

We have chosen four areas to look at. They are places where not only different 'industries' in the sectoral sense, but also different social forms of production, dominated: coal mining in the north-east of England, the factory work of the cotton towns, the sweated labour of inner London, and the agricultural gang-work of the Fens. In one chapter we cannot do justice to the complexity of the syntheses which were established in these very different areas. All we attempt is to illustrate our argument by highlighting the most significant lines of contrast.

Since the construction of that nineteenth-century mosaic of differences all these regions have undergone further changes. In the second group of sections we leap ahead to the last decades of the twentieth century and ask 'where are they now?'. What is clear is that, in spite of all the major national changes which might have been expected to iron out the contrasts, the areas, in terms of gender relations and the lives of women, are still distinct. But they are distinct in different ways now. Each is still unique, though each has changed. In this later section we focus on two threads in this reproduction and transformation of uniqueness. First, there have been different changes in the economic structure of the areas. They have been incorporated in different ways into the new, wider spatial division of labour, indeed the new international division of labour. The national processes of change in the UK economy, in other words, have not operated in the same way in each of the areas. The new layers of economic activity, or inactivity, which have been superimposed on the old are, just as was the old, different in different places. Second, however, the impact of the more recent changes has itself been moulded by the different existing conditions, the accumulated inheritance of the past, to produce distinct resulting combinations. 'The local' has had its impact on the operation of 'the national'.

The nineteenth century

Coal is our life: whose life?

Danger and drudgery; male solidarity and female oppression – this sums up life in the colliery villages of Co. Durham during much of the nineteenth century. Here the separation of men and women's lives was virtually total: men were the breadwinners, women the domestic labourers, though hardly the 'angels of the house' that featured so large in the middle class Victorian's idealization of women. The coal mining areas of Durham provide a clear example of how changes in the economic organization of Victorian England interacted with a particular view of women's place to produce a rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal society. These villages were dominated by the pits and by the mine owners. Virtually all the men earned their livelihood in the mines and the mines were an almost exclusively male preserve, once women's labour was forbidden from the middle of the century. Men were the industrial

A woman's place?

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The nineteenth century saw the expansion of capitalist relations of production in Britain. It was a geographically uneven and differentiated process, and the resulting economic differences between regions are well known: the rise of the coalfields, of the textile areas, the dramatic social and economic changes in the organization of agriculture, and so forth. Each was both a reflection of and a basis for the period of dominance which the UK economy enjoyed within the nineteenth-century international division of labour. In this wider spatial division of labour, in other words, different regions of Britain played different roles, and their economic and employment structures in consequence also developed along different paths.

But the spread of capitalist relations of production was also accompanied by other changes. In particular it disrupted the existing relations between women and men. The old patriarchal form of domestic production was torn apart, the established pattern of relations between the sexes was thrown into question. This, too, was a process which varied in its extent and in its nature between parts of the country, and one of the crucial influences on this variation was the nature of the emerging economic structures. In each of these different areas 'capitalism' and 'patriarchy' were articulated together, accommodated themselves to each other, in different ways.

It is this process that we wish to examine here. Schematically, what we are arguing is that the contrasting forms of economic development in different parts of the country presented distinct conditions for the maintenance of male dominance. *Extremely* schematically, capitalism presented patriarchy with different challenges in different parts of the country. The question was in what ways the terms of male dominance would be reformulated within these changed conditions. Further, this process of accommodation between capitalism and patriarchy produced a different synthesis of the two in different places. It was a synthesis which was clearly visible in the nature of gender relations, and in the lives of women.

This issue of the synthesis of aspects of society within different places is what we examine in the following four subsections of this chapter. What we are interested in, in other words, is one complex in that whole constellation of factors which go to make up the uniqueness of place.

proletariat selling their labour power to a monopoly employer, who also owned the home. Mining was a dirty, dangerous and hazardous job. Daily, men risked their lives in appalling conditions. The shared risks contributed to a particular form of male solidarity, and the endowment of their manual labour itself with the attributes of masculinity and virility. The shared dangers at work led to shared interests between men outside work: a shared pit language, shared clubs and pubs, a shared interest in rugby. Women's banishment from the male world of work was thus compounded by their exclusion from the local political and social life.

Jobs for women in these areas were few. Domestic service for the younger girls; for married women poorly paid and haphazard work such as laundry, decorating or child care. But most of the families were in the same position: there was little cash to spare for this type of service in families often depending on a single source of male wages. For miners' wives almost without exception, and for many of their daughters, unpaid work in the home was the only and time-consuming option. And here the unequal economic and social relationships between men and women imposed by the social organization of mining increased the subordinate position of women. A miner's work resulted in enormous domestic burdens for his wife and family. Underground work was filthy and this was long before the installation of pithead showers and protective clothing. Working clothes had to be boiled in coppers over the fire which had to heat all the hot water for washing clothes, people and floors. Shift work for the men increased women's domestic work: clothes had to be washed, backs scrubbed and hot meals prepared at all times of the day and night:

'I go to bed only on Saturday nights', said a miner's wife; 'my husband and our three sons are all in different shifts, and one or other of them is leaving or entering the house and requiring a meal every three hours of the twenty four.'

(Webb, 1921, pp. 71-2)

An extreme example, perhaps, but not exceptional.

