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Mothering and Fathering in Flexible and Precarious Working Contexts: The Brazilian IT Sector Case

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how flexible working practices and precarious labour contracts affect women and men as they seek to reconcile professional life and parental responsibilities. This is demonstrated through a case study of the Brazilian Information Technology (IT) sector, which has deployed a significant amount of people under illegal and informal employment contracts (i.e. irregular specification of working conditions, no maternity leave, no annual leave), making great use of 'flexible' working practices (i.e. home-office, working schedule adapted to employees' needs). The paper draws from a large study in the field and compares the working and family arrangements of two women and two men selected from a wider sample to contribute to the literature in two main areas: the relationship between work and family and the debate on precarious working conditions. The paper shows that women strategically use flexible working practices to achieve some balance between work and family. On the other hand, men use the flexibility to increase salaries and pursue higher-level jobs. Such findings confirm previous analyses in developed countries about gender relations in the IT sector and on flexible working practices. However, in the Brazilian scenario, the added impact of a highly informal labour market on gender relations is noted as particularly pernicious for gender equality.

KEYWORDS

Flexible labour, precarious employment, IT, gender, work and family, Brazil

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INTRODUCTION

In a wider study about the impact of precarious labour employment upon Brazilian Information Technology (IT) workers, I gathered several histories concerning the ways in which these professionals build different strategies to reconcile their working and family lives. Using 60 semi-structured interviews carried out in 2011, designed to understand the professional trajectory of 30 men and 30 women in the large Brazilian cities of Campinas and São Paulo, I was able to identify a distinctive gender pattern of how working men and women manage their roles as fathers and mothers. They have been using their labour flexibility in different ways: while women choose to work from home to take care of their children, men use their flexibility to work extra hours. While women become less important for companies or move to lower job positions, men are able to make more money and move upwards on their career pathways.

Similar findings were revealed by Scott-Dixon (2004) in her study of the Canadian IT sector. Hence, the contribution of the Brazilian case study for the sociological literature is in offering further data and analysis about how gender inequality needs to be addressed very carefully, in particular when highly informal labour markets are concerned. The case study shows how precarious employment contracts that proliferate in Brazil have deep impact upon the private lives of working women.

The subject of work and family balance has received extensive attention in the social sciences, especially from a gender perspective. According to the literature review done by Glass & Estes (1997), women are more likely than men to change their employment situation in order to reconcile work and family responsibilities. Either women leave their jobs, or they engage in part-time ones to raise their children - especially when they are of non-school age.¹ The authors understand that the reason for such trends is the fact that the 'families cannot afford to lose father's wages' (Leite and Estes, 1997), a conclusion that reflects the gap that still remains between men's and women's wages.²

These findings are not very different from those discussed in the Brazilian literature. A 2003 survey on 'Gender, Work and Family', following the methodology used by the 'International Social Survey Programme', showed the prevalence of men in full-time jobs. The survey was based on a household sample of 2,000 individuals aged over 18 years with quotas for gender, age, education and region.³ Analyzing this data, Araújo & Scalón (2007) found that the majority of women and men believe that mothers who work full-time inflict suffering on their children (78% of men and 80% of women). At least 33% of men and women stated that they did not believe that mothers who work can connect with their children in the same way that non-working mothers can. The majority of the respondents said that the role of mothers is to reconcile work and family responsibilities. 85% of men and 82% of women answered that either women should leave work or work part-time when

they have a child of non-school age. The statistics slightly changed when the respondents were asked about what women should do with their working lives after their children started school: 71% of men and 65% of women believed that women should not work or work part-time - against 35% of women and 29% of men who declared mothers could work full-time. Those percentages changed only in two cases: when women did not have children (48% of men and 57% of women believed that women should work full-time if married and childless) or when their children had already left home (52% of men and 63% of women).

The findings led Araújo and Scalon (2007) to conclude that the working lives of Brazilian women are still constrained by motherhood. Maternity remains an important part of women's identities, despite contemporary social changes, such as the increasing participation of women in the labour market.⁴ The traditional sexual division of labour has a deep influence on gender roles. People are socially expected to perform their family and working lives according to these cultural gender-biased models.

This paper contributes to this discussion by shedding light on how parental roles are affected by flexible working environments and precarious employment contracts. Flexibility is defined here by non-routinized organization of working space and time; precarious employment contracts are those that do not guarantee access to labour and social rights. The issue of non-routine time and space in flexible work has already been broadly addressed in the sociological literature (Scott-Dixon, 2004; Kelan, 2009). However, the issue of precariousness of employment contracts needs further research as it is particularly significant in the context of Brazil, and this is the major contribution of the analysis offered here.

