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Women's paid work and moral economies of care

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Abstract

Female labour force participation has been increasing in recent decades, in part encouraged by state policies to raise the employment rate to encourage economic competitiveness and combat social exclusion. Social provision for care, however, has lagged behind this increase, creating practical and moral dilemmas for individuals and for society, facing parents with complex choices about how to combine work and care. In this paper, we draw on a qualitative study in London to explore the extent to which the large-scale entry of women into waged work is altering women's understandings of their duties and responsibilities to care for others. We conclude that their decisions are influenced by class position, entrenched gender inequalities in the labour market, varying abilities to pay for care and complex gendered understandings of caring responsibilities.

Key words: worklife balance, childcare, gendered moral rationalities, narratives of care

Introduction: individualisation and new gendered divisions of labour

The aim of this paper is to assess the connections between women's rising participation in waged work and their continuing caring work in the household as mothers and as the carers for other dependants. As the British Government continues to emphasise waged work as both a civic duty and a necessity for a range of social entitlements, the care of children and older people has moved to the forefront of current policy debates in a way that was unimaginable only a decade ago. The merits and costs of non-family care for children, for example, are now part of the national policy agenda. For individual women and their families, this shift in emphasis means that new negotiations about gender divisions of labour, about responsibilities for care and about men and women's identities as parents have become a central part of both private and public agendas. In this paper we first address the reasons for women's rising labour market participation, then assess some of the recent theoretical work that addresses the connections between employment and caring labour, before turning to empirical survey work in the London borough of Islington to illustrate the preceding arguments.

One of the major longstanding achievements of contemporary feminist scholarship has been to demonstrate that a key element of gender inequality lies in the interconnections between the gendered divisions of labour in both the labour market and in domestic work (e.g. Okin, 1989; Pateman, 1988), now finally reflected in contemporary labour market policies. Gendered divisions in the labour market, the home and the community reflect existing systems of financial reward for different kinds of work, as well as embodying and reinforcing widespread ideas about masculinity and femininity. Despite temporal and geographical variations, a gendered division of labour based upon a dominant ideology of separate spheres for men and

women has until recently been part of the prevailing ideology and state policy in many western societies. This was codified in the UK in the post-war social contract embodied in the welfare state, which enshrined the ideal of the male breadwinner/female caregiver family model, even though this 'ideal' did not conform to the reality for many social groups. In this model, women's moral responsibility and role in life was to care for others in the private sphere, whilst men's was to provide for others by working in the labour market. It is this division that is now being challenged by women's rising participation in waged work and in the turn to 'workfare' policies by the UK government and dominant assumptions about the gendered responsibilities appropriate to the spheres of 'the labour market' and 'the household' are altering.

Whilst the responsibilities of mothers have expanded to include employment participation as well as their primary role as caregivers, as yet there has been little change in men's labour market responsibilities to accommodate more active care-giving. Consequently, at the beginning of the twenty first century, many women and men are struggling to find new ways to negotiate the gendered divisions between employment and domestic responsibilities and between individual autonomy and the commitment to care for others (McDowell, 2001, 1991; Sullivan, 2000; Finch and Mason, 1993). The limited understanding of the impact of these changes and their spatial variation was the impetus behind the research drawn on here: a study of the division of labour among parents of young children in Greater London.

Although empirical evidence is as yet limited, theoretical arguments about the implications of changing patterns of employment participation are widespread, ranging from grand statements from the 'grand old men' of sociology (Bauman, Beck

1992, Giddens 1991) to careful work by specialists in social policy and women's work (Adkins 2000, Crompton 2002, Duncan and Edwards 1999, Hakim 2000, Land 2002, Lewis 2002, McRae 2003). Optimistic commentators suggest that a growing emphasis on the individual will permit more equitable relationships between men and women (Giddens, 1991), as well as growing freedom from the constraints of class and gender, as individuals construct their own 'lifetime portfolios' (Leadbeater, 1999; Beck, 1992). Less optimistic commentators emphasise the 'retraditionalisation' of gender divisions (Adkins, 2000) and the continued disadvantages of flexible' working for women (Crompton 2002). Some of this work assumes significant change in social relations in the home and in the workplace. Certainly, statistical evidence seems to provide some support for this claim: the structure of households, the gendered division of waged labour, women's workforce participation and their patterns of childbearing have all changed in recent decades. In the UK, the proportion of families dependent on a single wage earner declined from 42 per cent in 1975 to 17 per cent in 2002 (HMSO, 2003) and the employment rate of mothers with dependent children is now 65 per cent (Duffield, 2002). Correspondingly, women have less time for unpaid domestic work and caring, generating increased demand for marketised services (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; Anderson, 2000; Gregson and Lowe, 1995).