These Durham miners, themselves oppressed at work, were often tyrants in their own home, dominating their wives in an often oppressive and bullying fashion. They seem to have "reacted to [their own] exploitation by fighting not as a class against capitalism, but as a gender group against women - or rather within a framework of sex solidarity against a specific woman chosen and caged for this express purpose" (Frankenberg, 1976, p. 40). Men were the masters at home. Here is a Durham man, who himself went down the pits in the 1920s, describing his father:

He was a selfish man. If there was three scones he'd want the biggest one. He'd sit at the table with his knife and fork on the table before the meal was even prepared... Nobody would get the newspaper till he had read it.

(Strong Words Collective, 1977, pp. 11-12)

Thus gender relations took a particular form in these colliery villages.

National ideologies and local conditions worked together to produce a unique set of patriarchal relations based on the extreme separation of men's and women's lives. Masculine supremacy, male predominance in every area of economic and social life became an established, and almost unchallenged, fact. Patriarchal power in this part of the country remained hardly disturbed until the middle of the next century.

Cotton towns: the home turned upside down?

The images of homemaker and breadwinner are of course national ones, common to the whole of capitalist Britain, and not just to coalfield areas. But they were more extreme in these regions, and they took a particular form; there were differences between the coalfields and others parts of the country.

The cotton towns of the north-west of England are probably the best-known example from, as it were, the other end of the spectrum, and a major element in this has been the long history of paid labour outside the home for women. It is often forgotten to what extent women were the first labour-force of factory-based, industrial capitalism. "In this sense, modern industry was a direct challenge to the traditional sexual division of labour in social production" (Alexander, 1982, p. 41). And it was in the cotton industry around Manchester that the challenge was first laid down.

Maintaining patriarchal relations in such a situation was (and has been) a different and in many ways a more difficult job than in Durham. The challenge was nonetheless taken up. Indeed spinning, which had in the domestic organization of the textile industry been done by women, was taken over by men. Work on the mule came to be classified as 'heavy', as, consequently, to be done by men, and (also consequently) as skilled (Hall, 1982). The maintenance of male prerogative in the face of threats from women's employment, was conscious and was organized:

The mule spinners did not leave their dominance to chance... At their meeting in the Isle of Man in 1829 the spinners stipulated 'that no person be learned or allowed to spin except the son, brother, or orphan nephew of spinners'. Those women spinners who had managed to maintain their position were advised to form their own union. From then on the entry to the trade was very tightly controlled and the days of the female spinners were indeed numbered.

(Hall, 1982, p. 22)

But if men won in spinning, they lost (in those terms) in weaving. The introduction of the power loom was crucial. With it, the factory system took over from the handloom weavers, and in the factories it was mainly women and children who were employed. This did present a real challenge:

The men who had been at the heads of productive households were unemployed or deriving a pittance from their work whilst their wives and children were driven out to the factories.

(Hall, 1982, p. 24)

Nor was 'the problem' confined to weavers. For the fact that in some towns a significant number of married women went out to work weaving meant that further jobs were created for other women, doing for money aspects of domestic labour (washing and sewing, for example) that would otherwise have been done for nothing by the women weavers. Further, the shortage of employment for men, and low wages, provided another incentive for women to earn a wage for themselves (Anderson, 1971).

The situation caused moral outrage among the Victorian middle classes and presented serious competition to working-class men. There was "what has been described as 'coincidence of interests' between philanthropists, the state - representing the collective interests of capital - and the male working class who were represented by the trade union movement and Chartism - which cooperated to reduce female and child labour and to limit the length of the working day" (Hall, 1982, p. 25). In the same way, it was at national level that arguments about 'the family wage' came to be developed and refined as a further means of subordinating women's paid labour (for pin money) to that of men's (to support a family). The transformation from domestic to factory production, a transformation which took place first in the cotton towns,

provoked, as can be seen, a period of transition and re-accommodation in the sexual division of labour. The break-up of the family economy, with the threat this could present to the male head of household, who was already faced with a loss of control over his own labour, demanded a re-assertion of male authority.

(Hall, 1982, p. 27)

Yet in spite of that reassertion, the distinctiveness of the cotton areas continued. There were more women in paid work, and particularly in relatively skilled paid work, in the textile industry and in this part of the country, than elsewhere:

In many cases the family is not wholly dissolved by the employment of the wife, but turned upside down. The wife supports the family, the husband sits at home, tends the children, sweeps the room and cooks. This case happens very frequently: in Manchester alone, many hundred such men could be cited, condemned to domestic occupations. It is easy to imagine the wrath aroused among the working-men by this reversal of all relations within the family, while the other social conditions remain unchanged.

(Engels, 1969 edn, p. 173)

This tradition of waged-labour for Lancashire women, more developed than in other parts of the country, has lasted. Of the early twentieth century, Liddington writes "Why did so many Lancashire women go out to work? By the turn of the century economic factors had become further reinforced by three generations of social conventions. It became almost unthinkable for women *not* to work" (1979, pp. 98-9).

And this tradition in its turn had wider effects. Lancashire women joined

trade unions on a scale unknown elsewhere in the country: "union membership was accepted as part of normal female behaviour in the cotton towns" (Liddington, 1979, p. 99). In the nineteenth century the independent mill-girls were renowned for their cheekiness; of the women of the turn-of-the-century cotton towns, Liddington writes: "Lancashire women, trade unionists on a massive scale unmatched elsewhere, were organized, independent and proud" (1979, p. 99). And it was from this base of organized working women that arose the local suffrage campaign of the early twentieth century. "Lancashire must occupy a special place in the minds of feminist historians. The radical suffragists sprang from an industrial culture which enabled them to organize a widespread political campaign for working women like themselves" (p. 98).