Drawing from the trajectories of two men and two women, who are chosen as representatives out of 60 qualitative interviews I carried out, I hope to show how the traditional gender bias has a perverse consequence when we look at non-structured and highly informal labour markets, such as the IT Brazilian sector, where precarious employment contracts are prevalent. I reflect on the case to note that gender biases have deep consequences in developing countries. This makes the hierarchies between the positions of women and men in IT more acute and severe than those shown in studies of such matters in countries with effective welfare policies.

In order to present my point, it is necessary to contextualize the object of my research. For this reason, this paper is organized in three parts: 1) a brief account of the changes in Brazilian Labour Laws during the 1990s; 2) the case-studies of two working fathers and two working mothers with precarious employment contracts and/or in flexible working environments, experiencing varied employment contracts; 3) an analytical comparison of the case-studies in relation to the existing literature.

BRAZILIAN IT INDUSTRY AND PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT CONTRACTS

The Brazilian IT industry gained strength in the late 1980s and early 1990s, following the drive to open the market to international competition, ceasing

protective measures. Yet, despite its growing importance for the Brazilian economy, the industry remains peripheral in relation to the global IT sector. As a study by SOFTEX (Association for the Promotion of Brazilian Software Excellence) shows, the core of this industry, IT production, remains sidelined within the Brazilian IT sector. The Brazilian focus is on customized software development (42%) and data processing (32%), both having business models that are focused on servicing clients. The development and editing of software ready for use, which relates to production not services, amounts to only 3% (SOFTEX, 2009).⁵

During the period when the IT sector grew, important changes were introduced both in the Brazilian Consolidation of Labour Laws (CLT, in the Portuguese acronym)⁶ and the 'Unique Legal Framework',⁷ allowing a profusion of different forms of flexible work. Both CLT and the 'Unique Legal Framework' guide the standard employment contracts defining formal working conditions in the country and labour rights, such as maternity leave and state pension fund. During the 1990s, however, several governmental policies deregulated and softened these two standard forms of contract. Informed by prevailing neoliberal policies of the period, new contractual employment models were implemented, allowing labour rights to be adjusted to the companies' interests, forcing the size and price of the working force to decrease (Krein, 2007)

These changes undermined public policy regulation of labour and stimulated self-regulation. With this changing regulatory environment, there was a spread of illegal precarious contracts, which reduced workers' benefits and rights. New forms of contracts emerged, which came to rule labour relations for a great part of the employed population.

In a study about labour contracts in Brazilian companies specializing in systems development (one amongst several specializations in the IT sector), Salatti (2005) found seven different forms of employment relationships: CLT, individual or limited Legal Entities (PJ in the Portuguese acronym, standing for *Pessoa Jurídica*), cooperatives, self-employed workers, interns, informal workers and pseudo-partners. Amongst such different employment contracts, the study showed a predominance of PJ contracts in the sector (36% of the sample). All of them (CLT excepted), however, were identified as forms of disguising an employment relation through an entrepreneurial or liberal working relationships.⁸ So, while aware of differences between those contracts, I shall refer to all of these non-standard contracts as 'precarious contracts', since they do not guarantee access to labour rights.

My analysis of the 2009 Brazilian National Household Sample Survey (known as PNAD - IBGE) (Table 1), shows that for all employment sectors 14% of men and 15% of women work under precarious contracts, while in the IT sector 32% of men and 24% of women work under these contracts.

Although we can only attest that workers 'without formal register' and 'without remuneration' are under precarious contracts, it is possible to say that some of the workers under 'own account' and in the 'employer' categories can be under precarious contracts as well. That is why I take those categories into account

cautioning that they are 'possible' precarious contracts. This is because while there is no PJ category for respondents to select in the PNAD sample, a PJ often disguises an employment link. My inference is that respondents of PNAD under PJ contracts can be led to answer that they are indeed 'employers'. In the PNAD, the category 'employer' is used as synonymous for entrepreneurs, even though the category does not ask for the entrepreneur to have employees formally linked to their companies.

Table 1
Type of contract for men and women in the IT sector

Type of contract		Men	Women
CLT	Frequency	289356	71059
	%	61%	64,5%
Unique Legal Framework	Frequency	31711	13190
	%	6,7%	12%
Total standard contracts	Frequency	321067	84249
	%	68%	77%
Without formal register	Frequency	62844	16482
	%	13%	15%
Own account	Frequency	82216	9113
	%	17%	8%
Employer	Frequency	6403	0
	%	1%	0
Without remuneration	Frequency	1744	223
	%	0	0
Total precarious contracts	Frequency	153207	25818
	%	32%	23%

Source: PNAD 2009, own elaboration.

