Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography

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Published online: 18 Sep 2014.

To cite this article: Katy Bennett (2014): Women and economy: complex inequality in a post-industrial landscape, Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography, DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2014.958066

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2014.958066

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Women and economy: complex inequality in a post-industrial landscape
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(Received 12 September 2013; accepted 16 May 2014)

This article looks at the workplace, home and welfare/state to explore intergenerational, dynamic inequality experienced by women around paid work. Based in a former coalfield, it brings women’s paid work centre stage and resonates with the experiences of women (and men) living and working in other post-industrial places that grew out of a particular industry, suffered the trauma of industrial closure, redundancy and job loss, and coping with a new economy shaped by low pay and insecurity. To examine the dynamic element of inequality, the article draws upon Walby’s (2009, Globalisation and Inequalities: Complexity and Contested Modernities, London: Sage) theory of ‘complex inequality’ to understand intersecting regimes of oppression. The article is based on ethnographic work in East Durham, England, including repeat in-depth group discussions with 31 women aged 16–90.

Keywords: complex inequality; work; economy; intergenerational; gender; class

Introduction

Carol lives in East Durham in North East England with her two children. She worked in a clothing factory for 27 years, but was made redundant in 2005. Before her redundancy, her workload had increased and a points system was introduced that monitored not only garment output but also the number of comfort breaks taken by employees. Following redundancy, Carol went to a job centre where she was given phone numbers to ring. At home she sat and looked at the phone numbers, working up the courage to get in touch with a temporary employment agency, where someone would ask her to complete more paperwork and attend an interview, just to be added to their surplus of temping staff. She wanted to be a forklift driver and so she retrained. Nobody interviewed her for a job because, she suspected, she was a woman and women do not drive forklifts.

This article is driven by growing concern amongst academics for the need to (re)engage with questions of structural inequalities and power (Valentine 2007; McDowell 2008a) to examine why the working lives of women like Carol are so hard and have not improved over time. Carol is 1 of 31 women aged between 16 and 90 whose experiences of paid work are drawn upon to capture cross- and intergenerational experiences of paid work that expose the long-standing, yet dynamic, inequality that women’s accounts of paid work collectively recount (Hopkins and Pain 2007). Although rooted in East Durham, a former coalfield, the women’s experiences resonate with those living and working in other post-industrial places that grew out of a particular industry, suffered the trauma of industrial closure and job loss, and coping with a new economy shaped by low pay and insecurity (Linkon and Russo 2002; Pini, Mayes, and McDonald 2010; Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012; McDonald, Mayes, and Pini 2012).

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In this article I bring four generations of women’s (paid) work centre stage in a place where the coal mining industry and men’s work dominated the working landscape and women’s paid employment was cast to the shadows because they were identified as wives and mothers of miners (for example Dennis, Henriques, and Slaughter 1956; Bulmer 1975). Yet most women in the former coalfields do/did paid work at various points in their lives, especially between leaving school and marriage, which for those women who left school at 15, was a substantial amount of time and necessary to help support their household (McDowell 2014). In 1931, 4000 women (12% of working-aged females) in Easington District1 were in paid work predominantly in personal services (GB Historical GIS/University of Portsmouth, n.d.). By 1951 the number of women in Easington District in paid work had more than doubled and by 1971 almost quadrupled (GB Historical GIS/University of Portsmouth, n.d.). In the second part of the twentieth century women were increasingly employed in the manufacturing and service sectors (Hudson 1980; McDowell and Massey 1984).

To engage with the dynamic element of inequality, especially how systems of oppression are (re)produced, I draw upon the concept of ‘complex inequality’ (Walby 2009) to frame the article. I will introduce this concept in more detail in the next section, but its web-like systemic approach to understanding inequality is a starting point for making sense of how the intersecting systems of oppression that mediate the everyday lives of women like Carol shift and change but continue. It also allows a broad approach to women’s paid work that considers home/unpaid work and state/welfare. Following an introduction to the article’s theoretical framework and the concept of complex inequality, discussion moves on to East Durham, the women involved in the research and methods employed in this study. It then examines and explains intergenerational experiences regarding women’s paid work.

Introduction to the theoretical framework

Although a focus on structures and oppression fell out of favour for not engaging with women’s agency, identity practices and points of difference, there is now growing interest regarding ‘the intersection of multiple structures of subordination that influences the lived experiences of work, exploitation and struggles’ (McDowell 2008a, 505). This renewed interest does not simply mean a return to debates around patriarchy, gender regimes and dual systems theories that preoccupied feminist work in the 1980s and 1990s, but growing this work in a way that embraces some of the more recent theoretical innovation around identity, practice and performance to explain complex inequality.

Building on patriarchal foundations

Feminist work initially focused on patriarchy to explain gendered inequalities with early theories focusing on a single base, such as heterosexuality or domestic mode of production, to explain oppression. Later theories of patriarchy developed a model based on a ‘system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women’ (Walby 1990, 20). Whilst influential (Bennett 2004), theories of patriarchy were the subject of considerable debate regarding, for example, the precise relationship between capitalism and patriarchy in systems of oppression, and the butt of critique regarding the focus on structures and the screening out of practices (Gottfried 1998).

