

## **The Politics of the Doorstep: Female Survival Strategies and the Legacy of the Miners Strike 1984-1985**

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### *Abstract:*

*This article considers the legacy of continuing activism of women in the North East of England who organised in support of the 1984-5 miners' strike. It refers to the traditional responsibility of women in mining localities for the maintenance of neighbourhood and kin relations and using the example of a key activist in one ex-mining village, it argues that the values associated with 'mining community' remain relevant as a reference point for a self-conscious, politicised reshaping of local relationships in post-industrial conditions. The material basis for this self-conscious approach has shifted from the masculine sphere of mining work and its associated community institutions to the feminised sphere of location and neighbourhood.*

**Keywords:** Women, Miners' Strike, Community, Neighbourhood, Kinship.

### Résumé :

Cet article examine l'héritage du militantisme des femmes du Nord-Est de l'Angleterre qui se sont organisées pour soutenir la grève des mineurs de 1984-1985 et qui ont continué leur action depuis. Il prend comme point de départ la responsabilité traditionnelle qu'ont les femmes dans les localités minières pour le maintien des relations de voisinage et de famille, et il se sert de l'exemple d'une militante qui a joué un rôle de premier plan dans une ancienne agglomération minière pour soutenir la thèse que les valeurs associées à la « communauté minière » restent pertinentes comme point de référence pour la restructuration consciente et politisée des relations locales dans des conditions post-industrielles. La base sociale de cette approche consciente s'est déplacée du domaine masculin du travail à la mine et de ses

institutions communautaires associées pour se centrer désormais sur le domaine féminisé de l'agglomération et du voisinage.

In a radio interview commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1984-5 Miners' Strike, a leading figure in the Women Against Pit Closures movement (WAPC) commented that women had always formed the backbone of mining communities (BBC Radio Newcastle, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2004). In addition to the traditional domestic role associated with miners' wives (Dennis et al, 1956; Bulmer, 1975; Waddington et al, 1991), the female contribution has included participation in neighbourhood activities which have linked with significant moments of industrial action, including the 1926 lockout (Williamson, 1982) and the 1984-5 strike (Rowbotham and McCrindle, 1986; Samuel et al 1986; Seddon, 1986; Allen, 2001). Since the pioneering historical work of Sheila Rowbotham (1973) recorded the extent to which female participation in labour struggles have tended to be submerged in subsequent accounts, feminist researchers have endeavoured to ensure that the activities of women in struggle are not 'hidden from history'. They have done so partly by revealing and re-evaluating the significance of their campaigning work (e.g. Measham and Allen, 1994; Beckwith, 1998; Allen, 2001). This article is conceived within this process in relation to the miners' strike of 1984-1985. However, rather than reflecting on the strike itself, we consider the manner in which the values mobilised by women in its support, particularly in relation to loosely defined ideas about 'mining community', are now used informally by them to inform their activism in post-industrial conditions.

'Community' as a set of ideals denoting reciprocity, co-operation, and mutuality, has long been associated with mining life and related to trade union and party politics in the public sphere. This was expressed powerfully in the solidarity and comradeship amongst those who remained on strike throughout 1984-5 (Beynon, 1985; Samuel et al, 1986). These ideals have also been evident within everyday life revolving around the more private spheres of home, family and neighbourhood. In this arena, ways of living, though dependent upon mining itself, nevertheless developed with a degree of autonomy consequent upon the highly differentiated gender positions characteristic of mining societies (Dennis et al, 1956; Waddington et al, 1991). The experience and memories of ways of life associated with mining are infused with gender difference. Continuing, self conscious commitment to the values espoused during the strike are therefore articulated through gendered locations, expectations and negotiations, but these have not remained static in the twenty years since the strike.

In this exploratory piece, we pursue a number of themes related to women's activism in the post-mining context with reference to traditional gender roles and representations. In so doing we utilise the notion of 'community' as a fluid concept which is being adapted in the actual lived relationships of the women. Models of community as relationships of 'place' and of 'interest' (Bell and Newby, 1971) are a useful starting point in understanding the significance of differentiated gender positions within the context of mining, but we suggest that with the destruction of the industry, 'community' has taken on a set of extended meanings about a way to live which draws from the collective

politics associated with the strike, but is developing out of the traditional female responsibilities for family and neighbourhood.

Our explorations raise questions about common sense views of women and mining community, which linger particularly in narratives of their actions in the 1984-5 strike.