The radical suffragists mixed working-class and feminist politics in a way which challenged both middle-class suffragettes and working-class men. In the end, though, it was precisely their uniqueness which left them isolated - their uniqueness as radical trade unionists *and* women, and, ironically, their highly regionalized base:

The radical suffragists failed in the end to achieve the political impact they sought. The reforms for which they campaigned - of which the most important was the parliamentary vote - demanded the backing of the national legislature at Westminster. Thousands of working women in the Lancashire cotton towns supported their campaign, and cotton workers represented five out of six of all women trade union members. No other group of women workers could match their level of organization, their (relatively) high wages and the confidence they had in their own status as skilled workers. Their strength, however, was regional rather than national, and when they tried to apply their tactics to working-class women elsewhere or to the national political arena, they met with little success. Ultimately the radical suffragists' localised strength proved to be a long-term weakness.

(Liddington, 1979, p. 110)

The rag-trade in Hackney: a suitable job for a woman?

But there were other industries in other parts of the country where women were equally involved in paid labour, where conditions were as bad as in the cotton mills, yet where at this period not a murmur was raised against their employment. One such area was Hackney, dominated by industries where sweated labour was the main form of labour-organization.

What was different about this form of wage relation for women from men's point of view? What was so threatening about women working? Hall (1982) enumerates a number of threads to the threat. The first was that labour was now *waged* labour. Women with a wage of their own had a degree of potentially unsettling financial independence. But Lancashire textiles and the London sweated trades had this in common. The thing that distinguished them was the spatial separation of home and workplace. The dominant form of organization of the labour-process in the London sweated trades was homeworking. The waged-labour was carried out in the home; in Lancashire,

birthplace of the factory-system, waged-labour by now meant leaving the house and going to the mill. It wasn't so much 'work' as 'going out to' work which was the threat to the patriarchal order. And this in two ways: it threatened the ability of women adequately to perform their domestic role as homemaker for men and children, and it gave them an entry into public life, mixed company, a life not defined by family and husband.

It was, then, a change in the social and the spatial organization of work which was crucial. And that change mattered to women as well as men. Lancashire women did get out of the home. The effects of homeworking are different: the worker remains confined to the privatized space of the home, and individualized, isolated from other workers. Unionization of women in cotton textiles has always been far higher than amongst the homeworking women in London.

Nor was this all. For the *nature* of the job also mattered in terms of its potential impact on gender relations:

Only those sorts of work that coincided with a woman's natural sphere were to be encouraged. Such discrimination had little to do with the danger or unpleasantness of the work concerned. There was not much to choose for example – if our criterion is risk to life or health – between work in the mines, and work in the London dressmaking trades. But no one suggested that sweated needlework should be prohibited to women.

(Alexander, 1982, p. 33)

Thinking back to the contrast between the coalfields and the cotton towns and the relationship in each between economic structure and gender relations and roles, it is clear that the difference between the two areas was not simply based on the presence/absence of waged labour. We have, indeed, already suggested other elements, such as the whole ideology of virility attached to mining. But it was also to do with the *kind* of work for women in Lancashire: that it was factory work, with machines, and outside the home. In the sweated trades of nineteenth-century London, capitalism and patriarchy together produced less immediate threat to men's domination.

There were other ways, too, in which capitalism and patriarchy interrelated in the inner London of that time to produce a specific outcome. The sweated trades in which the women worked, and in particular clothing, were located in the inner areas of the metropolis for a whole variety of reasons, among them the classic one of quick access to fast-changing markets. But they also needed labour, and they needed cheap labour. Homeworking, besides being less of an affront to patriarchal relations, was one means by which costs were kept down. But costs (wages) were also kept down by the very availability of labour. In part this was a result of immigration and the vulnerable position of immigrants in the labour market. But it was also related to the predominantly low-paid and irregular nature of jobs for men (Harrison, 1983, p. 42). Women in Hackney needed to work for a wage. And this particular Hackney

articulation of patriarchal influences and other 'location factors' worked well enough for the clothing industry.

But even given that in Hackney the social organization and nature of women's work was less threatening to men than in the cotton towns, there were still defensive battles to be fought. The labour-force of newly arrived immigrants also included men. Clearly, were the two sexes to do the same jobs, or be accorded the same status, or the same pay, this would be disruptive of male dominance. The story of the emergence of a sexual division of labour within the clothing industry was intimately bound up with the maintenance of dominance by males in the immigrant community. They did not use the confused and contradictory criteria of 'skill' and 'heavy work' employed so successfully in Lancashire. In clothing any differentiation would do. Phillips and Taylor (1980) have told the story, of the establishment of the sexual division of labour in production, based on the minutest of differences of job, changes in those differences over time, and the use of them in whatever form they took to establish the men's job as skilled and the women's as less so.