Family and household patterns have also become more diverse. Rates of marriage have declined and rising divorce rates have increased both the proportion of individuals living alone at any time, as well as the proportion of second and subsequent marriages. One fifth of dependent children were being brought up in lone parent families in 2002: twice the proportion of 1981. Over 90 per cent of these households are headed by women. Overall, birth rates are falling, more women are

remaining childless and at the same time, the population is ageing increasing demands for care of the elderly (Social Trends, 2003). Together these trends are generating widespread concern about social sustainability, prompting policies to raise the employment rate of the current generation and expand childcare to enable people (in practice mothers) to cope more easily with the conflicting demands of care and paid work (Esping Andersen, 2002; OECD, 2002). Thus in the UK, and elsewhere in the European Union where these trends are also evident, social policies have moved away from the male breadwinner model, towards an 'adult worker model', where all adult members of households are expected to participate in waged labour. This shift is premised upon a radical rethinking in state social policy, whereby the responsibilities of mothers are being redefined to encompass both employment and unpaid care work, with a concomitant endorsement of formal childcare arrangements outside of the maternal home¹. Whilst at first sight this shift in state social policy may seem congruent with the early demands of feminists to enhance women's independence, the policy reforms in the UK have been uneven. The adult worker model has advanced furthest in the sphere of the tax and benefit systems (Carling, Duncan and Edwards, 2002), and is also evident in 'work/ life balance' policies in the UK (DTI, 2003), but has not been matched by new forms of care provision (Lewis, 2002). While these economic and policy changes have meant that for most households there is now less rigid adherence to separate roles for men and women, the division of responsibility for care remains highly gendered. Thus, for western governments committed to encouraging women's labour force participation, the question of how to replace care obligations enshrined in the traditional marriage contract has become an urgent one.

¹ As this paper was in press, the Labour Government announced that it planned to reduce the emphasis

The centrality of childcare in New Labour policy

One of the most noticeable features of the current Labour Government's policies is the centrality of childcare as part of both its social and economic agenda.

Participation in waged labour is considered by the government to be the principal route out of poverty and social exclusion as well as a means of increasing economic competitiveness. All adults, including lone parents with school-aged children, and people with disabilities, are now seen as having a responsibility to participate in the labour market. Whilst fifty per cent of lone parents with dependent children are currently in employment, this is not regarded as sufficient and in September 2003, new initiatives by the Department for Work and Pensions were announced to expand childcare provision in pilot areas where provision is currently poor. For the population more generally, the DTI (2003) has also encouraged employers to enhance work/ life balance policies by demonstrating a 'business case' for their introduction. Consequently, childcare is now part of both anti-poverty strategies (Scott, Campbell and Brown, 2002; Benn, 1998; Cohen and Fraser, 1991), and of the competitiveness and social sustainability agenda of the European Union (EC, 2003; OECD, 2002), repositioning of childcare provision within social policy discourse. As well as a focus on gender equality and the educational needs of pre-school children, the desire to expand female employment rates to raise family living standards, especially for children and to contribute to national economic growth has become significant. Nonetheless, there is still a huge shortfall in the supply of financially and geographically accessible places. In the UK in 2001, there was still only one place for every 6.6 children aged under 8 years in either a day nursery, with a registered childminder or in an after-school club (Fagan, 2002). Many places are part-time,

on waged work for mothers with very young children (under 2 years of age).

leaving working parents with logistical problems co-ordinating a range of different caring arrangements (Skinner, 2003).

The Government's National Childcare Strategy shied away from direct public provision of childcare¹, focusing instead on increasing private provision in combination with tax relief for low-income households. The result is a polarisation between residual public provision, targeted at sole parents and low-income families, and high quality market-based childcare for those who can afford to pay, leaving the mainstay of childcare in Britain as informal care within the family. Thus, as individuals in different class positions have access to a differential range of care based on their purchasing power and/or their ability to draw on informal family networks, responsibility for caring has been transferred from those who are strong in the labour market to those who are weak (O'Connor et al, 1999) and class and gender-based inequalities are being exacerbated (Rubery et al, 1999). It may be that for all but the highest paid parents of dependent children, full-time employment for both partners will remain out of reach. Indeed, over two fifths of employed women in the UK work part-time, including nearly 60 per cent of working women with children (Duffield, 2002). Thus there has been no simple shift from a male breadwinner to a adult worker/dual-earner family model in the UK, but rather an uneven shift and the dominance of a 'one-and-a-half-earner model' (Lewis, 2002).