As the cultural turn took hold in geography and post-structural and postcolonial theory became influential, feminist work increasingly focused on difference and identity
Academics developed theories that were less static and more responsive to ideas around performativity, agency and meaning (for example Butler 1990). Inspired by this exciting work there is renewed academic vigour around regulatory systems, structures of power and systems of oppression that mediate practices and shape places ‘through which our experiences are lived’ (Valentine 2007, 19). This is because there has been some discomfort in response to excessive claims regarding post-traditional identities and new mobile societies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Bauman 2007) reinforced by deep-seated concerns about widening inequalities that coil round class and gender (Skeggs 1997; Lawler 2005; McDowell 2008b).

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality has reinvigorated discussion of oppression as it ‘aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it’ (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006, 187). Intersectionality has attracted academics with often different concerns, uniting feminist scholarship, because it is open-ended, ambiguous and ambitious (Davis 2008). It has been embraced by post-structuralists pushing for ways of theorising identity that get beyond – or at least think across – categories such as middle class and working class. At the same time, the concept has allowed others to hold on tight to the political agenda of identity to tackle the effects of sexism, class and racism. It gives voice to experiences of oppression (and privilege) and provides thinking space for how social structures interact in the social and material realities of lives to (re)produce power relations (Brown 2012; Rodo-de-Zarate 2014). For reasons concerning its breadth, intersectionality has generated debate regarding its definition, what it involves and how it is methodologically employed in research (Yuval-Davis 2006; Hancock 2007). It has been critiqued for the ‘oppression olympics’ that it has unleashed as ‘subjects are additively valorized by the number of oppressions they face’ (Brown 2012, 543) and for its hunkering around identity categories leaving the complexity and ambiguity of subjectivity in the shadows (Staunaes 2003).

Complex inequality

My interest regarding intersectionality concerns ‘complex inequality’ and reinvigorated systemic approaches that bring a relational, dynamic quality to work dealing with inequalities shaped by the agency of individuals and dynamic structures of power (Yuval-Davis 2006). Embedded in these approaches is an understanding that inequality is more than the sum of its parts – or systems of power – and concerns the ‘qualitatively different’ experiences of the multiply marginalised (Walby 2009; Choo and Ferree 2010).

Walby’s (2009) work on complex inequality has grown out of, in part, earlier attempts to theorise gender inequality and feminist work on intersectionality that considers issues of identity, difference and inequality. In her book Globalization and Inequalities, Walby’s (2009) work on ‘complex inequality’ developed a stretchy web-like systemic approach that was not static, but emergent through the multiple actions of individuals, whilst simultaneously not reducible to them. Walby’s (2009) focus on ‘system’ rather than ‘structure’ was deliberate to avoid connotations of rigidity and stasis that haunted her earlier work. Two types of system are key components of ‘complex inequality’. Walby (2009, 65) calls the first kind of system a ‘regime’ of inequality which includes ‘class, gender, ethnicity, age and more’. Her second she calls an institutional ‘domain’ and this specifically includes the economy, polity, violence and civil society. Domains are broadly
conceived with, for example, the economy including not only free wage labour, but also domestic labour and state welfare. For Walby (2009, 67):

Each social system (whether the economy, polity, violence or civil society) takes all other systems as its environment. Likewise each set of social relations (e.g. gender, ethnicity, class) is a system, taking all others as its environment.

Such a systemic approach disavows hierarchy, rigidities (such as part and whole) and the notion of ‘base-superstructure’ so that ‘social systems are mutually adaptive, influencing how each develops, though without the loss of their specific identities’ (67–68). Walby (2009) does not detail the nature of the relationship between social systems, keeping this open at a theoretical level, but emphasises their temporal and social reach, the probability/possibility of some overlap and their specificity linked to their independence as a system, their differences contingent. One set of social relations rarely saturates any particular domain, more usually coexisting within institutions.

In this article I stretch Walby’s systemic approach in ways that she probably did not intend, but it is this flexible, dynamic element of complex inequality that I want to push at here to interrogate women’s paid work in a place stitched into a global economy and haunted by its past. The industrial legacy, (patriarchal) households and values that characterise this former coal mining community shape some of the discourses that influence what can be thought, said and done. This article limits itself, for purposes of word count, to one institutional domain described by Walby (2009) – the economy – but of course other institutional domains figure in the shadows, their presence felt and given form by the women who took part in this research. Economy is broadly conceived to embrace not only free wage labour but also, and important for women (McDowell 2008b; McDonald, Mayes, and Pini 2012), domestic labour and state welfare. To examine the complex inequality identified by women in this research, the substantive sections of this article are organised around these three spheres of economy identified by Walby (2009): workplace/paid work, home/unpaid work and state/welfare. Before we get to these sections, I provide some context through a brief discussion of East Durham, the women who took part in the research and how the research was conducted.

**East Durham**

East Durham is located in North East England, sandwiched between Tyneside, Wearside and Teesside and built on a legacy of heavy industrial and mining foundations. Men in East Durham largely worked in the coal mining industry which, at its peak in 1913, employed more than 165,000 men in the Durham coalfield. Rhythms and patterns of local life were finely tuned to the demands of this industry (McDowell and Massey 1984; see also Gibson-Graham 1996; Pini, Mayes, and McDonald 2010; Pini and Mayes 2011; Tallichet 2011 for further detailed discussion on class and gender relations in [former] [coal] mining communities and the impact of mine closures). East Durham is a predominantly rural landscape, punctuated by villages and small towns, many of which grew and expanded around collieries. The pithead dominated the colliery village, dwarfing neighbouring terraced housing where miners and their families lived. The social life, welfare and health of the village depended on colliery jobs, contribution from miners’ pay packets and trade union membership. Sitting proud at the centre of village life was the Miners’ Welfare, a large brick building, offering support, respite and camaraderie for miners.