Rural life and labour

Our final example is drawn from the Fenlands of East Anglia, where the division of labour and gender relations took a different form again. In the rural villages and hamlets of nineteenth-century East Anglia, as in the Lancashire cotton towns, many women 'went out to work'. But here there was no coal industry, no factory production of textiles, no sweated labour in the rag trade. Economic life was still overwhelmingly dominated by agriculture. And in this part of the country farms were large, and the bulk of the population was landless, an agricultural proletariat. The black soils demanded lots of labour in dyking, ditching, claying, stone-picking and weeding to bring them under the 'New Husbandry', the nineteenth-century extension of arable land (Samuel, 1975, pp. 12 and 18). Women were an integral part of this agricultural workforce, doing heavy work of all sorts on the land, and provoking much the same moral outrage as did the employment of women in mills in Lancashire:

... the poor wage which most labourers could earn forced their wives to sell their labour too, and continue working in the fields. In Victorian eyes, this was anathema for it gave women an independence and freedom unbecoming to their sex. 'That which seems most to lower the moral or decent tone of the peasant girls', wrote Dr. Henry Hunter in his report to the Privy Council in 1864, 'is the sensation of independence of society which they acquire when they have remunerative labour in their hands, either in the fields or at home as straw-plaiters etc. All gregarious employment gives a slang character to the girls appearance and habits, while dependence on the man for support is the spring of modest and pleasing deportment'. The first report of the Commissioners on The Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture in 1867, put it more strongly, for not only did landwork 'almost unsex a woman', but it

'generates a further very pregnant social mischief by unfitting or indispensing her for a woman's proper duties at home'.

(Chamberlain, 1975, p. 17)

The social and spatial structure of the rural communities of this area also influenced the availability and the nature of work. Apart from work on the land, there were few opportunities for women to earn a wage. Even if they did not leave the village permanently, it was often necessary to travel long distances, frequently in groups, with even more serious repercussions in the eyes of the Victorian establishment.:

The worst form of girl labour, from the point of view of bourgeois respectability, was the 'gang' system, which provoked a special commission of inquiry, and a great deal of outraged commentary, in the 1860s. It was most firmly established in the Fen districts of East Anglia and in the East Midlands. The farms in these parts tended to be large but the labouring population was scattered... The labour to work the land then had to be brought from afar, often in the form of travelling gangs, who went from farm to farm to perform specific tasks.

(Kitteringham, 1975, p. 98)

There are here some familiar echoes from Lancashire. And yet things were different in the Fens. In spite of all the potential threats to morality, domesticity, femininity and general female subordination, 'going out to work' on the land for women in the Fens, even going off in gangs for spells away from the village, does not seem to have resulted in the kinds of social changes, and the real disruption to established ways, that occurred in Lancashire. In this area, women's waged-labour did not seem to present a threat to male supremacy within the home. Part of the explanation lies in the different nature of the work for women. This farm labour was often seasonal. The social and spatial organization of farmwork was quite different from that of factory work, and always insecure. Each gang negotiated wage rates independently with the large landowners, the women were not unionized, did not work in factories, were not an industrial proletariat in the same sense as the female mill workers in the cotton towns. Part of the explanation too, as in the colliery villages, lies in the organization of male work. Men, too, were predominantly agricultural labourers, though employed on an annual rather than a seasonal basis, and like mining, agricultural work was heavy and dirty, imposing a similar domestic burden on rural women.

A further influence was the life of the rural village, which was overwhelmingly conservative – socially, sexually and politically. Women on the land in this area did not become radicalized like women in the cotton towns. Relations between the sexes continued unchanged. Women served their menfolk, and both men and women served the local landowner; nobody rocked the boat politically:

When the Coatesworths ruled the village to vote Tory was to get and keep a job. The Liberals were the party of the unemployed and the undeserving... Concern over

politics was not confined to men. The women took an interest, too. They had to. Their man's political choice crucially affected his employment, and their lives.

(Chamberlain, 1975, p. 130)

Where are they now?

What is life like in these areas now? Have the traditional attitudes about women's place in the home in the heavy industrial areas survived post-war changes? Have Lancashire women managed to retain the independence that so worried the Victorian middle class? In this century there have been enormous changes in many areas of economic and social life. The communications revolution has linked all parts of the country together, TV, radio, video and a national press have reduced regional isolation and increased the ease with which new ideas and attitudes spread. Changes in social mores, in the role of the family, in the labour process of domestic work, increased divorce rates and a rapid rise in women's participation in waged-labour between the Second World War and the end of the seventies have all had an impact. And yet, we shall argue here, regional differences remain.

There are, as we said in the introduction, two threads which we shall follow in this process of the reproduction of local uniqueness. The first concerns the geographically differentiated operation of national processes. Over 40% of the national paid labour-force in the UK now consists of women: a vast majority of them married. One of the consequences of this growth of jobs 'for women' has paradoxically been both an increase and a reduction in regional differences. The gender division of labour is changing in different ways in different areas, in part in response to previous patterns. Regional disparities in the proportion of women at work are closing, but the corollary of this, of course, is that the highest proportions of new and expanding jobs are in those very regions where previously few women have been involved in waged-labour. The four regions are being drawn in different ways into a new national structure of employment and unemployment. We cannot here attempt to explain this new spatial pattern. One thing we do hint at, though, is that the form of gender relations themselves, and the previous economic and social history of women in each of these places, may be one, though only one, thread in that explanation.

The areas, then, have experienced different types of change in their economic structure. In many ways the growth of jobs for women has been of greater significance in the north-east and in East Anglia than in the cotton towns or in Hackney. But that is not the end of the story. For those changes have themselves been combined with existing local conditions and this has influenced their operation and their effect. The impact of an increase in jobs for women has not been the same in the Fens as it has been in the coalfields of the north-east. This, then, is the second thread in our discussion of the reproduction of local uniqueness.

In the rest of this chapter we try to show the links between past and present patterns, how changing attitudes to women and men's roles at work and in the family in different parts of the country (themselves related to previous economic roles) both influence and are influenced by national changes in the nature and organization of paid employment over time. The present gender division of labour in particular places is the outcome of the combination over time of successive phases. Space and location still matter. The structure of relationships between men and women varies between, and within, regions. Life in inner London is still not the same as in the Fenslands, in the coalfields of the north-east, as in the textile towns round Manchester. The current division of labour between women and men is different, paid employment is differently structured and organized, and even its spatial form varies between one part of the country and another.