QUALITATIVE DATA: FATHERS AND MOTHERS

In this session we will examine the histories of 41 year old IT manager, Michel, 41 year old database developer, John, 34 year old software developer, Ruth, and 33 year old software developer, Eliza. These four cases were chosen because they illustrate the average situation faced by mothers and fathers working under flexible and/or precarious contracts.

Mobility and security when exercising fatherhood

Michel, 41, works as an IT manager in a multinational company. He had previously worked for seven companies, always under standard labour contracts (CLT). He was laid off after his daughter was born following a restructuring process of the pharmaceutical industry. At the time of the interview, his daughter was 11. After dismissal, he was invited to take a similar job in a chemical multinational company,

making use of his experience with project implementation in Latin America. He travelled constantly to Argentina and Chile. 'If you asked me: '...where do you live?', I would say 'I live at Varig's⁹ check-in counter'. I would get home on Saturday, and on Sunday I was packing again to leave for another trip. Can you imagine that?'

Michel opted to seek a position with no travel requirements once he got tired of such a routine. He was offered a position to work with the board of directors of another company to deal with Mercosul¹⁰ affairs. Though hesitant, he accepted the job because he would only need to travel on business every two months. He felt that was nothing compared to someone who used to travel every week:

I believe that, as time goes by, you become more worried about the balance between your professional and personal life. I had a young daughter... In fact, she was already 6 years old at that time, but then you say 'Listen, I can't do it'. With all this travelling, I missed out on part of her childhood. So, this issue about personal balance, personal life and professional life, I reckon you start weighing it up.

He was then promoted to the coordination of the company's Southern Cone (consisting of Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay) and saw his planned transfer to the United States cancelled due to a company merger. His family was excited about moving to the US, mainly because once there, he would no longer have to travel. With the change of plans, the business trips resumed and expanded to also include the United States: 'But my conditions were always 'we ought to have a balanced travelling life'. I travel once a month. It won't hurt to be one week away, maybe two. But I do want to be here for at least two weeks, that's for sure'.

The constant business travelling was made possible because his wife took responsibility for the housework, house maintenance and childcare. Her husband's constant absences made her wholly responsible for the management of the family life; during a full year, the family only spent Saturdays and Sundays together. Michel's wife was self-employed. She worked as a consultant for a food chain and later on, became the owner of a café franchise. She accumulated a triple-shift working day (cf. Hochschild, 2010, meaning: home, work and emotional work) throughout the first years of her daughter's life and relied on the help of a part-time maid, who was responsible for cleaning, cooking and supervising the child when she was away from home.

Therefore, Michel's mobility relied on the support offered by his wife and their daily maid. The situation led Michel to work from home. He considers himself to be more productive when working from home than when in the office. Even though such practice is not institutionalised by the company, he had already worked remotely several times due to the different time zones related to the areas he covered which, at the time of the interview, already encompassed Asia.

Michel's house provided him with a conducive working environment. He had a room designated as an office, a wife who worked outside the house, a daughter who was

at school, a maid to serve him during the day. When working during mornings and afternoons, he could count on not being bothered by anyone, as none of their friends and relatives would visit at those times. That was office time and was respected as such – a dynamic very different to that of Ruth and Eliza, as we will see in the next section. When working remotely at night, Michel would lock himself in the office at home to take part in real time meetings made possible by VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocols), during which he would not be disturbed either by his daughter or his wife. They formed a family with broadly traditional gender roles.

John, a 41 year old database developer, resigned from a position that required him to move from city to city. He was going to be transferred from Sao Paulo to Uberlandia (a city with approximately 620,000 people in the nearby state of Minas Gerais). However, he had recently become a father and was not willing to relocate his family. Furthermore, he was working under a precarious contract and was keen to seek what he considered to be a more stable opportunity. This is what made him move to work under a precarious contract at another company for six months after which time he was promised a standard CLT contract, which did materialise.

I thought it was interesting to go back to CLT because after this... during this transition [of jobs] I had a son. And in the face of my family reality, CLT gave me a more comfortable condition: health benefits, paid holidays, dental plan. Some [of these] benefits [are] offered by few companies. Private retirement fund....

John wanted to make sure his son would have access to good medical care. Under a precarious contract, he could opt to pay for private health insurance. He complains, however, that he could only afford to pay for his son's insurance. What is more, he would have to reorganise his expenditure, which would cause him to compromise the payments he made to a private retirement fund. He was in search of higher pay. The nature of the contract did not make much difference.

Despite working under a standard contract, he was not able to take paid leave for two years, while he was implementing a project. He worked for a company that functioned as a hub of brands producing different products in the same plant. He was initially responsible for the organisation of the database for glass production. Later on he was assigned to the pottery sector. By the time of his internal relocation, he had accumulated 40 days of overtime work and paid holidays related to the previous year of work.