### **The Post Mining Context**

According to the Task Force Report for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 'Pit closures have dealt a sudden and irreversible shock to the culture of coal field communities' (ODPM, 1998:31). This 'shock' has a gender dimension. Formerly, links between work and neighbourhood, industrial and social relations had been inscribed within the public institutions of local life (Dennis et al, 1956; Williamson, 1982; Thew, 1985). These institutions, concerned with recreation, education, welfare and housing for miners and their families were sponsored and organised primarily by men through organisations associated with the nationalised industry and the miners' union (Waddington et al, 1991). For example, it has been suggested that during the 1950s, Britain had more than 200 youth clubs functioning under miners' welfare services, which have since disappeared (White, 2004:16). As one of our principal informants for this paper asserted:

*...most of the facilities in a mining village were provided either by the Miners' Union or the Coal Board. Like, the Church Institute was run by CISWO which is the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation, the*

*cricket club came as part of CISWO. The Community Centres- the Church Institute is a community centre now as is the old school. But there was a Workers' Educational Library here and all sorts, so there was no need to be travelling outside of the community. Your Club was predominantly with miners in charge you know. We all know about the Committee! (Jean<sup>1</sup> Interview)*

'The Committee' represented the local political control by men of the material resources in civil society which expressed the cohesion of 'mining community'. This control has been seriously wounded by the collapse of mining-related facilities. Pit closures and related socio-economic decline have been accompanied by weakening and fragmentation of the masculine organisational framework in which local cultural norms, with their *gemeinschaft* characteristics (Tönnies, 1955; Bauman, 2001) were previously reproduced in the public domain. Inevitably, the loss of work and the destruction of associated systems of socialisation, power and cultural reproduction have been accompanied, as predicted (Samuel et al, 1986), by an increase in the range of problems associated with low income, insecurity and decreased levels of civic participation (Putnam, 2001; Waddington, 2003). In degraded environments, where the identifying adjective 'mining' no longer has a material reference point, it has been difficult to sustain 'community' derived from connections between work and place with assumptions of collective endeavour reflecting patterns of male work underground. As place of residence and rhythms of life cease to revolve around the mine, the family and neighbourhood base of women's traditional role in community is also

disturbed. Meanwhile, young people have no visible reference point for inheriting a common culture located in local community life and relationships.

A range of studies have considered the implications for gender roles both of the women's activism during the strike and of the process of de-industrialisation since. For example, in 1991, Waddington et al suggested that despite the activism of women, the effects of the strike upon gender relations had been small scale and muted. They observed some 'softening of the rough edges of masculine behaviour', but argued that that the principle determinant of changing gender roles devolved around opportunities for female employment. By 1996, Dicks was exploring the increased dependence on women's employment outside the home in ex-mining areas, and arguing that the domestic division of labour had become a primary site of struggle. Dicks et al (1998) suggested that women were carrying the burden of male joblessness through their continuing role as family carers. Extending this theme, Strangleman (2001) noted the significance to family stability of intergenerational relationships and support in circumstances where women's wages have become important to family income. Recently, Waddington (2003; 2005) has described important roles played by local and professional women in a decade of struggle for regeneration in one ex-mining locality. Women have clearly entered more fully into the public arena, principally through work. Nevertheless, there is no clear evidence that in this process they have lost their responsibility for the maintenance of family and neighbourhood. Indeed, it appears rather that these two areas of concern are becoming more fully

intertwined in women's lives and that women are now taking greater responsibility for the institutional infrastructure of local community life.

Despite the pessimistic prognosis for the future of mining in Britain in the immediate aftermath of the strike, some commentators retained a hope that the collective values deployed in its support might be sustained in post-strike conditions (Beynon, 1985; Samuel et al 1996). By the end of the 1980s that hope was receding (Waddington et al. 1991). Collectively organised facilities, such as public kitchens and crèches were closed and activist women retreated into their families to deal with the personal consequences of struggle and defeat (Shaw, 1993). As the institutions which publicly signified the masculine collective culture and values of 'mining community' were weakened or dismantled, nothing replaced them. Yet Waddington's recent study of Warsop Vale (2003; 2005) offers grounds for hoping that the long term situation is not quite as bleak as previously perceived. Locally based action based on alliances between residents and professional workers with a community brief, has begun to make a difference to conditions in one struggling ex-mining village. Here it seems that among the men and women most dedicated to the community-building process, personal identification with mining life has meshed with a desire to rebuild 'community' in terms which focused upon homes, children and neighbourhood .

