

Women's Working Lives in Humboldt Park
Women and Gender Research Initiative
Research Proposal for a 2008-2009 Faculty Fellowship

Abstract:

This research project documents the working lives of women living in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago, including their experiences as participants in the labor market, the informal economy and unpaid household labor. It examines the untold experiences of women's labor, focusing on the lives of immigrant, Latina and African-American women. The project incorporates a feminist perspective, which rejects gender inequality and the patriarchal ideologies that undermine it, and analyzes gender in a social change and advocacy framework. The project also employs community-focused advocacy, using gender analysis to promote gender equality by bringing the lived experiences of women's working lives into public view.

YES

NO, not directly

Project Rationale, Aims and Goals:

Funding is requested for a research project investigating the working lives of immigrant and minority women in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago.ⁱ I propose to examine the untold experiences of women's labor, including their experiences as participants in the labor market, the informal economy and unpaid household labor. The project incorporates a feminist perspective, which rejects gender inequality and the patriarchal ideologies that undermine it, and analyzes gender in a social change and advocacy framework. The project also employs community-focused advocacy, using gender analysis to promote gender equality by bringing the lived experiences of women's working lives into public view.

I have chosen the Humboldt Park neighborhood as my fieldwork site for a number of reasons, including my familiarity with the neighborhood and the local community-based organizations I have previously worked with (Hofman 2007, Hofman et al., 2003, Wali and Ostergaard, 2007). More importantly, Humboldt Park is representative of the composition of immigrants and minorities in Illinois, a state ranked 10th out of 50 in the number of foreign-born residents (13.51%), 6.6% of which are Hispanic (2007, U.S. Census Bureau).ⁱⁱ Hispanic women in Illinois have the lowest rate of labor force participation (56.3% compared to 61.6% for white women and 60.8% for African-American women).

The picture is more complicated for women living in the Humboldt Park neighborhood because the neighborhood is characterized by documented as well as undocumented immigrant women, working class and working poor women from a number of different cultural backgrounds as well as a smaller number of working class white women. Women living in Humboldt Park are involved in low-to-high risk informal economic activities that prevent them from achieving any degree of economic stability or empowerment. For example, women in Humboldt Park on the low risk scale engage in informal economic activities, such as food sales and preparation.ⁱⁱⁱ On the high risk scale they are involved in sex work, drug sales and other potentially hazardous activities, which can expose them to incarceration and increased health risks (Hofman et al., 2003). Women in Humboldt Park, however, are also working as political activists, community leaders and organizers. They work in local neighborhoods schools, have their own businesses and NGOs and serve on neighborhood advisory boards.

Theoretical Foundations:

I employ gender analysis in order to understand the differences and similarities of the Humboldt Park women. Gender analysis is particularly potent for illustrating how political and economic changes affecting the neighborhood impact the lives of women. A gendered perspective discloses the ways in which these women form a sense of self, connect with their cultural communities and negotiate the structural barriers that impact their gender, social class, race and ethnicity. Gender analysis offers a way of understanding these phenomena by revealing the ideological, social and personal forces that mediate them. As such, it provides a lens through which the normative context of everyday life experiences—such as women’s participation in the labor market vis-à-vis unpaid household labor—can be examined. Gender analysis begins with the premise that people’s experiences are culturally constituted and is ultimately concerned with understanding the *meanings* behind their experiences and beliefs. By situating gender analysis in a social change and advocacy framework, this project seeks to expose unjust and unequal power structures and encourage social change on the local community-based level.

The proposed project builds on previous research of women's labor experiences in Chicago and abroad (Hofman 2008a and Hofman 2008b; Hofman 2004; and Hofman et al. 2003) as well as recent teaching activities: ISP 101 Women's Working Lives (spring 2008); and an independent study on the same topic with a WMS major. The proposed project is based on collaborative research, involving a WMS graduate student research assistant. The project will result in a number of creative scholarly endeavors, including a poster presentation that will illustrate the research findings in the community;^{iv} a paper presented at the national women's studies conference; and a co-authored paper to be submitted for publication in a scholarly journal. I intend to integrate the research findings into a course on Women's Labor that I am scheduled to teach in the spring of 2009 for the WMS Master's Program.