Without a change in the conditions under which the majority of women are employed, more accessible childcare provision and a better understanding of women's commitments to mothering and caring for others, the current government's desire to expand the employment rate is unlikely to be met. Women's increased labour market

participation has thus far been at the cost of increasing the total work burden on women, given men's apparent reluctance to expand the time that they devote to care or domestic work (as time-use survey data demonstrates: Eurostat, 2003), and of a widening social polarisation between women of different social classes, given the low valuation of care work. Increased labour market participation has also placed emotional strain on parents, especially mothers, faced with the dilemma of expanding their hours of paid work without adequate physical and social infrastructure to enable them to do so easily. These dilemmas are clearly demonstrated in the narratives of the mothers that we present below, indicating an urgent need for political debate about the ethics of care and the extent of responsibilities and duties owed to others. Before turning to this empirical material, we briefly assess theoretical approaches to conceptualising the existing gendered patterning of domestic and familial responsibilities which emphasise the importance of the moral dimensions of gendered caring responsibilities currently absent from governmental policies.

Conceptualisations of gendered patterns of care

There is an expanding and contested debate about the ways in which women in general and mothers in particular make decisions about how to combine the range of responsibilities facing them at different stages over their life cycle. One of the major debates is about the extent to which decisions are the outcome of a distinct set of preferences and choices (see especially Hakim 1991, 1995, 1996, 2000) or rather negotiated responses to the constraints of, *inter alia*, income, support networks, local services and facilities, national policy frameworks and national and local ideologies of femininity and mothering. Here we locate our work within the second approach that insists that women's decisions about their multiple responsibilities are taken within a

nexus of relational ties that both differentiate and bind social groups, whether based on class, gender, ethnicity or co-location, and within a set of social assumptions and values about femininity, motherhood and child rearing. These ties structure decisions about labour market participation and about men's and women's respective roles and their claims on resources within a national social framework which establishes the norms on which gendered social relations are based. The resolution of how to care is strongly shaped by social divisions, such as social class and ethnicity which influence the resources, including financial resources as well as informal help from within the family, available to negotiate the widely varying mix of care provision within different localities. In a range of interesting recent work, several authors also emphasise the significance of moral ideas about care and mothering. Bottero and Irwin (2000), for example, in a recent review of the connections between economic change and gender relations suggest that a moral economy perspective is useful in 'its emphasis on the social assumptions, evaluations and norms which structure claims to resources' (p 263). In stimulating work, a number of geographers have also argued that moral beliefs or rationalities are important, insisting too on their spatial variability and so linking national level policy changes to local economic and social conditions. Duncan and colleagues (Duncan et al, 2003; Duncan and Smith, 2002; Duncan and Edwards, 1999), for example, have identified specific gender cultures within different regions of the UK, related to the history of gendered divisions of labour in the workplace and the household in these regions, as well as to class and ethnic divisions. Distinctive, socially and spatially variable moral rationalities, they argue, are produced from an interaction between material circumstances and beliefs about gendered rights and responsibilities. Similarly Holloway (1998) has developed the notion of 'moral geographies of mothering' which become dominant within

localities over time, in interaction with the local organisation of childcare provision. These moral geographies consist of institutions and networks through which notions of ‘good mothering’ are circulated. We draw on these ideas, insisting on the importance of a *situated* understanding of the decision-making of parents (and see Jarvis, Pratt and Cheng-Chong, 2001), recognising that women not only make decisions within a set of competing discourses of appropriate forms of mothering/ but that they also modify and renegotiate their values over time in interplay with their changing experiences and their web of social relationships through which their self identity is constituted (Griffiths, 1995; Himmelweit and Sigale 2004). Women’s commitment to care, however, despite the variability in specific relationships in particular times and places, continues to exercise a powerful hold over individuals and is deeply implicated in the construction and maintenance of moral identity and reputation. Poststructuralist accounts of identity suggest that agency can be conceptualised as a consequence of simultaneous acts of free will *and* submission to the prevailing regulatory order (Butler, 1995). Thus, through the repetition of everyday acts of self-regulation, women conform to or reject the version of ‘good mothering’ embodied in the dominant gender regime and expressed in social policy initiatives (Gillies, 2003).