Coal was our life?

The decline of work in the pits is a well-known aspect of post-war economic changes in Britain. How have the men and women of the north-east reacted to this decline in their traditional livelihood? Have the changes challenged or strengthened the traditional machismo of the north-eastern male? What is happening in the north-east today in many ways recalls some of the images – and the social alarm – generated by the cotton towns a hundred years earlier. It is now in the north-east that homes are being 'turned upside down' and patriarchy threatened by women going out to work. At the beginning of the 1960s, still something less than a quarter of all adult women in the old colliery areas worked outside their homes for wages. The figure has more than doubled since then. And part of the explanation lies in the local distinctiveness, the uniqueness of these areas that has its origins in the nineteenth century. The women of this area have no tradition of waged-labour, no union experience. It was, of course, these very features that proved attractive to the female-employing industries that opened branch plants in increasing numbers in Co. Durham in the sixties and seventies.

The new jobs that came to the north-east, then, were mainly for women. They were located on trading estates and in the region's two New Towns built to attract industrial investment and also to improve housing conditions. The women who moved into the New Towns of Peterlee and Washington provided a cheap, flexible, untrained and trapped pool of labour for incoming firms. And added to this, the loss of jobs for men together with the rent rises entailed by a move to new housing pushed women into the labour market.

Male antagonism to the new gender division of labour was almost universal. Outrage at women 'taking men's jobs', pleas for 'proper jobs', an assumption that the packing, processing and assembly line work that loomed ever larger in the economic structure of the area was an affront to masculine dignity: "I think a lot of men feel that assembly work wouldn't be acceptable;

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they'd be a bit proud about doing that type of work in this area. North East ideas are ingrained in the men in this area" (Lewis, 1983, p. 19). These assumptions appear to be shared by the new employers: "we are predominantly female labour orientated... the work is more suited to women, it's very boring, I suppose we're old-fashioned and still consider it as women's work... the men aren't interested".

This lack of interest plays right into the hands of the employers: once defined as 'women's work', the jobs are then classified as semi- or unskilled and hence low paid. An advantage that can be further exploited, as this factory director explains:

"we changed from full-time to part-time women(!)... especially on the packing... because two part-timers are cheaper than one full-timer... we don't have to pay national insurance if they earn less than £27.00 a week, and the women don't have to pay the stamp... the hours we offer suit their social lives".

(Lewis, Ph.D., forthcoming)

So if men aren't doing jobs outside the house, what are they doing instead? Are men here, like their Lancashire forebears 'condemned to domestic occupations'? Unlikely. An ex-miner's wife speaking on *Woman's Hour* in 1983 recalled that her husband would only reluctantly help in the home, pegging out the washing, for example, under cover of darkness!

Things are changing, though. Men are seen pushing prams in Peterlee, Newcastle-upon-Tyne Council has a women's committee, TV crews come to inquire into the progress of the domestication of the unemployed north-eastern male and the social and psychological problems it is presumed to bring with it. Working-class culture is still dominated by the club and the pub but even their male exclusivity is now threatened. The 1984 miners' strike seems set to transform gender relations even further. New battle lines between the sexes are being drawn. The old traditional pattern of relations between the sexes, which was an important condition for the new gender division being forged in the labour market, is now under attack.

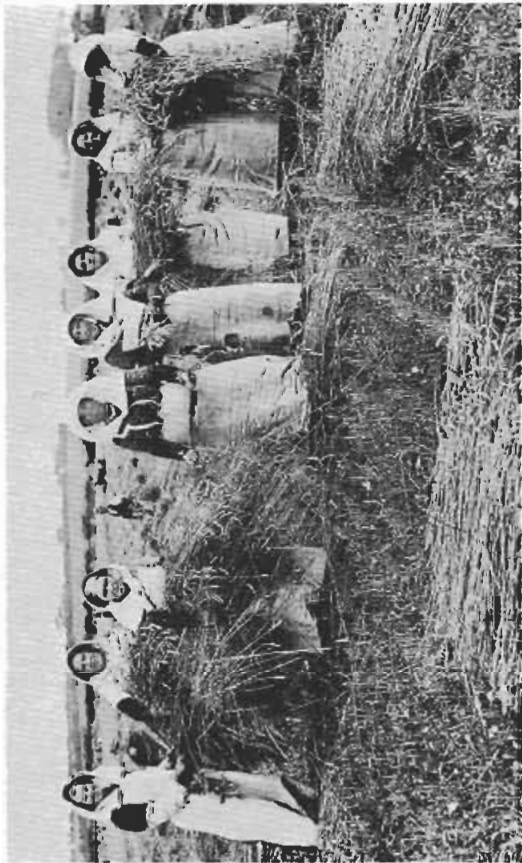
Industry in the country?

How has life changed in the Fens? In some ways, continuity rather than change is the link between the past and present here. For many women, especially the older ones, work on the land is still their main source of employment:

hard work, in uncompromising weather, in rough old working clothes padded out with newspaper against the wind... Marriage for convenience or marriage to conform... Land-worker, home servicer. Poverty and exploitation – of men and women by the landowners, of women by their men.