The company policy was to automatically deposit in the employee's account the cash value related to overtime work after they accumulated 90 working days overtime. However, they also had the option to transform the accumulated hours in time off rather than payments. In his case, the company invited him to use his hours as time off along with the holidays they owed him as soon as another holiday period was due.

He had been working from home for 90 days at the time of the interview. He considered the experience to be positive, as his son was still three years old and he

could spend time with him. He valorised that extended time off because he was still adapting to his recent divorce and his son's distance. Even though he had shared custody, his excessive workload prevented him from spending time with his son. The child's grandparents, his parents, with whom John then lived, were responsible for taking and collecting the child from school. They were also responsible for the child's meals, hygiene and putting him into bed when John came from work late.

The first account illustrates how Michel's mobility was only possible due to his dismissal of the role of care giver to his child. He was only at home during weekends during the first years of his daughter's life and the house management and childcare were left to his wife and their maid. While absent, he enjoyed a legal stability to fulfil his work, accompanied by all the resulting benefits. When he moved to work from home this established traditional division of labour continued.

In the second account, John searched for a standard, secure and stable employment contract to assure elementary rights, but found how inefficient such contracts can be in assuring some of those rights as he was not immediately able to enjoy paid holidays and overtime compensation. In search of an income increase to enable him to provide better life conditions for his son (which was not always successfully fulfilled), the interviewee went beyond his statutory working hours on a daily basis. He could only work as demanded thanks to the support of his parents, who cared for his son when the child was not cared for by his ex-wife. This is the reason why he claimed not to have a preference for any sort of employment contract. He sees the working conditions to be in fact the same, no matter the arrangement. The only relevant point was finding out which contract would bring real increase in salary, so that he could afford private health insurance for his son and himself.

The histories of Michel and John tell us a lot about how flexibility relies on a gender bias. This is corroborated by studies in developed countries, which show the different challenges of flexible work for men and women. On the basis of her study in Sweden, Kelan (2009) states that the discourse over the ideal IT worker is gender-biased. She interviewed men and women from three Swedish IT companies and found that besides flexibility, they are required to have auto-entrepreneurial attributes. This is, nevertheless, a neutral discourse in terms of gender, as men and women are supposed to be equally responsible for their own success. The problem here is that success does indeed touch gender: the ideal worker is in practice a man, such as Michel and John, because men are the ones who can offer availability and full dedication to work, without the additional concerns of house and family. Men are also the ones who have the possibility of exercising the flexibility demanded by the sector. According to Kelan (2009), flexibility is understood as a feminine attribute by the prevailing entrepreneurial discourse precisely because it would enable women to reconcile their professional and personal lives. Men with children say they prefer working from an office because they believe the children get in the way of their performance. While examining the same subject, Scott-Dixon (2004) found that Canadian IT men evaluate a home office environment more positively than women, exactly because the children and partners respected their privacy when working. This rarely happened for women, whose working

environment was merged with children, family and house care demands. Both Kelan's (2009) and Scott-Dixon's (2004) findings reveal that when men are working from home someone else must be there to look after the children – usually the wife or a nanny – which outsources their family care. Moreover, the statement provided by the male interviewees from both studies attest that working from home and having a family are incompatible activities for men, while the same does not apply to women working from home.

'A room of one's own': the second shift in flexible working contexts

Twelve years without a holiday. The only time I had off was my maternity leave when I had my first son. I call it maternity leave; I was six months off... My boss paid my salary because it was his son, and the money would go to his house anyway. But... in fact, I was working from a home office. (Ruth).

Ruth is 34, a software developer, and mother of two boys, aged three and four. She worked for a consultancy firm specialising in IT services for 12 years. During her job interview she met the firm's owner, who later on became her husband and the father of her two children. While working in this firm, she was under a very precarious employment contract, entitled to only one week off per year and some public holidays. She reports that, before having children, she did not mind the lack of rest, as she enjoyed her job so much that the frenetic pace of work made sense to her. Her routine involved 12-hour working days when approaching project deadlines. Working late nights and weekends were commonplace.

She did not used to feel tired. As her husband was her boss and the owner of the company, they grew to have the same pace of work. Their schedule and routines were compatible. When she first fell pregnant, Ruth believed that there would be no change in such harmony: being the boss's wife, he would understand that she would have to finish the day earlier to be able to pick up the child from school, or to go back home when he was sick. She believed that she would be able to make use of a flexible schedule when managing her time as a mother, care giver and professional. However, the unruly flexibility started to reveal certain issues from the very first days after she gave birth.