Less prominent in colliery villages in the 1950s onwards were the bus stops where lines of women waited in the morning for factory buses to take them to work in places such as
as Spennymoor, Hartlepool, Peterlee and Darlington (Lewis and Foord 1984). The manufacturing sector was a significant employer of women who worked in factories owned by companies such as Paton and Baldwins, Siemens, Tudor Crisps and Thorn EMI. One reason why women’s paid work sits in the shadows of colliery life is because they were employed elsewhere.

Numbers employed in the coal mining industry began to decline from a peak in 1913. Whilst national economic strategies and international market forces were responsible for pit closures in Durham in the second part of the twentieth century, it was the neoliberal policies of the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s that struck a death knell to the coal mining industry (Robinson 2002). Between 1981 and 2004, 22,800 men in County Durham lost coal jobs (Beatty, Fothergill, and Powell 2007). In East Durham the last colliery closed in 1993. Alongside the devastatingly fast eradication of deep coal mining in Durham in the 1980s and 1990s, manufacturing was also in decline. Between 1979 and 1993 the number of employees in manufacturing in the northern region fell from 410,000 to 241,000 (Robinson 2002). Despite this decline, manufacturing in East Durham was still a significant employer with 24.1% of employees working in this sector in 2008 (compared with 10.2% for Great Britain) (Office for National Statistics 2008). The impact of job loss was a growth in economic inactivity in East Durham (Beatty and Fothergill 1996), which remains high with 25.7% of people aged 16–64 in Easington economically inactive in 2012 (compared with 23.1% in Great Britain) (Office for National Statistics 2012a).

Job growth in the North East has been in the service sector, especially public sector services (Beatty, Fothergill, and Powell 2007). This means that more than 70% of jobs in the North East are in the service sector, compared with almost 50% in 1970 (Robinson 2002). New industries such as call centres and retail parks are prevalent in Durham and are more likely to employ women (Moore et al. 2005), although some research suggests that a younger generation of men compete with women for these jobs that are generally low paid and insecure (Beatty, Fothergill, and Powell 2007; but see also McDowell 2003; Jimenez and Walkerdine 2011). Call centres (and factories) are largely the ephemeral branches of globally operating companies that can be chopped and relocated at short notice, when tax breaks and other financial incentives come to an end. East Durham is not home to headquarters or research and development hubs of multinational corporations and is in competition with other global regions for jobs and investment generating a new economy shaped by low pay and insecurity (Bennett, Beynon, and Hudson 2000). Despite growing competition between women and men for jobs, this increase in service sector jobs has created a shift in employment patterns with women making up almost half of the regional workforce in East Durham with 21,000 women (aged 16–64) economically active in 2012, compared to 24,000 men (Office for National Statistics 2012a).

**Research methods**

The article is based on research conducted from 2005 to 2008, which included in-depth discussion group work involving 31 women aged between 16 and 90 and participant observation. The women (see Figure 1) were selected on the basis that they lived in Easington District as part of a broader research project concerned with the relationship between identities and regeneration for women living in the former coalfields of East Durham (Bennett 2009, 2011, 2013). The groups were organised around age (55+, 41–55, 26–40, 16–25).

My approach to in-depth discussion group work was influenced by Burgess, Limb, and Harrison (1988a, 1988b), who designed group work that allowed individuals to get to
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Previous jobs</th>
<th>Current paid/unpaid work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iris</td>
<td>55+</td>
<td>Factory worker, manager at factory</td>
<td>Retired, voluntary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td></td>
<td>Factory worker, shop worker, care assistant, postwoman</td>
<td>Retired, voluntary work, looks after grandchildren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td></td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>Retired, voluntary work, carer for adult child with disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joan</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dinner lady, shop worker, factory worker, office worker</td>
<td>Retired, voluntary work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td></td>
<td>Shop worker, factory worker, domestic service</td>
<td>Retired, voluntary work, looks after grandchildren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nanny for family/School nanny</td>
<td>Retired, voluntary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacqueline</td>
<td>41 -55</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hairstylist</td>
<td>Child minder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td></td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>Mother of teenage children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caz</td>
<td></td>
<td>Supermarket employee</td>
<td>Looks after granddaughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Civil servant</td>
<td>Child minder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td></td>
<td>Office clerk, bakery operative</td>
<td>Child minder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Mother of baby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td></td>
<td>Alcohols and drug addicts support worker</td>
<td>Looks after granddaughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnie</td>
<td>26 -40</td>
<td>Nanny</td>
<td>Works at crèche, voluntary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cleaner</td>
<td>Cleaner, voluntary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td></td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>Community Centre worker, voluntary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td></td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lou</td>
<td></td>
<td>Support worker</td>
<td>Support worker, voluntary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td></td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>Mother of young child, voluntary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemma</td>
<td></td>
<td>Carer for old people</td>
<td>Mother of young child, voluntary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saara</td>
<td></td>
<td>Self employed</td>
<td>Works in family business, voluntary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nurse, classroom assistant for children with special needs</td>
<td>Childminder/foster carer, voluntary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>16 -25</td>
<td>Manager at Butlins</td>
<td>Mother of young child/ren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td></td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>Mother of young child/ren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hair dresser, bar worker, shop worker, care worker for mentally ill</td>
<td>Mother of young child/ren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becky</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trainee youth worker</td>
<td>Trainee youth worker/mother of young child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mother of young child/ren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cara</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mother of young child/ren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mel</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bar worker</td>
<td>Bar worker/mother of young child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td></td>
<td>Care worker for elderly/mentally ill adults</td>
<td>Mother of young child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. The women and their work.
know each other and explore their experiences with others. Each group met three times in 2006 and meetings, which were organised around the themes of ‘home’, ‘work’ and ‘change’, lasted for approximately three hours. Methods were influenced by growing lines of engagement between psychotherapeutic techniques and the social sciences (Bondi 2005). In each meeting I asked eight open-ended questions and followed where respondents took me regarding their experiences, prompting around these (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). Data analysis involved a grounded theory approach that examined what the respondents were telling me, narrative analysis to explore (sub)plots and a further reflexive layer of analysis that considered why people told me what they did (Doucet and Mauthner 2008).

