recession, and Downward Gender Convergence: Young People's Employment, Education, and Homemaking in Finland, Spain, Taiwan, and the United States 2000–2013' *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 26 (1): 59–86.

- Cuervo, H. & Wyn, J. 2011, Rethinking youth transitions in Australia: A historical and multidimensional approach, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.
- Denny, L., and Churchill, B. (2016) 'Youth Employment in Australia: A Comparative Analysis of Labour Force Participation by Age Group', *Journal of Applied Youth Studies* 1(2): 5–23.
- Goldin, C. (2006) 'The Quiet Revolution That Transformed Women's Employment, Education, and Family.' *American Economic Review*, 96 (2): 1-21.
- Furlong, A., and Cartmel, F. (2007) *Young People and Social Change*, Open University Press, Maidenhead.
- Kalleberg, A. (2018) *Precarious lives: Job insecurity and well-being in rich democratic countries*. Polity: London.
- Lamb, S, Jackson, J, Walstab, A & Huo, S (2015) *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*. Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University
- Pocock, B. (2016) 'Holding up half the sky? Women at work in the 21st century', *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 27(2): 147-163.
- Roberts, S. (ed) (2014) *Debating Modern Masculinities. Change, continuity, crisis?* London: Palgrave
- Standing, G. 2011, *The Precariat: The new dangerous class*, Bloomsbury Academic, London.
- van Gellecum et al. 2005, Neoliberalism, Gender Inequality and the Australian labour market, *Journal of Sociology* 44(1): 45-63.
- Woodman, D., Wyn, J. (2015) 'Class, gender and generation matter: using the concept of social generation to study inequality and social change', *Journal of Youth Studies* 18(10): 1402-1410.
- Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA). 2018. 'Data Explorer'. URL: <https://data.wgea.gov.au/>