She was able to convince her husband to allow her six-month maternity leave which, at that time, was not even part of legal working agreements for women working under the more protective regime of the CLT. Despite working under a precarious contract, and although such provision was not included in her contract, Ruth managed to earn her full salary during the time she was off work. However, the counterpart was harsh and, in practice, nullified the agreement.

So, for example, my son was five days old when there was a crash at a client's office resulting in a team of workers calling me every five minutes, while I still felt the pain of giving birth. ... Yes... I was at home, alone. I did not have a maid. All the baby did was cry, he could not sleep, my breasts were sore, breastfeeding was really hard, and I still had to program the thing that was crashing! You

know? It was something that needed coding, scripting... Logic, quietness, reasoning... and I was full of hormones, you know? I was still in *Labourland (sic)*... and was not able to think logically. So, I call these six months maternity leave, but I did not have the peace of mind that is needed for a working mother to look after her child, to be able to nurse her child.

When having her second child, the period of intensive care for the newborn and for resting was reduced to three months. After this time, the baby was put into day care full-time, as had happened to her first son, who was in day care from six months old. From the moment she was back at work, the routine of the couple was organised as follows: her husband would take the children to day care and she would pick them up. This routine was only diverted from when the governing Law of Vehicle Rotation in Sao Paulo prevented one or the other from driving his or her own cars in peak hours. His license plate was restricted on Mondays, which meant that Ruth would leave home earlier to take the children to school and go straight to work. This implied that her husband would look after the boys on Sunday nights so that she could go to bed earlier; he would be responsible for the preparation of the children's lunch boxes and the organisation of the school material to go in their backpacks.

Nevertheless, she complained about the fact that he never knew the children's eating preferences, which made him neglect the chore of preparing their lunch boxes. The vehicle rotation law also meant that he would be responsible for picking up the children from day care on the day his wife's license was restricted. The pick-up time at the day care was 5:15 pm, but, according to Ruth, he would only get there between 6:30-7 pm. She was also resentful of the lack of care he gave to the children's oral hygiene. As they took turns covering the night shifts at the company, he would always forget to brush the children's teeth before putting them to bed when she was the one working overtime.

Such issues regarding the children's wellbeing when she was not the one looking after them, along with her long working hours, were key factors in her decision to leave the company. Moreover, her husband and boss complained about the decrease of her productivity and suggested that she seek a position at another company. He made this suggestion because he thought that her reduced productivity had an immediate impact on his income as the company owner, and would like her to get a job at another company in order to make up the salary he was paying for her. At the time of interview, she had left the company nearly a year ago. Despite resenting the professional withdrawal, she was happy to spend more time with her children because she had started her own business providing consultancy and training in social media for large companies. As she does not have enough economic capital to lease an office for her new emerging business, she works from an office at home.

I want to be present in these things, because I see that it doesn't matter how many times I say 'come on, don't let them go to bed so late, don't forget to brush their teeth...', nothing happens! I don't

know why! And if I enter the [labour] market and start spending 12 hours away from the house, what will happen then? Feeling the pressure from work, pressure because no one cares about you... I can't handle it. I snapped. That's why I don't think it works... for me, I can't handle it. It doesn't work, I'll feel guilty, I'll feel bad, I won't be happy... I have to be much more laid back, as is G. [a colleague with a three-year-old child]. She [*keeps telling stories like this*] 'three days that I don't see my son because I spent three nights burning the midnight oil at the company!' That's how things are for her. For me, that's over the line. I was raised by a mother who was with me at home at all times! She didn't use to work... which I don't think is good, but during early childhood, when they're still babies... one was at the day care from six months old, the other was there from three months old. That took its toll on me... it's not that I wanted to stop working, but come on, they were too little for....

Ruth's account sheds light on a classic issue concerning the division of duties between men and women when it comes to childcare and housework. In this particular family, the childcare is left to the wife, despite the creation of a system to take the children to day care. She handles the feeding and attention to oral hygiene, since she does not agree with the way her husband deals with them. Even though she managed to give some flexibility to her routine at work, either by finishing early to be with the kids, missing a day to take them to the doctor, or working from home, she still led a 'triple-shift' working day. When such a working day started being seen as a lack of commitment to her job by her husband-boss, she was removed. Hence, the possibility of organising her professional life around her caring time was taken away. She did not regard such responsibility as an easy one.