In the remainder of the paper we turn to an empirical examination of the processes of negotiation and the resolutions that men and women come to in dividing the work of caring. We draw on interviews carried out with mothers of dependent children to explore the women’s narratives about their complex and often contradictory attachments to their multiple roles and responsibilities, highlighting the tensions and

ambiguities that arise between the growing social expectation of employment participation and the gendered moral commitments to care for others.

The empirical research

To assess the significance of claims that gendered notions of caring are often geographically specific we designed a project to encompass not only north-south differences but also differences between neighbourhoods within a single city. To capture difference at the national level we chose to compare London with Manchester and within each city we interviewed about 25 mothers with dependent children in three contrasting areas: an inner city locality, a neighbourhood further from the centre that included a high proportion of council tenants and a more suburban neighbourhood that was largely dominated by owner occupiers. Long interviews, in the main in mothers' own homes, were recorded and are currently being analysed. Here, we draw on the interviews that we did in adjacent streets close to the Angel in the London Borough of Islington. We chose to analyse these interviews as a priority as the locality is characterised by extreme micro-scale social segregation, with rich and poor households living in close proximity. Gentrification in the area is long-established, owing to its proximity to the City, and fashionable shopping streets and a thriving late night eating and drinking culture are juxtaposed to areas of extreme poverty, potentially bringing mothers from different class backgrounds and social attitudes into contact, especially if they use local childcare facilities: an issue that we wanted to explore. It has been suggested that gentrified areas are significant sites for women, whether single mothers or members of dual-career households, as they often provide access, anonymity and a range of resources needed by women with children (Bondi 1991; Rose and Villeneuve 1988).

In the study as a whole our sampling strategy was theoretically driven, designed to reflect a range of household work and family circumstances, rather than to be representative of the household structure in each small area. We aimed to identify women with at least one pre-school child as this is the time when decisions about child care are most acute. We identified prospective interviewees at a range of locations including pre-school classes, play groups, libraries, other pre-school facilities and through personal contacts and recommendations. In total 32 interviews were undertaken in the Angel, with an over-emphasis on middle class women, in part reflecting the identification strategy. Middle class women are both more likely to be in employment and more likely to use formal childcare provision, whereas working class women more commonly rely on family and neighbours, although we found that most mothers use a mixture of forms of care. The tables below show the socio-demographic characteristics of the women interviewed.

Table One: Family status, %s

Age	No. children	Status
25 or less 3.1	One 56.3	Single 18.8
25-29 3.1	Two 21.9	Partner 81.3
30-34 37.5	Three 15.6	
35-39 40.6	Four& + 6.2	
40 & + 15.6		

N = 32

Table two: Housing tenure and employment status, %s

Housing	Current or last job
Owner occupier 72.0	Prof. and managerial 75.0

Tenant	38.0	Intermediate	9.4
		Own account	3.1
		Semi-r. and routine	9.4
		Missing	3.1

N = 32

Source: authors' survey, LB Islington, 2003

In this paper, we present extracts from the interviews of four mothers, chosen to illustrate the extent of difference among the interviewees living in this locality in terms of class background, current employment status and their narrative construction of mothering. They show how these women arrived at their current decisions about childcare. The narratives document the complexity of factors influencing decisions, as well as the fluidity of understandings of appropriate caring arrangements, showing the importance of a situated understanding of women's 'choices' and the ways in which their reported decisions are amenable to change as their circumstances alter. The extracts show how women justify their choice of what they feel is the most appropriate care available at the time in relation to their sense of identity as a mother.

Narratives of mothering and caring strategies

The first extract is from an interview with Margaret, a graduate managerial employee, who had worked in investor relations for a large telecommunications company before resigning. She was in her early thirties when she had her first child, then 14 months old. She looked after her daughter full-time and used no formal childcare, apart from the crèche at a private gym two mornings a week. Margaret was an affluent homeowner, whose husband held a well-paid managerial job. Her own job had

involved long hours and travel, and she felt that it would only be compatible with mothering if she employed a nanny which she was unwilling to do. In the passage below, she describes how she tried – but failed - to negotiate a reduction in her working hours:

I rather hoped that they'd say, 'OK, you can have six months maternity leave, and we'll let you come back part-time', but they didn't. ... I sort of dropped a few hints to my boss. ... He was actually very sympathetic ... and he sort of seemed that he was going to be quite open-minded and then wasn't. And when I resigned I went and had a chat to them, when she was a few weeks old, and sort of, dropped a large hint about part-time, more than a large hint, I basically said, you know, 'I don't think I can do this full-time but would part-time be possible?' And he was very negative about it and said he didn't really think so.