(Chamberlain, 1975, p. 11)

Not much different from their grandmothers and great-grandmothers before them. Gangs are still a common feature and the nature of fieldwork has hardly



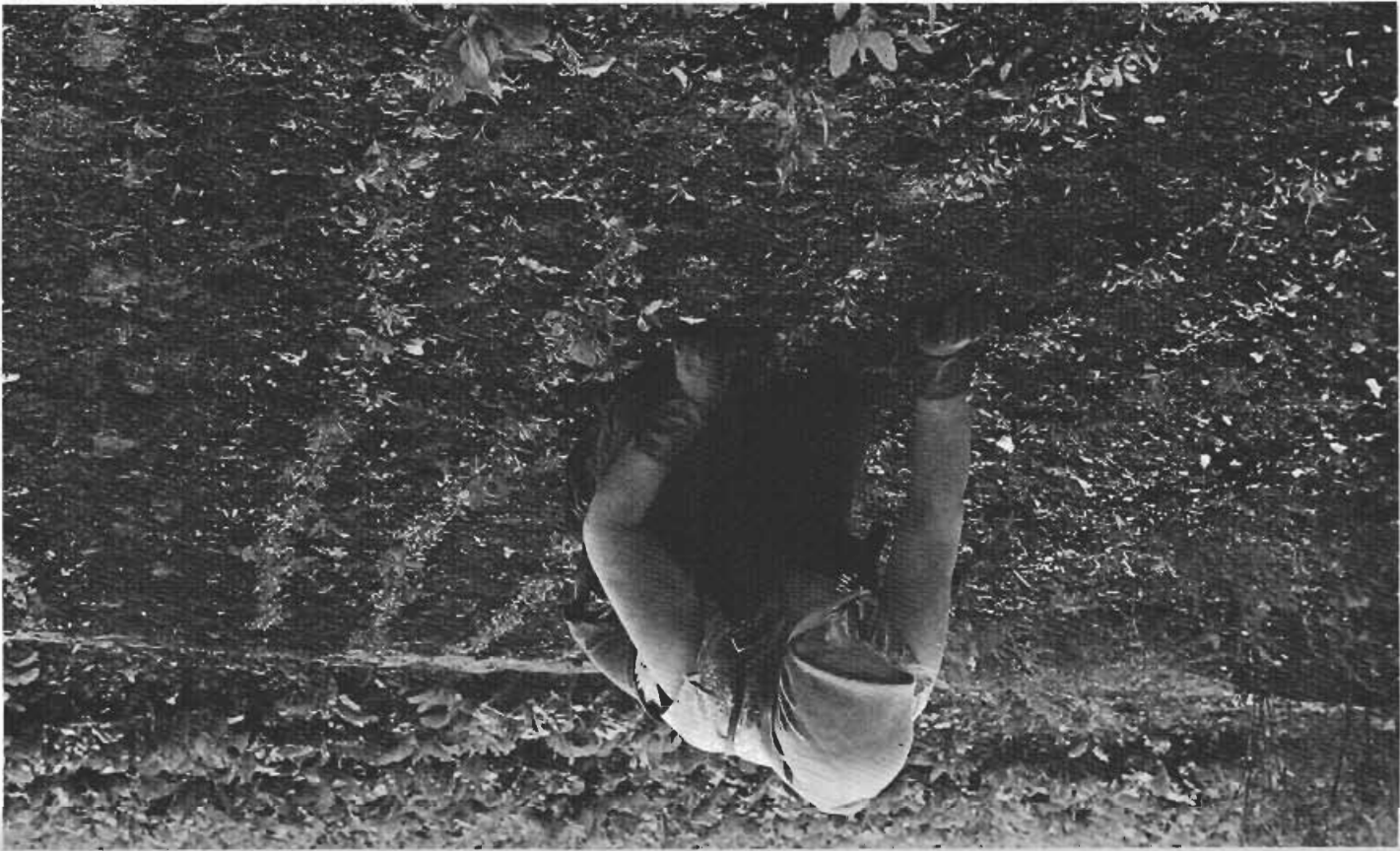
Women harvesting in nineteenth-century Norfolk (reproduced by kind permission of the Coleman and Rye Library of Local History, Norwich).

changed either. Flowers are weeded and picked by hand. Celery and beet are sown and picked manually too. And this type of work is considered 'women's work'. It is poorly paid, seasonal and backbreaking. Male fieldworkers, on the other hand, have the status of 'labourers', relative permanence and the benefits associated with full-time employment. And they are the ones who have machinery to assist them.

Life has changed though. Small towns and rural areas such as the Fens have been favoured locations for the new branch plants and decentralizing industries of the sixties and seventies. Labour is cheap here – particularly with so few alternatives available – and relatively unorganized. Especially for younger women, the influx of new jobs has opened up the range of employment opportunities. It provides a means, still, both of supplementing low male wages, and of meeting people – of getting out of the small world of the village.

The impact of such jobs on women's lives, though, even the possibility of taking them, has been structured by local conditions, including gender relations. This is still a very rural area. The new jobs are in the nearby town. So unless factories provide their own transport (which a number do), access is a major problem. Public transport is extremely limited, and becoming more so. There are buses – but only once a week to most places. Not all families have a car, and very few women have daily use of one, let alone own 'their own' car. For many women, a bicycle is the only means of getting about.

This in turn has wider effects. For those who do make the journey to a factory job the effective working day (including travel time) can be very long. The



A landworker at Gislea Fen, 1974 (photograph by Angela Phillips, and reproduced with her kind permission).

time for domestic labour is squeezed, the work process consequently intensified. Those who remain in the village become increasingly isolated. The industrial workers, be they husbands or women friends, are absent for long hours, and services – shops, doctors, libraries – gradually have been withdrawn from villages.