Even though she was given the flexibility of working from home, as she started her own business, she would rather work at the office. She worked from home when the children were at school, in the same way as when they were just born. However, she never regarded such rhythm as reasonable. She does not regard the routine peaceful:

I can only work from home when the kids are at school. They stay at school full time, from 8 am to 5:15 pm. When school starts, I can work. From the beginning of December to the end of January, when they're on holidays, it's impossible to work! (...) It's impossible because the kids make such a fuss at home. Specially the little ones... if only I lived... I have this dream. If I lived in a house, perhaps they would play, run, and would leave me alone. But not in an apartment. Especially because boys, at their age, make too much noise... all they want is to do is run and jump! Then they get a ball and start playing in the living room and that makes an awfully loud noise and bothers my downstairs' neighbour. And it goes all day long: 'G., stop! Quiet, B.! G., stop! Quiet, B.!' Or when I'm on the computer, they go 'mum! Mum! Mum!'. I wanna work too! You

know? Or yet 'mum, I wanna see Mickey'. Then he wants me to log on to *Youtube* so he can see the Mickey's cartoon. In other words, they want attention. They don't understand that even though I'm physically there, I'm mentally somewhere else. They don't get it. They can't get it!

The problems in reconciling work and family, and workplaces' willingness to accept flexible schedules and spatial flexibility, are well addressed in the sociological literature. Armstrong et al. (2007) interviewed 39 women working in a technology firm in the United States of America in order to understand how they balanced work and family life. The women interviewed formed a very heterogeneous group. They were single, married, pregnant, had young and grown-up children. They had been working in the field for an average of eight years and were mostly programmers, such as Ruth.

As it was the case with Ruth, the flexibility of working from home was pointed out as a solution to the conflict between work and family. However, adaptation to the new working conditions was a source of great stress because it was perceived as lack of commitment in the business environment. Armstrong et al. (2007) sees this as a barrier to women's career development: the pressure to keep up-to-date and acquire new qualifications was constant, but they had to use the time to care for their family. Therefore, the mechanism the women have been using, as a way of relieving the work-family conflict, became the source of problem. As Ruth's case shows, flexibility is a choice made by women in order to juggle work and family responsibilities, and this choice has positive and negative effects on their lives, according to their own evaluation of their flexible working situation.

In my study I highlight the particularly pernicious consequences that precarious contracts have on the lives of working mothers. Workers under a precarious contract are not entitled to elementary rights, such as paid holidays, sick leave, maternity or paternity leave. Neither is there a guarantee of an entitlement to a pension – FGTS (Guaranteed Fund for Length of Service) and the contribution to the INSS (National Institute of Social Security),¹¹ not to mention trade union contributions. More often than not, some of these rights are negotiated in the contract between employer and employee. These contracts are likely to encompass some paid holidays, paid or unpaid sick leave and maternity leave, and retirement pension programmes. However, there is no regulation of such contracts. As they vary from one company to the other, little is legally guaranteed.

These conditions led some professionals to find their own private ways of obtaining such social rights. Ruth, for instance, has been contributing to social security since she was 18 years old, and to a private retirement fund since she was 20, despite having never worked under a standard contract. However, her contributions to social security have always been based on a minimum wage. With a current monthly salary of R\$5,000 (equivalent to about £1,500), such contributions are unlikely to guarantee the maintenance of her current lifestyle after she retires. What is more, the private retirement fund was exhausted during the year she was

away from her husband's company taking care of her children and attempting to start up a new business:

I was always very prudent. Now, due to this decrease in my income, I blew out my private retirement fund. I am exhausting it right now. I have INSS, but I have contributed very little. And my plan was always... I started off very early because I invested heavily in my private retirement fund.... So my expectations, two years ago, of retiring with a guaranteed income of R\$6,000 per month, were blown away.

Ruth was not the only worker in my sample under a precarious contract who became a mother and faced several problems. Eliza, a 33-year-old software developer, has two sons: a three-year-old and a six-month-old. She had previously worked under a precarious contract, and under a standard one. She also worked without signing any type of contract. This was her situation at the time of her participation in my project.

Eliza was a system consultant, working under a precarious contract, hourly-rate based, when she first fell pregnant. The agreement between her and the firm was that she would work from home after giving birth, for however long she found it convenient. Nevertheless, her boss was laid off shortly before her giving birth, and her employment contract then became void. She and her husband decided that they would sell their car in order to keep up with the living expenses while she was not in paid work. She stopped contributing to both her social security and private retirement fund to save money. She did all she could to increase her income while out of employment and worked as a rep for a cosmetics catalogue-based retail shop. The money from the sale of their car was entirely invested in the construction of a small house at the back of her husband's family home in order to cut down on rental expenses. She started working from home when the money ran out, programming software for a medical laboratory. This created the need for a better computer, which caused her to use the money from her retirement fund. This was her job when I interviewed her, a job without any contract or formal employment agreement. At that point she had not resumed her contributions to either social security or her retirement fund.