Legislation introduced in April 2003² would have provided Margaret with a legal right to ask for shorter working hours, requiring employers to seriously consider such requests. Nonetheless the efficacy of this new law is doubtful as a request can be refused. Further, the long-hours culture in many organisations acts to restrict employees' own sense of entitlement for what they tend to see as special treatment.

Despite resigning, Margaret was ambivalent about her role as a full-time mother. On the one hand, she endorses, somewhat hesitantly, the belief that children benefit from parental care, suggesting that going back to work might mean putting her own interests before those of her child. At the same time she is frustrated with her financial dependence on her husband and the lack of mental stimulation at home:

We really wanted to have a child and we just thought that she's sort of important, and I kind of think that, to an extent, that if you can afford it, it's nice to bring up your child yourself, and that a child benefits from having one or both of its parents around, certainly for the first few months. ... So there's all sorts of questions about going back to work, you know, who am I actually doing it for, and by the time you've paid the childcare, I suppose there's a sort of band of earnings at which it doesn't really make much difference. ... I hate my husband knowing everything that I spend, ... you know I never, or very rarely, buy something for me, . . . now, I sort of almost feel like I should ask permission, and I just don't do it. So I don't like that. I miss the mental stimulation, you feel a bit brain dead.

Margaret's ideal solution would be to return to work part-time, if her mother would look after her daughter. It is ironic that the achievement of Margaret's own ideal of independence depends on the caring labour of her mother. She concluded by saying that she would like 'something to do for herself', providing more intellectual challenge. But her ambivalence around her desire to work remains as she emphasised that this 'might sound selfish', thus illustrating the continued strength of the construction of mothering as the primary and exclusive means of fulfilment for women (Bassin, Honey and Kaplan, 1994).

The second mother, Ursula, seems at first sight to be a straightforward example of the belief that maternal care is irreplaceable, but as her narrative unfolds it becomes clear that this is also contingent on her specific circumstances. Ursula is in her early

thirties, in a long-term relationship with her partner who is a systems analyst for a City investment bank. They are currently tenants of a housing trust flat, with two pre-school children. Ursula and her partner grew up in Northern Ireland, moving to London for work. She worked full-time as an administrator in the civil service until she had her first child. She describes below how, despite her initial intentions to return to work after maternity leave, she subsequently decided not to:

[I was in the] civil service, just admin in a job centre, been there for years, and thought I was gonna go back and then ... I just thought that I really wasn't ready to go. I mean I wasn't ready to leave him and then the longer I spent at home with him, the harder it was to leave. We thought financially I was going to have to go back at one stage because - that would really kill me. . . . I'm actually on a career break, so the job is there. I can have it up to five years; if I need to go back again it's there.

Ursula went on to make a powerful statement about her belief in full-time maternal care to justify her emphatic decision not to return to work. It is interesting that although she espouses continuous maternal care as morally superior, she qualifies this belief a number of times, noting that other women might not be in a financial position to make the same choice. She also questions the relationship between continuous maternal care and a child's healthy development. This perhaps illustrates some erosion of the ideal of the male breadwinner/full-time mother family model, as Ursula's recognises that her moral position is no longer an uncontested one:

Well it's really because personally I believe that I should be, *I* should be here bringing up the children, ...but . . . it's easy to say that, and I know a lot of people financially have to go out and work, they've no other choice. But for me, because luckily Daniel earns enough, I can stay at home, and I'm really grateful for it. ... I know a lot of children [in childcare] are brought up quite healthy and, you know, they don't seem to want for anything ... But for me I just couldn't see another woman, like a childminder, or even in a nursery. ... I want to be the one who brings them up. ... no matter how good the childminder is, you know, it's not their children, and they're not going to love them the way a parent can.

