

between Mexico's early lesbian/gay movement and its left-wing opposition to the PRI dictatorship. Diego Sembol's article describes LGBT Argentina's progression from post-dictatorship division and violence in the 1980s to legal recognition, anti-discrimination legislation, and Criminal Code reform in the 1990s. The global South today is full of similar stories of struggle to be told and analysed, from Nicaragua to Nepal. It is to be hoped that the renaissance of sexuality studies that Wieringa and Sívori have valiantly helped launch will lead in the future to more of these stories being told.

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HALL, VALERIE G. *Women at Work, 1860–1939. How Different Industries Shaped Women's Experiences.* [Regions and Regionalism in History, Vol. 16.] The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2013. ix, 202 pp. Ill. Maps. £60.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859014000534

This study covers the years 1860–1930 when three industries (mining, fishing and agriculture), despite interwar decline, were dominant in Northumberland. It is a world which has now vanished. Valerie Hall introduces her work with a survey of the romantic portrayals of working-class women in Victorian art and literature: grieving women gathered round a pithead or on a wind-swept shore after a mine or fishing disaster; events which resulted in much public sympathy. These portrayals showed women as victims.

But there was ambivalence in Victorian attitudes to working-class women. While there was sympathy for apparent victims, there was also condemnation of those who went out of the home to work. In a paper presented to the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in 1861, Mrs Bayley wrote, "The wife and mother going abroad [i.e. outside the household] for work is, with few exceptions, a waste of time, a waste of property, a waste of morals and a waste of health and life, and ought in every way to be prevented." This was the view of many middle-class observers of working-class women in Victorian Britain. Hall rejects these stereotypical views. She sees these women neither as victims, nor romantic heroines nor as "a waste", but as women whose work was essential to the well-being of their families. By implication single women were not included in this Victorian condemnation of working women, which was aimed specifically at wives and mothers, and it this group which is mostly covered in this study.

Hall has used a very wide variety of sources for her work, ranging from official records, newspapers, personal memoirs, and, for the more recent interwar period, oral evidence. The geographical area covered is Northumberland and features three groups of women: those in the mining, fishing, and farming communities. Crucially, Hall does not simply look at women's wage-earning work outside the home but also their work's critical contribution to the family.

The subtitle of the book is “How Different Industries Shaped Women’s Experiences”, and there were significant differences in the lives of the women in these three communities. However, all of these women were responsible for the housekeeping. As has long been evident from many other surveys, cooking and housekeeping, without modern domestic appliances, was arduous and extremely time-consuming. The chapter on the domestic duties of mining wives clearly illustrates this. There is less about how housework was managed by the women who toiled on the land or in the fishing industry. There are some references to the general cleanliness of these women’s houses but it must have been impossible for these women to devote as much time and energy to housekeeping as the miners’ wives. My own work, which deals with married women cotton workers in Lancashire, illustrates how they had various strategies to ensure that the work was done. These ranged from spending some of their earnings on child-minders, washerwomen, convenience food, and, surprisingly, their husbands sharing the housework. Sadly there is little information about how the farming and fishing women coped with the double burden of work both outside and inside the home. Oral evidence can unravel this conundrum.

Women themselves were proud of their work, knowing how critical it was for their families’ well-being. They did not regard work as degrading or masculine, but took pride in their strength and achievements. Virtually all controlled the family budget which gave them considerable power; as in Lancashire they were referred to as “Chancellor of the Exchequer”. It is difficult in these circumstances to speak of patriarchy being the basis for power relationships in these marriages. But neither could matriarchy be a correct description. Miners were waited on hand and foot by their wives, who had to have food ready when the men came home, not to mention a bath – which involved much lifting of water to and from the copper and into the fireside bath. Frequently women had to get up in the night to accommodate their husbands’ shift patterns. And the timetable of school-going children had also to be fitted in. There were also limits on the wage-earning work women were allowed to undertake. Women in the fishing villages were not able to go out in the boats, only to drag them to the shore to be launched. Farming women looked after cows, pigs, and chickens but not horses, nor were they allowed to do such jobs as stack-building (which was thought to require special skill), or use farm machinery.

The women in all the communities considered that they did work which was essential to their families’ economy and well-being, and there is considerable evidence to suggest that their husbands agreed with this evaluation. Miners could not have done their arduous work without the care given by their wives, on whom they were totally dependent for baths, food, clean clothes, and a comfortable home. “Miners felt incapable of living on their own and, if widowed, usually moved in with their sisters” (p. 65). And their work gave women self-respect and defined their status. Hall quotes from Bill Williamson’s *Class, Culture and Communities*: “My grandmother found that self-respect in her diligent housework and the visible signs of that – the bright windows, the sanded steps, the line of white washing, the well turned out kids – each a simple yet powerful symbol of a powerful dignity which much of her environment threatened to destroy; and each amply compensating in its symbolic force for the deficiencies of its material worth.”¹

There was considerable differentiation in the different wage-earning roles of the three groups of women. Miners’ wives could and did add to the family’s income by taking in

1. Bill Williamson, *Class, Culture and Community: A Biographical Study of Social Change in Mining* (London, 1982), p. 126.

lodgers, especially in the late nineteenth century, when the expansion of the mines was not matched by the increase in housing provision. Others earned money by baking, dressmaking and laundry.

The experience of fishing wives was also dictated by the industry followed by their husbands. They played a vital role in the line fishing. It was their job to collect shellfish, shell them, and then tie them on to the hooks of the fishing lines. This task of baiting could take up to seven or eight hours a day. Some women hawked the fish caught on these lines round the local villages. They also helped to launch the fishing boats. Women in areas where herring were caught worked in the factories where the fish were packed into barrels. Others were fishwives who travelled up and down the east coast selling the herrings. These women needed great physical strength, as the combined weight of their baskets and creels was over 57 kilos. These muscular women were an affront to many middle-class sensibilities.

Agricultural women workers also offended against middle-class views on femininity. They worked in filthy conditions sowing, weeding, thinning, and gathering turnips, an essential feed for the local sheep. There were not enough men to do all the essential labouring work and so women had their role, albeit one seen as inferior to that of the men. Although the old system of hiring labour ended in the 1860s, the women field workers kept the old name of "bondagers". They wore with pride a distinctive outfit of rough clothing which was finished off with an elaborately decorated straw hat. Farming women also made butter and cheese, kept chickens, and sold their produce.

The study is about many aspects of the women's lives, not simply their lives as workers. There is much about health, fertility, illegitimacy, and housing. One characteristic of the women in the mining areas was that a minority of them were involved in political movements. Women in the other two communities were almost totally apolitical. Miners' wives belonged to the Co-op Women's Guild, they supported the Independent Labour Party formed in 1896 and joined the Women's Labour League, a socialist feminist organization which was affiliated to the Labour Party in 1908. They campaigned for equal divorce and marriage laws, miners' pithead baths, school meals, and much more. They continued in political action in the difficult interwar years when mining, as well as agriculture and fishing, suffered a serious depression.

Hall, like an increasing number of historians, also proves how under-represented women's work is in the census returns which cannot be relied upon for an accurate account of the amount of work done by women.

This is a very thoroughly researched book, very readable, and a valuable contribution to the growing understanding of working-class women's work and lives. The study of men's work has long dominated labour history. Eventually, as the missing pieces of the jigsaw are found, it will be possible to see a complete picture of working-class women's lives, with both the similarities and differences made plain. The women in this book had very hard lives. They did not conform to middle-class ideas of femininity but they were proud of their achievements and confident of their considerable value to their families, both economically and in their general standard of living.

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