Eliza finds working from home positive. She nevertheless reports that she could only sleep from 6am to 9am and from 5pm to 7pm to be able to juggle work, childcare and domestic chores:

I would do most of work late at night because that was when I had the most time available. I had a baby waiting to get some lunch, a bit of fruit, a bit of juice. I had to nurse him. So, I did everything else while he was asleep. I would sometimes iron clothes late at night or very early in the morning, because that was the time he was asleep. I would prepare his soups late at night because he was asleep. The importation [of the database] could take hours to load, because it was a very old disc. It sometimes took longer. I did other

things while waiting for it to load. If I had a seat, I would doze off [laughs]. So, I would do something else. It was tough to work at night. Especially with a kid, you get even more tired.

Her mother, who used to live in the countryside, came to live with her when her son turned one. The idea was to provide childcare so Eliza could go back to work. She started by working four days at the laboratory, and she would work the fifth from home. She did not stop working when falling pregnant with her second child: she resumed her services from home:

The baby was born on a Saturday, I was discharged from hospital on Tuesday and was back to work on Wednesday. There's no point in either laughing or crying. So I was put back to work on Wednesday, see what I mean? I didn't have a chance to have some rest. I went back, had no maternity leave. Then, after 40 days, I started bringing the baby to meetings.

Both Ruth and Eliza worked under precarious contracts by the time they fell pregnant. Eliza was promised to be allowed to work from home, but the deal was broken. Ruth had negotiated maternity leave that was not fulfilled, as she had to work from home. Neither of them relied on any external care (maid, nanny, nurse, relatives, day care) to look after their children while they kept on working. To Ruth, reconciling productive and reproductive work was traumatising. It was slightly less so for Eliza, as she was away from work for the first six months of her first child's life. However, she would only get five broken hours of sleep so that she could use the time the baby was asleep to work. She later conceded that she was not able to keep up the same pace when her second child was born, even though she was then counting on her mother's help.

Due to motherhood, both professionals had to fall back on their retirement savings to make ends meet. To Ruth, that was due to the fact that the flexibility was not enough to give her the quality time she would like to have with the children, which eventually led her to resign – or led her to be invited to resign. Furthermore, she was not able to demonstrate to her husband-boss that she was still productive despite the gaps in her working hours to pick up the children from school, spend time with them during their holidays or when they were sick. Later on, such factors became the reasons why she was invited to leave the company. In Eliza's case she was forced to use her retirement savings to buy a new computer in order to enjoy the flexibility that she perceived as necessary to participate in her children's upbringing.

It is not the aim of this study to infer ideal types of relationships between precarious employment contracts and parenthood. The two stories presented here are illustrative of two different approaches to work and family management. It is, nevertheless, important to highlight that Ruth's and Eliza's life histories show that the lack of formal employment agreements and access to social and labour rights interfere both in their professional experiences and their subjectivities – in their case, their motherhood experiences. The precariousness exercised by such

contracts over these subjects is made clear, generally by the lack of elementary rights such as paid holidays, paid weekly rest, pension and social security.

Such stories are not isolated cases. Brazilian sociological literature shows how, in a highly informal labour market, women are more likely than men to experience precarious labour relations – and the motherhood experience is related to that. Rizek & Leite's (1998) studies of the Brazilian manufacturing restructuring process led them to conclude that the main changes observed in work organisation during the 1990s, such as the increase in externalisation of production and subcontracting strategies, established different cleavages between qualified and unqualified work and regulated and non-regulated ones. Women were confined to tasks that were similar to domestic work, such as cleaning and quality control. They were also more numerous at the bottom of the production chain, which means that they were occupying most of the jobs offered by the subcontracted companies.¹²

What I show here illustrates how precarious contracts severely affect the private and professional lives of Brazilian working mothers. Segnini's (2009) study on the ballerinas of Sao Paulo's Municipal Theatre presents the same trends that I found in the IT sector. The women have temporary working contracts that last 11 months a year. When they get pregnant, they do not have access to maternity leave. Such rights are highly dependent on the management's discretion. The motherhood experiences in these cases, compared to the fatherhood ones of Michel and John, illustrate how rights have different impacts depending on gender and family arrangements.

CONCLUSION

My intention in this paper has been to use four detailed accounts of work experience in the Brazilian IT sector, two by men and two by women, to illustrate how work flexibility (as mobility, working-hours regulation, working place) and precarious employment contracts are affected by gender bias.

One can observe how flexibility has different meanings and effects through the accounts of the two men and two women interviewed for the study, corroborating findings by Kelan (2009) in Sweden. Whereas the women used their flexibility to reconcile productive and reproductive work, the men did so in order to pursue a career or an income increase, making themselves available for business trips and continuously working overtime. Whereas the men were able to perform flexibility because they relied on external support – wives, maid and elderly parents - to provide care for their family, one woman gave up her career to provide such support and the other depended on her mother to cope with the domestic and childcare needs.