The 31 women

Although the women lived in East Durham, four of them moved there following their marriage. Most of the women identified themselves as working class through, for example, a (grand)father who was a miner, their own occupation and leaving school at a young age. The women developed nuance and differentiation around working-class identity depending on, for example, a father’s particular role in the coal mining industry, whether or not their parents had a car or a telephone (‘ooooh you posh lass’ [laughter]) and the kind of house they lived in. Most of the women had left school at 15 (for the oldest group) or 16, although Jacqueline had returned to further and higher education. All of the women were white, apart from Saara, who was a middle-class British Asian and worked in her husband’s family business. The article’s core concern is the intersection of gender and class regimes and what this means for their experiences of paid work. East Durham’s post-industrial landscape and weak position in a global economy figures strongly in experiences of class regimes, as does the patriarchal legacy of the place’s coal mining industry in gender regimes. A significant point of difference amongst the women was obviously their age and it is this dimension of their identity that is drawn upon to consider the reproduction of systems of oppression.

Figure 1 provides some brief introductory details regarding the women’s working lives and collectively demonstrates many years of paid work in manufacturing and service sectors.

Workplace/women’s paid work

Women’s paid work: 1950s to early 1980s

All apart from two of the (youngest) women involved in this research had been in paid employment at some point in their life. The first part of this section draws upon women’s experiences of work in the 1950s through to the early 1980s (although Mary began paid work much sooner in the 1930s). For the older women, leaving school at 15 or 16 (or 14 in Mary’s case) was quickly followed by starting paid work. Women worked out of necessity, contributing to household income and/or leaving home so that there were fewer mouths to feed. Mary left home at the age of 14 to look after the children of a wealthy family in Manchester. Others found jobs nearer to home, typically working in factories and shops. Women worked for at least seven years before they married. Paid work shifted for older women once they married and/or had children. Some women gave up paid work for a lengthy period of time whilst their children grew up, others returned to work sooner. Maggie went back to factory work when her child was six months old, and Ann when her child was one year old. Other women returned to work when their children started school. Paid work fitted around childcare responsibilities, the availability of female relatives to
help care for children and husband’s work. Paid work was left at calamitous moments, when a child was injured or a friend died, and returned to when domestic pressures eased or necessitated their paid employment. Although women were in paid work, they were also central to domestic life, doing most of the housework, shopping, cooking and childcare.

Cutting across older women’s accounts of paid work was the ease of finding employment and job security when they were younger. Whilst they were low paid, working in mostly manual occupations, they could leave work one week and start another job the next because there were jobs available. Some women, like Maggie and Ann, took advantage of the job opportunities available:

Maggie: There was the jobs. There’s no jobs now where there was then. We were never out of work . . . I used to say ‘I’m sick of that job, I’m sick of the travelling’ and me friend used to work in Salters Bakery. She says ‘Maggie so and so’s leaving, why don’t you come’. I’d say ‘Right’. So Ronnie that had the shop wanted us to start on the Monday, I says ‘I cannot, I have to work me notice’. He phoned Paton Baldwins and they said yes, fair enough, I could leave earlier and started for him and I got sick of him so I went back to Paton’s again, you know, this is what we used to do.

Although women emphasised the ease of finding jobs, the best paid work was often not easy to access. Job opportunities had been deliberately kept away from colliery villages to keep men working at the coalface (Bennett, Beynon, and Hudson 2000). Factory work was located outside villages and getting to industrial estates was tricky for women unable to drive or with no access to a car and reliant on factory buses. Journeys to work often took more than one hour and, as Ann said, ‘It was nearly the clock round you worked’. Five days a week Ann was away from home for more than 12 hours. Both Maggie and Ann had worked at the Paton and Baldwins Worsted Spinning Mill factory in Darlington, a good example of factory work in the 1950s/1960s. Established in 1947, the factory employed 3500 workers at its peak, 75% of whom were female, producing knitting wool and knitting patterns. Factory buses would collect women from villages between 6 am and 7 am, drive them to its large 140-acre site and then take them home again at the end of the day. The size of factories was daunting:

Ann: My first one (job) was Paton and Baldwins. It was the big wool factory. I mean it was on a 100 acre site, at Darlington. It had its own railway line going through and everything, for all the wool, it was enormous. The canteen was as big as this building, you know, because there was thousands worked there wasn’t there Maggie? Six o’clock on a morning, up to catch the bus, because there was buses from all round the villages. There were hundreds of them weren’t there?