Despite Ursula's insistence that she did not want to return to paid work, as her narrative progressed it became clear that she and her partner were planning to return to Northern Ireland and then Ursula was hoping to re-enter the civil service. As she explains below, returning to the locality in which she grew up means that she will be able to rely on existing social networks to ensure the quality of childcare. It is only at the end of a long explanation about the trustworthiness of her children's carers, that Ursula mentions that returning to work will also make financial sense as her partner will be earning less money. It seems that she does not consider this latter explanation to be sufficient as a justification for her decision to return to work, given the moral claims she made earlier about the superiority of full-time maternal care. Instead, she emphasises elements of the care that her children will receive that are akin to maternal or familial care:

It's more likely you will know the people in our community, in the nursery, ... we're out of the city, just out in a village really, ... over there you really do know everybody . . . you know all the children who are at the nursery and their parents, and you would feel a lot safer and a lot better leaving them. Or even if you got a childminder it would be somebody local that you would know, and I would be more happy with that, you know.

Thus even for Ursula, who initially appeared to epitomise a wholesale commitment to continuous maternal care, decisions proved to be situated ones, drawing upon a complex amalgam of location, social capital, financial security and an ideology of mothering, sufficiently flexible to be re-interpretable in altered circumstances but yet retaining its coherence and centrality to her self identity.

The third narrative is from Claudette, who works on a full-time basis as an equity analyst in investment banking, as does her husband. They are homeowners, with one daughter, then 9 months old and cared for in a private nursery. The rates are high but the hours are geared to the long day of City professionals. Here Claudette explains her choice of a private nursery:

One of the reasons that I took them [the nursery] is because they have an option to start at seven in the mornings, so she goes from seven till six. ... We tend to have similar working hours, starting earlier in the morning, ... and they also have an option late evening, so if really I've got something coming up at work and I can't, then we just, we can sort of buy an extra hour. It's not cheap but it's easier than having to organise last minute an extra babysitter or something like that.

Claudette's main concern, then, in choosing childcare is the long hours available and their compatibility with her own and her husband's working hours. But there are drawbacks, especially the practice of sending children home for relatively minor ailments. In this respect, Claudette is critical of the childcare workers at the nursery, who she says too often 'think they know best' rather than seeking the advice of qualified medical staff and so disrupting Claudette's work plans:

Sometimes it's not very flexible in terms of, I mean it's normal that they have to be careful when your child is sick or whatever, but sometimes they're a bit intransigent, in the sense that *you* know your child and ... it's just that sometimes if, it's like little things, like, you know, if they decide she has conjunctivitis, even it's not true, they tend to sort of play - but that's, I guess, you know, they have to be very careful.

Claudette took basic maternity leave after having her daughter, and then managed in the subsequent weeks to build some flexibility into her work schedule. However she soon found that this was not a long-term option nor was part-time work available or appropriate. Faced by the same constraints as Margaret, Claudette made the opposite decision, returning to work full-time rather than resigning. Claudette works ten hour days, five days a week in the office, as well as taking work home with her 'on an ad hoc basis', but she describes these working hours as 'flexible', compared to the brokers in her company.

We've got to be there before the market opens so that we can analyse the news and the comments, and then be there during market hours when the fund managers really

want to speak to you, and then, you know, afterwards you can be more flexible because you can take some stuff home, or you can, sort of, there's lots of reading involved, and things that you can actually do from wherever, if you're organised enough. ... on the brokerage side you have to be seen to be there much more.

Asked if she had ever tried to vary her hours in any way, by working part-time or reduced hours, Claudette was very definite that this was not possible:

I think it would be impossible in my job, I think it would just shoot my career down . . . A job share or part-time work would be great, but it's just impossible, I think it would be too complicated as well, because the nature of the job is, you're expected, I mean if something happens on the market, ... I mean you've got to be there, and you can't ask them not to do it on a Friday because you're off on Fridays!

Claudette therefore rejected the possibility of working part-time, not because her firm would refuse it but because it would be detrimental to her career, blocking her chances of promotion. As with Margaret's situation, the complex reasons why people work long hours in private sector professional and managerial jobs becomes clear, casting doubt on whether legislation to provide the right to request reduced working hours will be effective without a shift in organisational cultures and promotion ladders. Of the three women, Claudette was the least hesitant about her choices, seeing little need to justify her decision in terms of a set of beliefs about the most appropriate form of childcare for her daughter. Nonetheless, when pressed about the future, Claudette justified her current extensive time investment in her job on the basis that it may mean she can spend more time with her daughter in the future.