Methodologies:

This project involves study participants or so-called human subjects. An application will be filled with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the autumn quarter. In general, participant observation and open-ended interviews will be used for data collection. Participant observation will consist of visiting study participants in their households and asking them to document their daily activities. Interview questions will be designed to highlight a variety of topics, including the impediments participants face in attempting to access the labor market or generate income and negotiate household responsibilities. The interview questions will be open-ended. Participants will in addition to their direct experiences with labor be asked about support systems, living arrangements, and education.

Research Timeline and Student Responsibility:

This collaborative project is divided into three parts, with each fitting into our DePaul quarters. In the autumn, the research assistant will i) familiarize herself with the available literature on immigrant and minority women and labor by conducting extensive library research and compiling an annotated bibliography; ii) contact Chicago-based organizations that assist

women in their employment efforts,^v and iii) contact Humboldt Park-based CBOs to access study participants and eventually disseminating the research results.^{vi} Also during the autumn, we will submit the research proposal to the IRB. In the winter, we will begin conducting day-long participant observation with ten women in their households.^{vii} Documenting the lived experiences of women's labor in this manner will be followed by in-depth interviews with 10 to 15 women selected through the participant observation activities. In the spring, the interviews will be transcribed and, if needed, translated. All the collected data will be compiled and analyzed using gender analysis. Research presentations are projected to be held at the Humboldt Park Cultural Community Center, in the Women and Labor class, the national Women Studies conference, and at the Services Speaks Conference. A research report will be prepared for the Women and Gender Research Initiative and a ~~co~~-authored paper will be submitted for publication.

Ass. H.

no,

yes

yes

yes

X

no, single
Answered

no
no

References:

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- 2008a Accessing Romani Women Study Participants: Collaborating with their Gatekeepers and other NGO Entrepreneurs. *Practicing Anthropology*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp 46-49.
- 2008b Life at the Crossroads of Social Change: Invigorating Romani Women's Empowerment in Post-Socialist Croatia. *Human Organization: Journal for the Society of Applied Anthropology*, Volume 67, Number 4, forthcoming.
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- 2004 Towards Critical Research Ethics: Transforming Ethical Conduct in Qualitative Health Care Research. *Health Care for Women International*, Vol. 25, No. 7, pp 647-662.
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- 2003 Maintaining Respectability: Gendered Drug Use, Paid and Unpaid Labor Patterns Among Women Injecting Drug Users in Chicago. *Health Care for Women International*, Vol. 24, No. 9, pp 794-807.
- 2008 Illinois Department of Employment Security. Progress Report for Women and Minorities in the Illinois Labor Force. Available at: http://www.ides.state.il.us/pdf/reports/women-minorities_2008.pdf
- 2007 U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007. Available at: <http://www.stats.bls.gov/gps/home.htm>
- Wali, Alaka and John Ostergaard, editors.
- 2007 Researcher: Ginger Hofman, pp 26-27. In Alaka Wali and John Ostergaard, editors, *Collaborative Research: a Practical Introduction to Participatory Action Research (PAR) for Communities and Scholars*. Chicago: Center for Cultural Understanding and Change.

ⁱ The criteria for inclusion for the study participants is that they reside in the Humboldt Park neighborhood. Study participants will be selected from Humboldt Park women residents who either work in Humboldt Park or elsewhere in the city of Chicago.

ⁱⁱ In Illinois, women make up 37.1% of the labor force (2008, Progress Report for Women and Minorities in the Illinois Labor Force).

ⁱⁱⁱ This information comes from my experiences with a research study focused on food access in Humboldt Park: an ongoing project generated by Howard Rosing and implemented in several research-based courses that I teach for the anthropology department.

^{iv} I am hoping to negotiate an exhibition in the Puerto Rican Cultural Center on this topic at the end of the project.

^v There are a number of Chicago-based organizations that I intend to contact including the Chicago Network, Chicago Women in Trades, the Governor's Office of Women's Affairs, Women's Business Development Center, Work4Women, and the Women's Self-Employment Project.

^{vi} My aim is to contact CBOs focused around women's lives, labor and/or education including the Humboldt Park Vocational Center (a contact which I have already established); Mujeres Latinas en Accion; Vida Sida; Association House of Chicago; Bickerdike Redevelopment Cooperation; the Puerto Rican Cultural Center; and others in order to involve community members in the research and dissemination process.

^{vii} See for more detail on this procedure Hofman, 2008a.