Massive site with lots of huts or sheds.
Like being in a concentration camp.

Ann: I mean, if your foreman sent you on a message . . . oh, the first time he sent me I hadn’t a clue where I was going. I was away ages. Couldn’t find my way back.

Whether women worked in factories, shops, domestic service or care homes, work was largely manual and took its toll on bodies as they lifted people in and out of beds in care homes, walked miles to deliver the post and cleaned houses. Dawn remembered how her knees felt after scrubbing the shop floor where she worked, Ann the noise and heat of factory work, ‘you didn’t have ear protectors then you know’ and Maggie the effect of fibreglass (from the production of oven doors at Thorne EMI) on her skin – ‘like a load of needles, you were covered in it. It was in your hair, all over your body’.

Making work bearable was the camaraderie of the workplace and friendships formed over ‘fag (cigarette) breaks’ in the ladies washrooms, backsides resting against sinks
whilst talking to each other via the mirrors on the walls. Women often worked alongside other women. Even in workplaces, such as factories, where both men and women worked, women recalled gendered segregation with men occupying management positions or, when they did the same type of work, grouped into different shifts. Although work was gruelling, older women also remembered employers looking after them better. Factories had ‘beautiful toilets with an attendant’ or a nurse providing massages and treatment; another employer paid bus fares, covered the cost of overalls and provided dinner vouchers.

**Women’s paid work: 1980s onwards**

Headlining younger women’s experiences of paid work was the difficulties of finding (permanent) employment and job insecurity. Carol’s experiences of temporary employment agencies outlined at the start of the article were typical with paid work increasingly found through these agencies, which put women on zero-hour contracts and paid them low wages. Women talked of people turning up to work, only to be told they were not needed that day and unable to claim benefits until they had been turned away – ‘laid off’ – for three consecutive days. They also recounted finishing a night shift at 10 pm and being asked to return for a shift the following morning at 6 am. For the women, temporary employment agencies meant low wages, no career progression, unpredictable working hours, underemployment and no rights regarding holiday/sick pay and pension contributions (Forde 2001; Elcioglu 2010).

Declining working conditions dominated women’s accounts of paid work. Before she was made redundant, job cuts meant that Carol was under pressure to get more done in less time:

Carol: As time went on things started changing ‘cos like less people working there and everybody seems to be getting like more work, jobs … And people started to like argue and like causing friction … Everybody just totally getting on everybody’s back.

Cutbacks had worse repercussions in workplaces where employees had to absorb the hits (literally). Sarah and Donna’s accounts of their junior roles in care homes were striking for the extent to which they worked alone with inadequate supervision. This contrasted with Maggie’s accounts of care work when she was younger, which were loaded with stories of colleagues who worked alongside her. Working alone, the young women faced tricky situations and Sarah said that she had ‘had a few black eyes’. She went on to say:

There’s one time I went and put a woman’s slippers on and she like … obviously I was in front of her, I went to put the slipper on and she went bang, straight in my face. All my face was black and blue.

Underpinning declining working conditions is the introduction of points systems that take into account everything from speed and quality of work to the number of comfort breaks taken by staff. Caz’s working conditions deteriorated when the supermarket where she worked was taken over by another company which ‘was just all about money’. A new pay system was introduced which meant an increase in hourly pay, but the removal of higher bank holiday and overtime pay. Caz said:

They couldn’t force you to swap over you know, but they made life pretty difficult in some situations.

Younger women focused on low pay too. The North East has one of the lowest paid workforces in the UK. In Easington average gross weekly pay was £390.60 for full-time workers in 2012 (compared with a Great Britain average of £508) (“Office for National
Statistics 2012b), but this average for all workers glosses over the fact that women earn less than men. In Easington women in full-time work earn on average £372.20 per week compared to male full-time workers earning on average £438.60 per week. Wages are low in East Durham because of the pressure of globalisation, transnational ownership, disinvestment and casualisation on the place, the demands of companies to keep wages low or they relocate, their growing reliance on temporary employment agencies and the predominance of work defined as low skilled.

The following sections will examine women’s inequality regarding paid work in more detail, opening up the home/unpaid work and state/welfare for some scrutiny.

Home/unpaid domestic work

It is impossible to unstitch women’s experiences of paid work from home. Husbands/male partners/boyfriends – ‘men’ – and grandchildren/children shape home lives and mediate decisions, experiences and practices regarding women’s paid work, encouraging, restricting and supporting them.

The home lives of women in this research suggest subtle changes regarding the intersection of class and gender regimes in households that shape this former coalfield. Few mothers under the age of 25 lived with a man, yet they were still variously haunted by an industrial past and the patriarchal gender relations traditionally associated with coal mining communities. Younger women felt the discursive pressure to be good mothers by staying at home and looking after their children. For older women, the ‘bed-work-food-pub’ practices of their father haunted them and across the generations of women there was growing intolerance of men doing nothing in the way of childcare and housework. Joanne remembered:

Like when I was young, me dad like ... well he worked, so he came in and wanted his dinner there and then he’d have a sleep and then it would be the pub. In-bed-work-food-pub. But that was his life. And I hate that. It’s like if I’ve got a partner who wants to go to the pub on the afternoon I’ll say ‘Get out!’ Because it’s what you see when you’re growing up and I won’t tolerate that.