The final case study is Cara, a working class women employed in a supermarket on a part-time 'flexible' basis, which means that her working hours vary from week to week and may include day shifts, evenings and weekends. Her husband, who is not the biological father of her three children, aged 17, 14 and 7, cannot work at present as he is an asylum seeker. Cara's life is characterised by constant pressure to ensure that her complex arrangements fit together:

We don't get a set shift, every week I work different hours, ... so you have to juggle, juggle, juggle. So when I'm at work, she's (her 7 year old) with her natural father and grandmother, so she's still with family. I would never have [a childminder], never have and never would. ... I'm dead against it. I want my children to be with people that know them and love them, and family when I can't be.

Of the four women discussed here, Cara has the lowest educational credentials and is currently employed in a role with few formal skill requirements. Thus in theory she is completely replaceable as a worker, yet it is her employer (rather than Margaret's or Claudette's) that takes caring responsibilities into account in its employment practices. As Cara explains:

I'm on a 'mother's contract', ... They are excellent with mothers, I think they realise that mothers ... can be and should be a big part of the workforce, but if they don't fulfil our needs we're not going to do the work for them, you know, ... but this is just perfect, it's as near as perfect you will get, you know.

It was clear that Cara's first responsibility was to her children and paid employment was a secondary responsibility. It may seem, therefore, that she has little commitment to the labour market and few ambitions. Yet, Cara spoke with pleasure about her then-recent promotion to the position of supervisor within the store, as well as insisting that employees must be reliable timekeepers. While it is clear that her life is a constant struggle to 'juggle' care arrangements, it is equally clear that she gains satisfaction from her decision to combine family care with part-time employment.

These four women all live within a few streets of each other and yet lead lives that are vastly different. The financial security of Margaret and Claudette, for example, is a world away from Cara's insecurity. These marked material differences, reflecting the extreme class polarisation in the locality, are not paralleled, however, by any clear-cut distinction between their moral justifications of their work choices and caring strategies. Both Margaret and Claudette are middle class women with financial security and so able to pay for substitute care and yet they made different decisions. And yet, although Claudette seemed not to feel the 'pull' of the dominant ideal of maternal care, she did argue that there was too much emphasis on the 'work' side of her present work/ life balance. Both Ursula and Cara exhibited a strong moral position of maternal care as best for their children but without Ursula's relative financial security, Cara is currently working long hours in a low-paid job and juggling childcare for her youngest daughter as best she can. Both Cara's and Ursula's situations demonstrate the situatedness and contingency of decisions regarding work and childcare and the way in which apparently rigid moral positions may be modified in the light of experience and circumstances. While both emphasise the importance of

'family care', Ursula is able to align this belief with using a childminder or nursery when she returns to Northern Ireland because of the social cohesion of village life while Cara will not contemplate using a childminder in London. Clearly class position and financial resources also affect these women's ability to operationalise their beliefs, as well the type of employment that is open to them. For Margaret, a moral position of maternal care sat uneasily alongside her desire to engage in more 'mentally stimulating' activities and her dislike of financial dependence. This resulted in an ambivalent narrative, where she expressed guilt at putting her own interests first. Margaret's ambivalence reveals the limits of categorising women into distinctive types based on their work/care strategies at one point in time. It is clear that for many women such strategies are both compromises and subject to re-evaluation as circumstances change. In part we chose these four women as exemplars as their current arrangements were amongst the most straightforward. One of the clearest outcomes of the interviews in Islington was the multiplicity of forms of childcare used at any one time. There were almost as many combinations of care as interviewees, including mixes such as school, childminder, playgroup and mother or private nursery, school and nanny.

Clearly then, as our work reveals, childcare and work decisions are taken on the basis of a complex set of factors including idealised versions of mothering, financial constraints, the support available from others within the household, the availability of alternative forms of care and their location, and the policies of employers. For most women, daily life with children involves a set of compromises that tend to be justified on the basis of what Chodorow (1978) terms 'good enough mothering'. This does not mean that ideas of what is the right or the appropriate form of care are not important,

they clearly are, but these moral rationalities constitute flexible constructs that are continually reinterpreted in a mutual interaction with experiences and circumstances.

