

Leah F. Vosko et al., *Closing the Enforcement Gap: Improving Employment Standards Protections for People in Precarious Jobs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020)

STATUTORY EMPLOYMENT standards are a key source of formal protection for a large number of employees in Canada, especially those who are in precarious jobs or forms of work characterized by dimensions of labour market insecurity. However, the very same practices that fuel precarious employment (e.g., subcontracting, franchising, and extended supply chains) have also posed a major challenge to standards enforcement strategies, and in combination with structural barriers that prevent employees from exercising their voice in the workplace, have led to a deepening “enforcement gap.” (4) *Closing the Enforcement Gap*, a recent book co-authored by Leah F. Vosko with members of the Closing the Enforcement Gap Research Group, reveals, traces, and contextualises Ontario’s employment standards enforcement crisis; a crisis that the book contends renders empty the founding promise of statutory protection to guarantee the minimum floor of rights for employees and to advance principles of fairness and universality. Yet, as the book also argues, “there is nothing inevitable” about this state of affairs. (4) As the book explores, the enforcement gap is not only actively challenged by worker advocates; these efforts are also inspiring some innovative regulatory experiments and interventions and creating opportunities for policy learning and change. Straddling the space between critical research and the search for better policy alternatives, the book is itself a significant contribution to these efforts.

The book is a culmination of a seven-year collaborative research initiative on employment standards enforcement, focusing on Ontario (Part I, Chapters

1–7) albeit with a view to developments in other jurisdictions experiencing similar conundrums (Part II, Chapters 8–11, focusing on Britain, Australia, Quebec, and the United States). Led by Professor Vosko, the initiative’s director and principal investigator, whose cutting-edge research on precarious work is globally known, the Closing the Enforcement Gap Research Group includes many leading or emerging scholars of historical and contemporary labour market change and work regulation. This combined and considerable expertise, enriched further through partnerships with various local and international institutional and community actors, is evident in the book’s multifaceted yet cohesive approach, its rich findings, and nuanced analysis.

An impressive example of the complex texture that a mixed-methods approach can achieve, the book draws on qualitative research involving in-depth interviews with workers, community advocates, and enforcement officials, archival research excavating decades of ministerial records, and analysis of a previously untapped source of administrative data collected by Ontario’s Ministry of Labour (MOL). “Active mixing” of methods and data sources brings to the fore multiple drivers of the gap in enforcement of employment standards and their wide-ranging effects. (40–41) Moreover, this approach also serves the political commitments of the book’s authors to contribute to meaningful policy change by producing evidence-based research that foregrounds social relations and processes (e.g., feminization and racialization), which shape standards enforcement and gives research participants an opportunity to “tell their stories.” (41) These voices and stories – from low-wage workers in Toronto, Sudbury, and Windsor but also from employment standards officers, MOL officials, and workers’ advocates – are woven into all the chapters in Part I.

Against the backdrop of careful statistical and policy analysis, this rich interview data helps to capture how workers respond to workplace problems and how their social location affects their ability to navigate enforcement issues. We also learn how the day-to-day practices of MOL staff and officials shape the enforcement system and what principles, orientations, and biases inform their work, and about the roles played in standards enforcement by other actors, such as worker advocates and legal case workers.

Conceptually, the book adopts critical and feminist political economy perspectives, casting employment standards as a terrain of historical and ongoing struggle between business interests seeking to minimize legislative intrusion into employer affairs and workers' advocates pushing for better standards and enforcement. The historical sketch of employment standards evolution in Ontario (Chapter 1) makes clear that far from being neutral, policymakers have persistently shown reluctance to interfere with employers' operational decisions, leading to a statutory regime that has often functioned in the interest of the industry and excluded large numbers of workers. As the book shows by marshalling a range of evidence, the more recent "third way" approaches grounded in regulatory new governance to some extent recognize that persisting and deepening inequalities in access to employment standards enforcement have to be addressed, but ultimately continue to ignore how the structural changes in work organization exacerbate the imbalance of power already inherent in the relationship between employers and employees. Exemplary here is the compliance orientation and the notion that there are only a few "bad apples" amongst employers and that it is ignorance of the law rather than deliberate cost-saving strategies or operational pressures that drive standards violations.