When she was courting the man who was to become her (ex)husband, Joanne remembered watching her fiancé come home from work, sit down in a chair and have his socks taken off his feet by his mother to be washed. When she divorced her husband, Joanne established her own hairdressing business to pay the household bills. Similarly Iris, following her divorce, experienced a sense of release that enabled her to move ‘from the factory floor of Black and Decker’ and rise through the ranks of management.

Where women lived with men, sharing housework and childcare enabled some, like Caz, Amy and Jacqueline, to do paid work. Amy remembered when she was a bakery operative:

When I worked a late shift ... he had to bring up the babies. You know like me youngest one was actually three month old when I went back to work and I worked 2 pm–10 pm shift. So he had to come in from work, feed them, have them bathed, bed. And seeing to like whatever he was doing himself. But he always did it.

Caz similarly described how her husband would get the tea on the table if he was home before her shift at the supermarket had finished, although she had often prepared it the night before. Women living alone also sometimes had help with childcare from the father of their child, enabling them to, in the case of Mel, do paid work at the weekends.

The welfare system mediated home and relationships with men, affecting decisions, practices and experiences of paid work. Older women were quick to recognise the benefits
of the state/welfare system, supporting women to escape unhappy marriages, set up home alone and be full-time mothers, eroding the ‘you’ve made your bed, now lie in it’ culture, described by Ann. Iris and Joanne felt there had been less support for them and their children following divorce, making paid work vital. The welfare system, though, also had deeper implications for home lives with rules stipulating that women with a boyfriend at home more than two nights a week did not qualify as single. Consequently, home and working lives were both eased and complicated by boyfriends who, for this, and other reasons, often did not stick around for long.

Children and grandchildren influenced practices regarding paid work. Whilst the guilt induced by the moral undertones of a former coalfield community pulled women home to look after their children, the desire to provide for them pushed women into work. Younger women, with pre-school children, felt caught in this conundrum, although the wish to work diminished in the face of low paid, insecure work that prioritised the needs of capital over the working conditions of employees in a place distressed by high levels of deprivation. Mothers of young children wanted to be at home, to watch their children and keep them close.

Grandchildren influenced older women’s patterns of paid work. They took grandchildren to and from school, looked after them at home and cooked meals for them whilst their children worked. One woman said:

And then I’ll get me daughter on the phone (who has just finished work) and she’ll say ‘Mum, what are you having for tea? Is there enough for me and (partner) and the bairn?’ ‘Aye, come on then’. Because I do, I cook, you know, extra because I know what’ll happen.

Some women left the workforce to care for grandchildren and enable their children to work. Sometimes this decision backfired when they needed to work again. Debbie had recently bought her house, had a mortgage to pay and needed to find a job to maintain her own home life, but felt unable to find paid work because of the needs of her grandchildren/children.

The next section deals with a third element of economy – state/welfare – but it is clear to see in this section that this system is entwined with home/(un)paid work.

**State/welfare**

During most of the twentieth century up until 1979, there was a general expansion of institutions associated with welfare and employment regulation in the UK. Social insurance was introduced in 1911, council housing in 1919, state secondary schooling in 1944 and the National Health Service in 1945. The expansion of state welfare generated employment opportunities for women like Danielle, a nurse, and Jacqueline, a teacher. It partly fuelled the feminisation of the workforce and the growing significance of the public sector as an employer in the North East. Older women reflected on other important impacts of state-provided welfare on the lives of women from the mid-twentieth century onwards, including improved income support for lone mothers. Welfare support, which had treated women as wives and mothers of workers, had been negligible for women, like Iris, who found themselves single parents following divorce.

This expansion of state-supported welfare ended with the election of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government in 1979 which set about rolling back the state, through, for example, the sale of social housing through Right to Buy. The election of a New Labour government in 1997 did little to turn the tide of a neoliberal agenda. Despite greater state intervention in poverty, especially amongst families with children, welfare policies were designed to support people in (to) paid work through, for example, the
introduction of a minimum wage in 1999, Working Tax Credit (a means tested payment to workers in low-income jobs which includes help with childcare costs), better maternity leave provision and benefit extensions (where out-of-work benefits continue for a limited period of time). In short, these policies were designed to support working families, make work pay and get people into work.

The problem in East Durham is that when people can find work, wages are well below the national average, employment is insecure and working conditions are often poor. Although government policy assumes that paid work is financially worthwhile for lone parents, this is often not the case. Childcare costs are prohibitive, especially for women who want to work part-time, and work-related expenses, including travel, mean that it is hard to make ends meet. Talking about a friend Leah said:

She went down to the job centre, you know, they do that thing when they tell you how much working family tax you get and blah, blah, blah … She went there and if she got like a minimum paid job, she’d be like £20 a month better off and that’s without any travelling.

Even with additional income, such as in-work benefits, women on low wages struggle to escape poverty, making paid work simply not worth it (Himmelweit et al. 2004). Lone parents, however, continue to be a significant target for government policy. Since 2011, lone parents not in paid work, whose youngest dependent child is above five years of age, lose eligibility for Income Support and are shifted to Jobseeker’s Allowance, ‘a benefit with greater conditionality, mandated job search and powers of sanction’ (Rafferty and Wiggan 2011, 276).