Outside the mining context, it has been noted how residents living in run-down housing estates use the notion of 'village' to (re) generate a sense of ownership and belonging amongst local people, despite the absence of a

common employment base (Garner and Clarke, 2005). This implies that private beliefs and energies which mobilise widely used, loosely defined, idealised concepts such as 'village', can be effective at the level of neighbourhood in stimulating co-operative endeavour. Where the local history is one of mining, 'village' is frequently a real entity. Even where it is not, as the successes of community work imply (Poppo, 1995; Waddington, 2003; 2005), the shared interests of residents in the welfare of local neighbourhoods can be mobilised as a material foundation for collective action using the medium of 'feel-good' concepts like 'village' or 'community'. In the ex-mining locality, a traditional feminised understanding of everyday networks and relationships can be particularly significant in pursuing collective ideals which are not deterministically dependent upon waged employment.

### **The Research**

The research data upon which this article is based, derives primarily from semi-structured interviews with nine women who were active in the strike, and from a focus group discussion in with a group of women in an ex-mining village in Co. Durham who are involved in a Savings Group facilitated by one of the interviewees. These two sets of data collected between 2002 and 2004 are part of a wider research project and discussion group concerned with women and mining in the north east. Members of the group have been involved personally in women's activism in relation to mining, both in the strike and in the 1992-3 campaign against pit closures and have subsequently reflected upon and written about those experiences (eg. Shaw, 1993; Spence, 1998; Suddick, 2005).



The nine interviewees are a subset of 32 women who were affiliated to WAPC and mining support groups during the strike who were interviewed by Shaw between 1985 and 1987. The purpose of revisiting these women was to consider the longer term consequences of the strike. Within the interviews, memories of the strike provided a starting point for narratives which tended towards the auto-biographical as the women assessed its place in the overall trajectories of their lives. From these biographies we have chosen one in particular, the story of Jean, to raise a number of questions for further exploration.

The interview transcripts reveal that the experience of the strike created a broad understanding amongst the women in which the solidaristic collective action associated with trade union and labour politics was merged with female responsibilities for family and neighbourhood through the discourse of mining community. This has been taken by the women into their post-strike environment and used as a value framework for continuing, individual activism. The focus group discussion was designed to interrogate the significance of this, and to assess whether the values associated with women's responsibilities in relation to mining were being reproduced in the contemporary environment. Three of the women in the focus group were involved in the miners' strike. This includes Jean who is especially self-conscious about the relationship between the strike and her own community activism and has engaged in discussions with the research team about these issues outside the research environment. The other three were younger and

had no memory of mining in the locality. The interest in individual biographies was continued within the focus group but also extended to questions about whether different, individual life histories combined to form a collective understanding related to ideas about mining community.

### **Community**

It has been suggested that although the conditions of the strike propelled those involved into recreating in actuality the conditions of solidarity and reciprocity associated with traditional mining community, collective provision in the public sphere was much less important than the private ties of kinship in sustaining people through the twelve months of hardship and struggle (Samuel et al, 1986:9). This prefigures Strangleman's argument (2001) that extended family networks have been central to the processes of transition since the traumas of pit closures. The relevance of this argument is underlined by the fact of decline of 'mining communities' as real places. Even by 1984, 'mining community' was more a memory or an imagined place in many coalfield localities (Waddington, 2005). In the village where the savings group organises, the mine had closed in 1975 and at the time of the strike those employed in mining were a small minority, travelling over 15 miles to the larger coastal pits for their work. Nevertheless, the notion of belonging to a community linked with mining has persisted both here and for the women interviewed in other locations across the region. The data reveals a continuing

and long-term concern with community as an issue and our analysis suggests that from the perspective of the women, there is no absolute distinction between responsibilities for kin or for community, that the two merge in female activism.

Ideas about 'mining community' as a 'way to live' as well as a 'way of life' informed female organisation and were acted out in women's mobilisation during the strike. However, this was not unique to the strike. Rather its significance was emphasised by the dispute. The research material questions the common sense understanding that pre-existing, traditionally feminised, personal skills were 'politicised' during the dispute. In contrast it appears that for some women such skills were always used within the political landscape of their lives which included formal party political and trade union activism as well as neighbourhood and community duties. The strike was so powerful for them, not just because it created an opportunity for intense political engagement, not only because it 'politicised' them, but because it legitimated the personal in the political and brought to visibility in the public sphere their intermeshed interests of family, community and waged work.