Tracing the key elements in the standards enforcement cycle – from individual claims-making (Chapter 2) through complaint administration (Chapter 3), wage recovery (Chapter 4), and inspections by the MOL (Chapter 5), to the limited use of deterrence-based strategies (Chapter 6) – the book reveals how the "regulation of self-regulation model" and new public management techniques introduced to manage claims backlogs have largely failed to produce a better system of enforcement. Instead, these changes have placed more responsibility on employees to pursue complaints yet exacerbated the barriers they encounter in trying to enforce them (e.g., reprisals and low wage recovery). Moreover, they have strengthened MOL staff's orientation towards encouraging voluntary compliance by employers rather than engaging in more proactive deterrence even as increased resources for inspections have been made available during some periods. Building on these findings, and on examples of effective innovations in other jurisdictions contributed by leading international scholars (Part II), the book makes a range of concrete recommendations for "closing the enforcement gap" in Ontario (Chapter 12) and explores how workers advocates and organizations that already play a key role in enforcement can be best supported while remaining at arm's length from MOL so as to retain their independence.

A major scholarly achievement that shows the value of collaborative and multi-method research, the book is outstanding in its nuance and impressive in its scope. Unflinchingly critical, the book is nonetheless a great example of engaged scholarship, as it is clearly oriented towards policy debates; hopefully, the changes it proposes will be taken seriously by policy audiences in Ontario and beyond. While it is analytically sophisticated, the book remains highly readable

and accessible. As such, it is bound to become a key reference text for academics and researchers in a range of fields, in addition to being a great resource for undergraduate and graduate teaching in labour studies, law and legal studies, political economy, sociology of work, etc. Last but not least, the book can also be useful for labour activists and worker advocates across Canada, to whose efforts and commitments the book is dedicated and whom it celebrates.

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Françoise Ega, *Lettres à une Noire*, (Montréal : Lux Éditeur, 2021)

CE RÉCIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIQUE, publié pour la première fois à titre posthume en 1978, relate deux années dans la vie de Françoise Ega, émigrée martiniquaise installée dans la ville de Marseille avec son mari et ses enfants. Cette nouvelle édition préfacée par Elsa Dorlin nous permet de (re)découvrir une œuvre étonnante, et surtout une femme, surnommée Mam'Ega, militante et organisatrice communautaire infatigable dans son quartier de la Busserine, où sa mémoire est encore bien vivante.

Ce livre est né de l'indignation. Témoin de l'exploitation de ses consœurs antillaises fraîchement débarquées au port de Marseille, Françoise Ega décide de se faire embaucher comme femme de ménage, afin d'« en avoir le cœur net » (25), et, surtout, de faire le récit de son expérience quotidienne. Pendant deux ans, elle racontera ses déboires à Carolina, un personnage de l'autre bout du monde, croisé dans un magazine, et dont elle fait son âme sœur.

Pour Françoise Ega, cette « expérience » de service domestique revêt plusieurs dimensions. À prime abord, sa démarche relève autant de

l'observation sociologique que du projet littéraire. En effet, la fibre de l'écrivaine vibre fortement en elle, et elle décrit abondamment son plaisir d'écrire et son espoir d'être publiée. Mais travailler comme femme de ménage devient aussi, par moments, une nécessité économique, lorsqu'elle est « prise de court » (251) face aux dépenses du ménage. Cela dit, Ega n'est pas dans la précarité subie par la plupart de ses compatriotes qui demeurent chez leurs patrons, elle en est bien consciente : « Je suis une privilégiée; quand je laisse madame et ses chiffons de poussière, j'ai un gîte, une famille qui m'attend et plus de travail que je n'ai de bras. Le dérivatif est immédiat et la rancœur ne me ronge pas » (67). Par ailleurs, sa détermination est bien mal comprise par son mari, qui rouspète et tente de la convaincre de laisser ses « bonnes femmes » chez qui elle « s'abîme les doigts » (124). Ce mélange des genres fait assurément de *Lettres à une Noire* une œuvre singulière dans les écrits sur la domesticité.

Bougie d'allumage de son projet d'écriture, l'univers des boulots domestiques prend donc dans le récit une place importante. On retrouve sous la plume mordante de Françoise Ega certains traits familiers des récits de travailleuses domestiques, qu'ils soient contemporains ou qu'ils datent du siècle dernier, qu'ils se déroulent en France, au Québec ou au Brésil. Les pratiques déshumanisantes – comme changer le nom de son employée ou tout simplement ne pas la nommer (« Quinze jours se sont passés et personne ne m'a demandé mon nom ni ma carte d'identité, c'est inouï! » (25)), ou alors parler d'elle « comme si elle n'était pas là » –, les humiliations et les mesquineries du quotidien émaillent le récit, exacerbées par la dimension raciale de ce rapport d'exploitation. En riposte, Ega dépeint les « dames » (et dans une moindre mesure, leurs maris) avec