An analysis of women, work and complex inequality in a former coalfield

Women’s intergenerational accounts of paid work show the continuing inequality they experience and the capability of systems and regimes to absorb women’s practices, shift and adapt accordingly, reinforcing oppression. There are two points that I want to emphasise. The first is precisely this monstrous, dynamic element of inequity which Walby’s (2009) theory of ‘complex inequality’, with its stretchy, web-like systemic approach to understanding intersecting regimes of oppression, helps to expose. Things change but systems adapt so that women remain unequal. For example, Walby (2009) wrote about a shift from a private to public gender regime exposing women’s greater access to public life and paid work, but also the ways in which practices are shaped by institutions and powerful discourses that keep them in their (typically female-dominated work) place. Even though Carol was a qualified forklift driver, her search for a job was met with stony silence. At work women and men were segregated through shift systems (with men working the night shift and taking the extra pay that went with it) or horizontally segregated by systems of (typically male) management. This segregation makes legislation around Equal Pay hard to apply and whilst women’s work in, for example, caring professions is regarded as drawing upon their natural talents rather than qualified skills, it is downgraded and low paid (Walby 2009). The monstrous capability of the gender regime shifts so that it continues to oppress women, despite, and because of, their efforts, like Carol, to strike out.

This monstrous capability was evident at home and around decisions to do paid work (or not). Many of the (younger) women lived alone or with men who did at least some domestic work at home. Things at home have changed and women’s (and men’s) practices have eroded the ‘bed-work-food-pub’ culture typical of patriarchal households that shaped coal mining communities. Yet, living alone was not always a choice for younger women, but they did so because of regulations underpinning Income Support, low wage rates and
not wanting to pay other people to look after their children. The welfare system and recent
to Income Support eligibility, East Durham’s low-wage economy, the insecurity
of jobs and living alone meant that women continued to face inequality as they grappled
with poverty, in substandard accommodation located in the most deprived areas.

My second point is that, like a spider’s web anchored into a space through its threads,
particular experiences of inequality are rooted in place. Still somehow shaping regimes is
the legacy of this former coalfield and the patriarchal households that shaped it. Systems
might shift but memories of the old order run deep, continuing to affect current practices.
Focusing on a (public) gender regime (with more women in paid work) and its intersection
with class, women’s experiences of oppression are moulded by East Durham, rooted in the
geology of the place, the disused mines below haunting lives and households above.
Women have a complex relationship with the ghosts of patriarchal households and an
industrial past that shaped coal mining communities, talking about their erosion, seeking
to escape them, nurturing some of the values that underpinned them and consciously and
less consciously (re)acting to them. Younger women’s experiences of the intersection of
class and gender regimes are haunted by the patriarchal geology of the place, the distress
caused by the eradication of an industry, the sense that mothers, not childcare providers,
should look after their young children to keep them close and protect them from the trauma
they (have witnessed others) experience. Similarly, older women’s first-hand experiences
of patriarchal households influenced decisions and practices regarding their own home
lives and paid work. In short, systems of oppression are entrenched in place, the memories
and practices that shape this, so that systemic change is not neat.

Shifting the focus to the class regime (and its intersection with gender), place is similarly
significant. Discount retail parks and industrial estates are located where collieries once
were. Filling the empty spaces left by the removal of collieries are call centres, factories and
buildings where companies employ people cheaply and make staff anxious around job
security, zero-hour contracts, low pay, the use of temporary employment agencies and
points-based systems that measure efficiency. This is a place where people compete for few
jobs. As experiences of paid work since the early 1980s demonstrate, women feel
disempowered in the work place, at the butt end of capitalism and cornered by a class regime
where profit from their work accumulates elsewhere and offshore. East Durham’s peripheral
location in a global economy where research and development and the headquarters of
companies are located elsewhere mean that wages and other costs are kept low to compete
for jobs and investment. The rights of workers and their representation through membership
of unions have diminished with the growth of temporary employment agencies that engage
and turn away workers on their books, depending on the ebb and flow of demand (elsewhere)
for goods and services. Whilst women would not welcome the return of collieries or
dangerous jobs for men and employment that was tough on their own bodies, they are
nostalgic for a place and time when workers had more rights, supported by stronger unions,
the availability of jobs and better job security. Nostalgic accounts of past workplaces are
revealing regarding contemporary experiences of work (Davis 1979; Bennett 2009),
exposing anxiety caused by job insecurity.

**Conclusion**

Two converging sets of voices were the starting point for this article. The first set
concerned different generations of women who live in a former coalfield in East Durham
describing their experiences of paid work over time. Older women who did paid work
from the 1950s onwards recounted workplaces that were hard on their bodies and pay
that was low but necessary for household survival, especially when they were divorced, lone parents with limited access to welfare support. Despite changes in legislation around Equal Pay and welfare support, younger women recounted sometimes different, but ongoing experiences of inequality. In fact, whilst older women described some good times at work and a sense of job security, younger women generally did not. The article examines why the working lives of women in this former coalfield have not improved over time.