It seems that the expansion of industrial jobs 'for women' has had relatively little impact on social relations in the rural Fens. In part, this is to do with the local conditions into which the jobs were introduced: the impact back of local factors on national changes. The Fenland villages today are still Conservative – politically and socially. Divorce, left-wing politics, women's independence are very much the exception.

Old cultural forms, transmitted, have remained remarkably intact:

Although love potions and true-lovers' knots made of straw have disappeared, Lent and May weddings are still considered unlucky. The Chuching of Women – an ancient post-natal cleansing ceremony – is still carried on, and pre-marital intercourse and the resulting pregnancy is as much a hangover from an older utilitarian approach to marriage as a result of the permissive society. In a farming community sons are important and there would be little point in marrying an infertile woman. (Chamberlain, 1975, p. 71)

Attitudes to domestic responsibilities also remain traditional:

No women go out to work while the children are small – tho' there isn't much work anyway, and no facilities for childcare. Few women allow their children to play in the streets, or let them be seen in less than immaculate dress. Many men come home to lunch and expect a hot meal waiting for them. (p. 71)

It takes more than the availability of a few jobs, it seems, substantially to alter the pattern of life for women in this area:

Although employment is no longer dependent on a correct political line, the village is still rigidly hierarchic in its attitudes, and follows the pattern of the constituency in voting solidly Conservative. And in a rigidly hierarchical society, when the masters are also the men, most women see little point in taking an interest in politics, or voting against the established order of their homes or the community as a whole... Most women must of necessity stick to the life they know. Their husbands are still the all-provider. The masters of their lives.

(Chamberlain, 1975, pp. 130–1)

Gender relations in East Anglia apparently have hardly been affected by the new jobs, let alone 'turned upside down'.

A regional problem for women?

The contrast with the cotton towns of Lancashire is striking. Here, where employment for women in the major industry had been declining for decades, was a major source of female labour, already skilled, already accustomed to

factory work, plainly as dexterous as elsewhere. And yet the new industries of the sixties and seventies, seeking out female labour, did not come here, or not to the extent that they went to other places.

The reasons are complex, but they are bound up once again with the intricate relationship between capitalist and patriarchal structures. For one thing, here there was no regional policy assistance. There has, for much of this century, been massive decline in employment in the cotton industry in Lancashire. Declines comparable to those in coalmining, for instance, and in areas dominated by it. Yet the cotton towns were never awarded Development Area status. To the extent that associated areas were not designated on the basis of unemployment rates, the explanation lies at the level of taxes and benefits which define women as dependent. There is often less point in signing on. A loss of jobs does not necessarily show up, therefore, in a corresponding increase in regional unemployment. Development Areas, however, were *not* designated simply on the basis of unemployment rates. They were wider concepts, and wider regions, designated on the basis of a more general economic decline and need for regeneration. To that extent the non-designation of the cotton towns was due in part to a more general political blindness to questions of women's employment.

So the lack of regional policy incentives must have been, relatively, a deterrent to those industries scanning the country for new locations. But it cannot have been the whole explanation. New industries moved to other non-assisted areas – East Anglia, for instance. Many factors were in play, but one of them surely was that the women of the cotton towns were not, either individually or collectively in their history, 'green labour'. The long tradition of women working in factory jobs, and their relative financial independence, has continued. In spite of the decline of cotton textiles the region still has a high female activity rate. And with this there continued, in modified form, some of those other characteristics. Kate Purcell, doing research in the Stockport of the 1970s, found that:

It is clear that traditions of female employment and current rates of economic activity affect not only women's activity per se, but also their attitudes to, and experience of, employment. The married women I interviewed in Stockport, where female activity rates are 45 per cent and have always been high, define their work as normal and necessary, whereas those women interviewed in the course of a similar exercise in Hull, where the widespread employment of married women is more recent and male unemployment rates are higher, frequently made references to the fortuitous nature of their work.

(Purcell, 1979, p. 119)

As has so often been noted in the case of male workers, confidence and independence are not attributes likely to attract new investment. It may well be that here there is a case where the same reasoning has applied to women.

But whatever the precise structure of explanation, the women of the cotton towns are now facing very different changes from those being faced by the

women of the coalfields. Here they are not gaining a new independence from men; to some extent in places it may even be decreasing. Women's unemployment is not seen to 'disrupt' family life, or cause TV programmes to be made about challenges to gender relations, for women do the domestic work anyway. Having lost one of their jobs, they carry on (unpaid) with the other.

Hackney: still putting out

What has happened in Hackney is an intensification of the old patterns of exploitation and subordination rather than the superimposition of new patterns. Here manufacturing jobs have declined, but the rag trade remains a major employer. The women of Hackney possess, apparently, some of the same advantages to capital as do those of the coalfields and the Fens: they are cheap and unorganized (less than 10% are in a union - Harrison, 1983, pp. 69-70). In Inner London, moreover, the spatial organization of the labour-force, the lack of separation of home and work, strengthens the advantages: overheads (light, heat, maintenance of machinery) are borne by the workers themselves; workers are not eligible for social security benefits; their spatial separation one from another makes it virtually impossible for them to combine to force up wage rates, and so on.