Discussion and Conclusions

The current transformation of women from ‘mothers’ into ‘waged labourers’ in public policy has complex and contradictory effects. The four narratives discussed here cannot be easily slotted into approaches that conceptualise women’s employment/caring strategies as the result of different orientations to waged work. Hakim (2000) in her work on preference theory, for example, suggests that women fall into one of in three distinctive categories: ‘careerist’, ‘domestic’ and ‘adaptive’ women. On the basis of our work, we suggest that such categorisations pay insufficient attention to the contingencies of women’s situations and the pragmatism in their decision-making over time. Instead we argue that approaches such as Duncan’s gendered moral rationalities (Duncan et al, 2003) or moral economies of care (Bottero and Irwin 2002) which combine an understanding of ideological orientations towards caring with a knowledge of differential command over resources and assets provide a more appropriate way to conceptualise women’s decision making. As McRae (2003) has argued in her deft assessment of Hakim’s preference theory, women may have similar attitudes and orientations but their differential capacities for overcoming constraints lead to different labour market careers.

The four women whose lives inform this paper, as well as many of the other women we interviewed, resolve the dilemmas of combining caring and employment in a variety of flexible and pragmatic ways. In talking about these arrangements they made it clear that they were aware of the dilemmas, costs and opportunities of different strategies. For most women, the decision is neither a clear-cut nor a constant

one. Instead, arrangements are flexible and open to re-evaluation over time. Caring commitments are negotiated in specific relationships at specific times and places, and are not necessarily generalisable across these contexts. Nonetheless commitments to care, once negotiated, are often securely held in place by their significance for a mother's moral reputation. The commitment to the belief that a mother's responsibility is to put her children first was often a strongly articulated moral position, leading to guilt about actions that did not conform to particular ideals of appropriate mothering.

It is also clear from our research that in a socially-mixed and mobile inner city area such as the southern end of Islington, it is inappropriate to think about a locally-based 'moral geography of mothering' (Holloway, 1998), at least in the singular. However, we believe that the notion of local moral geographies is useful as it draws attention to the ways in which women's experiences and meanings of motherhood are mediated through the networks and cultures in which they are embedded as well as influenced by the types of childcare available locally. However, unlike residentially stable communities (such as those in Sheffield where Holloway conducted her research), inner London is characterised by high rates of job and housing mobility and relatively little social contact – despite residential proximity - between women in different social class positions. Moreover, women's constructions and practices of motherhood draw from wider social networks and cultural milieus than simply those organised around childcare. These include dominant assumptions in the workplace and the family, in professional circles such as health care and other local institutions such as churches and political groups, as well national narratives about mothering circulated in popular culture. Class, lifestyle and locality interact to produce complex resolutions

in which class position and financial assets are perhaps of overwhelming importance (see also Vincent et al 2004). Surprisingly, class position is a relatively neglected aspect in the work by geographers on mothers' work/care strategies.

Our research also illustrates how inadequate current 'family friendly' policies are, with the option to ask for reduced hours or parental leave, despite new legislation in 2003, out of reach for many women, either for financial reasons for women in lower-paying positions or for career reasons for women in professional and managerial occupations. Despite these limitations, the current Government, in common with other EU member states, is seeking to raise women's labour market participation rates to increase competitiveness and challenge social exclusion, but is trying to do so with inadequate care arrangements. As Land (2002: 28) has argued, 'current welfare policies in Britain both devalue and obscure activities within the home which until recently, were regarded, if not as work, at least as giving rise to legitimate claims on the state for support.'

As we indicated in the introductory section, the old breadwinner model that informed British social policy and the institutions of the welfare state in the post-war period is breaking down in the face of women's rising labour market participation and active labour market policies based on an assumption that all individuals who are able must enter paid employment. At present, it is unclear what model might emerge to replace it. Feminist critics have argued that a more equitable set of arrangements than the neo-liberal individualist adult worker model that lies behind the new 'workfare' state is essential. Among these scholars' work (see Fraser (1997), Levitas (2001, Williams 2002)) we are drawn to the arguments of Nancy Fraser. In her challenge to the neo-liberal, 'post-socialist' state, she argues that a re-evaluation of the meaning, gendered divisions and associated rewards of caring and employment is necessary to create a

more equitable distribution of the total labour of social reproduction. Instead of regarding caring as an inferior activity, unskilled and undemanding, she insists that care work should be revalued, with increased monetary rewards for care workers, to encourage greater male participation and a realistic prospect of 'work/ life balance' for parents. These goals will only be achieved if an ethic of care is placed right at the centre of economic and social policy as a necessary condition for a more equitable and ethical society.

¹ The focus has been on creating part-time nursery places in schools for 3 and 4 year olds, rather than public funding of pre-school and out-of-school childcare services.

² The interviews in Islington were undertaken in late 2002 and early 2003

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