The second set of voices driving this article involves academics encouraging a (re)engagement with questions of structural inequalities and power (Valentine 2007; McDowell 2008a) to expose and explain (women’s) experiences of oppression. To engage with the dynamic, trans- and intergenerational element of inequality, I draw upon the concept of ‘complex inequality’ (Walby 2009) to frame the article. I use its stretchy, web-like systemic approach to explain how women’s experiences of inequality shift and change, but continue. Walby’s concept of ‘complex inequality’ allows a broad approach to the economy and paid work, prompting matters concerning home, unpaid work and the welfare/state to be brought into focus because they are so important to women’s experiences and decisions regarding paid work. The 31 women, aged between 16 and 90, who took part in the research, take us into their workplaces and homes, nudging us to consider their relationships, work and welfare to expose dynamic, intersecting gender and class regimes that absorb women’s practices, shift and adapt accordingly, reinforcing oppression. It is precisely this web-like quality of the concept of ‘complex inequality’ that enables the article to explore the monstrously dynamic capability of inequality that oppresses women over generations. I probably push this web-like quality in ways that Walby (2009) did not intend, but webs stretch across particular places, the geology, history and economy of which haunt the practices of the women who inform this article. The article considers the post-industrial landscape that shapes this low-wage economy, with factories, call centres and discount retail parks moving into, and out of, empty spaces where collieries were once located, and the impact of temporary employment agencies on job security and experiences of paid work.

I agree with the drive for more work on structures and systems of oppression, especially at a time when workplace conditions look set to worsen with reports that the European Union and the USA negotiate behind closed doors, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) or Transatlantic Free Trade Agreement (TAFTA) (Wallach 2013). This is a modified version of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment which was similarly negotiated in secret in the 1990s but derailed by protests when news got out about it. Central to the TTIP/TAFTA negotiations is the empowerment of companies and the dismantling of social, consumer and environmental legislation enabling companies to sue governments for compensation over earnings lost because of, for example, strict labour legislation (Wallach 2013). These ongoing negotiations concern corporate empowerment and ‘would allow foreign companies to attack any signatory country whose policies impacted on their profits’ (Wallach 2013, 2). The implications of these negotiations for strengthening and deepening regimes that oppress women (and men) living in post-industrial places such as East Durham who need jobs and investment are disturbing.

Acknowledgements
Thanks to all the women who took part in the research (their names have been changed), Emily Nolan for helping me to organise and run the groups, Peter Krafil, Clare Madge and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on the paper.
Funding
The funding for this research was provided by the ESRC [RES-148-25-0025].

Notes
1. Easington District was a local government district covering East Durham from 1974 to 2009.
2. Low educational credentials and the intergenerational transmission of trauma related to the pain and shame experienced by older men in the local community regarding the inability to do ‘proper masculine’ work also prevent young working-class men from accessing service sector jobs (McDowell 2003; Walkerdine 2010).
3. From a sample of 25 women working in the manufacturing industry in Peterlee in 1982, average net weekly earnings for full-time manual female workers was £58 (Lewis and Foord 1984).

Notes on contributor
Katy Bennett is a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Leicester. Her research interests focus on issues of identity, emotion, home and community, and much of her research has examined how economic restructuring, regeneration and transformed landscapes impact on people’s lives. Her latest research on ‘Living Multiculture’ examines new social and spatial formations of multiculture in England, how people live and manage growing cultural diversity and ethnic difference in their everyday lives and the role of place in this process.

References


Las mujeres y la economía: compleja desigualdad en un paisaje post industrial

Este artículo observa el lugar de trabajo, el hogar y el bienestar/estado para analizar la desigualdad intergeneracional y dinámica experimentada por las mujeres alrededor del trabajo pago. Basado en un ex yacimiento de carbón, pone en el centro de la escena al trabajo pago de las mujeres y resuena con las experiencias de las mujeres (y los hombres) que viven y trabajan en otros lugares post industriales que surgieron de una industria en particular, sufrieron el trauma del cierre de la industria, la redundancia y la pérdida de trabajo y lidian con una nueva economía caracterizada por los bajos salarios y la inseguridad laboral. Para examinar el elemento dinámico de la desigualdad, el artículo se basa en la teoría de la “desigualdad compleja” de Sylvia Walby (2009) para comprender los régímenes de opresión que se intersectan. El artículo está basado en un trabajo etnográfico en Durham del Este, Inglaterra, incluyendo discusiones en profundidad repetidas con 31 mujeres de entre 16 y 90 años de edad.

Palabras claves: desigualdad compleja; trabajo; economía; intergeneracional; género; clase
女性与经济：后工业地景中复杂的不平等

本文检视工作场所、家庭和社会福利/国家，以探讨女性在给薪工作上所经历的代间动态不平等。本研究以一个先前的矿场为根据，将女性给薪工作置于核心，并与女性（及男性）在其他后工业地区居住及工作的经验产生共鸣，这些地区诞生自特定的产业、饱受工厂倒闭、遗弃和工作流失之苦，并正设法应付由低薪和不定性型塑而成的新经济。为了检视不平等的动态因素，本文运用西尔维亚．沃尔比（Walby 2009）的理论“复杂的不平等”来理解相互交织的压迫体制。本文是根据在英格兰杜伦东部所进行的田野工作，包含对三十一位年龄介乎十六至九十岁的女性重复进行的深度团体讨论。

关键词：复杂的不平等; 工作; 经济; 跨世代; 性别; 阶级