My data confirms the gender relations of work in IT already presented in the broad sociological literature. But it also makes clear how precarious employment contracts, a particular trait of the Brazilian non-structured and highly informal labour market, have different impacts on the lives of men and women. Whereas having a precarious contract was only a security measure for John, so that he could guarantee to have a saving plan and private health insurance for himself and his

child, it meant the impossibility of maternity leave and loss of pensionable income for both female interviewees. It also meant that even the formal contract, CLT, does not guarantee access to labour rights: the high level of informality present in the Brazilian labour market also affects the only contract that is supposed to ensure labour and social rights to the employees of the private sector of the economy. Even the formal employment contracts are acquiring traits of informality.

The patterns of working relations found in the IT sector in Brazil also lead us to question whether the prevailing precarious employment contracts have some relation with the Brazilian industry's position globally. As I note, despite its growing importance for the Brazilian economy, it remains peripheral to the global IT sector and it is primarily focused on service provision. This means that the Brazilian IT industry mainly survives from customizing software products developed elsewhere. In other countries, where the IT sector has an important role in innovation, keeping a qualified working force and offering a package of benefits is essential for the core business. Software production is the main business of IT. In the Brazilian case, the development of new software is not central. The services offered around pre-programmed software are the most profitable part of the Brazilian business. Therefore, we can hypothesize that the workforce of this sector is not a central part of the business strategy, a situation that can have important consequences for labour relations.

I hope I was able to demonstrate that the precarious employment contracts contain a bias of social precariousness that is revealed by the very marked hierarchies for mothers and fathers at work. The flexibility of employment, in non-structured labour markets, has gendered-biased consequences for the lives of working individuals and can have a deep impact for family and working life.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Lisa Freehill (2012) also shows in her study on the US engineering workforce that women are more likely than men to leave that career because of factors associated to work and family balance.

² The 2010 Brazilian National Census shows that women's average wage corresponds to 70% of men's.

³ As Araújo & Scalon (2007) explain in their article, the survey was composed by two sessions: the first was about perceptions respondents had on work and family; the second about practical attitudes towards the organization of their daily life.

⁴ In 1981, 33% of Brazilian women, who were in the economically active population, were working. In 2002, they were 47% - an increase of 14% (Hoffmann & Leone, 2004).

⁵ The data refer to the PAS/IBGE (Annual Survey of Services/ Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), 2005.

⁶ The CLT is the result of the systematization of the country's 1943 social and labour legislation promulgated during Getulio Vargas' paternalistic dictatorship. While it guaranteed social and labour rights, CLT established the 'limits and possibilities of militancy and class organisation' (Paoli, 1998).

⁷ Since the 1988's Constitution, the 'Unique Legal Framework' is used exclusively for workers in the public sector, while CLT is mostly used by the private sector.

⁸ This can be further understood in each form of an employment relationship: 1) PJ cheapen labour costs. Employers hire the employee as a company, and through this, they are not required to pay CLT-linked labour and social taxes. Employees have to open up a company and loose labour rights. Within Brazilian Law, this is an instrument of fraud: it disguises an employment link through an entrepreneurial link. In theory, the contract is an agreement between two companies: a client-contractor relation. 2) Cooperatives are also used to disguise an employment relationship. As taxes to hire a cooperative are lower than labour taxes, employers open up cooperatives, or ask their employees to do that, but these cooperatives do not follow the principles of cooperativism: they are not autonomous, neither are they self-managed; 3) Self-employed workers: while this is a legitimate form of liberal work, it can be used to disguise an employer-employee relationship; 4) Interns: some companies hire professionals who have already graduated, as interns in order to pay less tax; 5) Informal workers: employees working without any form of contract; 6) Pseudo-partners: some companies add some employees as partners, under small quotas of participation in their companies, but these employees continue to receive a salary and do not have a share of the company's profits or involvement in the decision making process.

⁹ Varig is an extinct international Brazilian airline company.

¹⁰ Mercosul (short for *Mercado Comum do Sul*) is a customs union for Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela. It was established in 1991 by the Treaty of Asunción and to promote free trade and free circulation of goods, currency and people.

¹¹ FGTS is a contribution made by the employer on behalf of the employee to guarantee their ability to support her/himself in case he/she is forced to withdraw from the workforce. The INSS is the governmental retirement pension system in Brazil. I refer to it as social security.

¹² Studies show that subcontracting companies have a tradition of not upholding Brazilian labour rights (Amorin, 2011; Araújo & Ferreira, 2009; Druck, 1999, 2011; Marcelino, 2004, 2008).

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