So given the clear advantages to capital of such a vulnerable potential workforce, why has there been no influx of branch plants of multinationals, of electronics assembly-lines and suchlike? Recent decades have of course seen the growth of new types of jobs for women, particularly in the service sector, if not within Hackney itself then within travelling distance (for some), in the centre of London. But, at the moment, for big manufacturing capital and for the clerical-mass production operations which in the sixties and seventies established themselves in the Development Areas and more rural regions of the country, this vulnerable labour of the capital city holds out few advantages. Even the larger clothing firms (with longer production runs, a factory labour process, locational flexibility and the capital to establish new plant) have set up their new branch plants elsewhere, either in the peripheral regions of Britain or in the Third World. So why not in Hackney? In part the women of Hackney have been left behind in the wake of the more general decentralization, the desertion by manufacturing industry of the conurbations of the First World. In part they are the victims of the changing international division of labour within the clothing industry itself. But in part, too, the reasons lie in the nature of the available labour. Homeworking does have advantages for capital, but this way of making female labour cheap is no use for electronics assembly-lines or for other kinds of less individualized production. The usefulness of this way of making labour vulnerable is confined to certain types of labour process.

The influx of service jobs in central London has outbid manufacturing

for female labour, in terms both of wages and of conditions of work (see Massey, 1984, ch. 4). But working in service jobs has not been an option available to all. For women in one way or another tied to the home, or to the very local area, homeworking in industries such as clothing has become increasingly the only available option. Given the sexual division of labour in the home, homeworking benefits some women:

Homework when properly paid, suits many women: women who wish to stay at home with small children, women who dislike the discipline and timekeeping of factory work and wish to work at their own pace. Muslim women observing semi-purdah. (Harrison, 1983, p. 64)

But homework seldom is 'properly paid'. Harrison again, on types of work and rates of pay in Hackney in 1982:

There are many other types of homework in Hackney: making handbags, stringing buttons on cards, wrapping greeting cards, filling Christmas crackers, assembling plugs and ballpens, sticking insoles in shoes, threading necklaces. Rates of pay vary enormously according to the type of work and the speed of the worker, but it is rare to find any that better the average female hourly earnings in the clothing trade in 1981, £1.75 an hour, itself the lowest for any branch of industry. And many work out worse than the Wages Council minimum for the clothing trade of £1.42 per hour (in 1982). Given these rates of pay, sometimes the whole family, kids and all, are dragged on in... one mother had her three daughters and son helping to stick eyes and tails on cuddly toys.

(Harrison, 1983, pp. 67-8)

The involvement of all members of a family in homework or working as a team in small family-owned factories is not uncommon, especially among ethnic minorities. For small companies the extended family may be essential to survival:

the flexibility comes from the family: none of their wages are fixed. When times are good, they may be paid more. When they are bad, they are paid less. They get the same pay whether their hours are short or long.

The fact that women are employed in the context of an extended family is important not only in the organization of the industry but also for the lives of the women themselves. They may have a wage, but they do not get the other forms of independence which can come with a job. They do not get out of the sphere of the family, they do not make independent circles of friends and contacts, nor establish a spatially separate sphere of existence. Within the family itself the double subordination of women is fixed through the mixing in one person of the role of husband or father with that of boss and employer.

But it is not that there have been no changes in recent decades for the homeworkers of Hackney. They too have been caught up in and affected by the recent changes in the international division of labour. The clothing

industry of London in the second half of the twentieth century finds itself caught between cheap imports on the one hand and competition for labour from the better working conditions of the service sector on the other. The clothing firms with the ability to do so have long since left. For those that remain, cutting labour costs is a priority, and homeworking a means to do it. So an increasing proportion of the industry's work in the metropolis is now done on this social system while the amount of work overall, and the real wages paid, decline dramatically. For the women who work in this industry there is thus more competition for available work, increasing vulnerability to employers and intensification of the labour process. And this change in employment conditions brings increased pressures on home life too, though very different ones from those in the north-east, or the Fens. For these women in Hackney their workplace is also their home.

Here's Mary, a forty-five-year-old English woman with teenage children describing the pressures she feels:

I've been machining since I was fifteen, and with thirty years' experience I'm really fast now... But I'm having to work twice as hard to earn the money. The governors used to go on their knees to get you to take work if they had a rush to meet a delivery date. But they're not begging no more. It's take it or leave it. If you argue about the price they say we can always find others to do it. It's like one big blackmail. Three years ago we used to get 35p to 40p for a blouse, but now [1982] you only get 15p to 20p...

I used to get my work done in five hours, now I work ten or twelve hours a day... The kids say, mum, I don't know why you sit there all those hours. I tell them, I don't do it for love, I've got to feed and clothe us. I won't work Sundays though. I have to think about the noise... I'm cooped up in a cupboard all day - I keep my machine in the storage cupboard, it's about three feet square with no windows. I get pains in my shoulders where the tension builds up. I've got one lot of skirts to do now, I've got to do sixteen in an hour to earn £1.75 an hour, that means I can't let up for half a second between each skirt. I can't afford the time to make a cup of tea. With that much pressure, at the end of the day you're at screaming pitch. If I wasn't on tranquillizers, I couldn't cope. I'm not good company, I lose my temper easily. Once I might have been able to tolerate my kids' adolescence, with this I haven't been able to, I haven't been able to help them - I need someone to help me at the end of the day.

(Harrison, 1983, pp. 65-7)

Reflected in this woman's personal experience, her sweated labour and family tensions, is a new spatial division of labour at an international scale. Low wage, non-unionized workers in Hackney are competing directly with the same type of low-technology, labour-intensive industries in the Third World. But it is precisely the history of the rag trade in Hackney, the previous layers of economic and social life, that have forced this competition on them. The intersection of national and international trends, of family and economic relationships, of patriarchy and capitalism have produced this particular set of relationships in one area of Inner London.

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