The strike was undoubtedly a defining moment for all the women in the research in terms of their self-consciousness about class and gender positions and relations with wider political structures. Yet subsequent activism cannot be simply 'read off' from it. A number of different personal trajectories followed in the wake of the strike including personal education and development, access to professional careers, increased formal political

engagement and non-party political activism. The nature of our research meant that it was inevitable that the nine interviewees were those most likely to have remained publicly engaged, but what could not be predicted was their continuing commitment to an ideal of community activism focused on the traditional female location in neighbourhood. Amongst those who were involved in party politics, one had attained the position of mayor in a major city, but generally, insofar as they sought public office, the women expressed a preference for the role of parish councillor which keeps them personally in touch with neighbourhood issues:

*I'm in the Labour Party and I am a Parish Councillor. I could have been a District Councillor but I mean I never put in for it because I like the Parish. I think when you cover your Parish – well I have a friend was a County Councillor and she found that it took her away from the people (Ethel, interview).*

Parish councillors and neighbourhood activists draw upon a long tradition of working class female 'self-help', 'good neighbourliness' and informal education which can be traced in other contexts (Reynolds, 2003). These made an important, if not the only contribution to survival during the strike. They have continued since as a 'politics of the doorstep':

*If you can't see to your own, you can't see to anybody else's. And I think people come to me because they know I wouldn't repeat anything. It's all confidential you know. I mean when they come to my door and I bring them in, I lock the door to make sure we are not disturbed. I will say to them, 'Look, I've got to ask you some personal*

*questions. We can't sort this out unless you tell us the truth. Now if you've missed a payment, I want to know. I've been in that situation'...I've stopped going to the club because it was getting, 'Have you got a minute?' you know. And it was taking three quarters of an hour before I could get a drink!...But I really enjoy it. It's lovely you know to walk through the village and 'Hiya!, Hello there' you know.*

(Freda, Interview).

The maintenance of the collective ideals associated with mining community in such an approach is to a large extent dependent upon the commitment to a set of explicit values maintained by the individual activist who frequently becomes a catalyst for community building. The ideals are realised in practice through interpersonal processes of reciprocity which cement 'community' as a lived reality for them. Some individuals make extraordinary contributions to the maintenance of collective approaches within social groups and this is apparent, but takes different forms both in the workplace (Darlington, 2001; 2002) and in civil society. In north east England, the social contribution of miners associated with trade unionism and labour politics, such as Thomas Hepburn,<sup>2</sup> Peter Lee,<sup>3</sup> and Sam Watson<sup>4</sup>, are legendary. Yet individual activism does not necessarily follow from the experience of working conditions in the mine or the social conditions of mining localities. Many miners who experienced the interdependence of the workplace and of neighbourhood failed to draw from this a commitment to collective well-being. Those who broke the 1984-5 strike symbolised the limits of collective solidarity compared with individual interest. Similarly, not every woman associated with mining

has contributed positively to the cohesion of neighbourhood. There is an implicit understanding within the labour movement that to some extent, the maintenance of the collective consciousness which underpins trade union solidarity and politicises worker co-operation depends upon social and political education and understanding. Whilst the history of mining is littered with the male leaders of struggle who have paid detailed attention to the transmission of collective ideals and values, scant attention, with the notable exception of Waddington (2005), has been afforded to the significance of individual women in this process.

In this context, we focus on one particular woman, Jean, as an example of a reflexive individual acting self-consciously and purposefully towards the maintenance of ideals associated with mining community as articulated during the strike. Jean has not been chosen as 'representative' but rather because her voice has been evident in each stage of the research, and because she is acknowledged by the other women, nationally as well as locally, to be articulate in communicating their subjective understanding of the meaning of the strike (Newcastle, 2004). The transcript of the savings group discussion highlights the manner in which ideas about collective responsibility derived from mining life and politics are promoted in Jean's contemporary activism and local relationships. In particular, it is apparent that she seeks to cement 'bonding' networks which sustain local activity based upon the traditional responsibilities of women for neighbourhood. At the same time, she works to extend and to inter-marry these with 'bridging' activities, maintaining her

contacts with the NUM, with other women activists outside the region, and with international contacts in the labour movement (Putnam, 2001).

### **Jean**

Jean is a single woman in her 50s. She has no waged employment but works long hours to support friends and neighbours and to organise local and national events concerned with mining issues. She was born and brought up in a West Durham mining village, although her father was not a miner. At the outbreak of the strike Jean was employed as a secretary by the miners' Mechanics Union and thus inevitably was caught up in strike politics, though she claims not to have been a 'political animal' in 1984. However, her engagement was also personal. Her sister, a miner's wife, had recently died, leaving a young child and a baby. Her brother-in-law was on strike. The immediate pull was the practical needs of those around her, 'I just had to get involved I had to do something!' Jean had previously had some involvement in local, community based activity and she drew upon this experience to shape her political activism during the strike.

Throughout 1984-5, she developed a public persona, co-ordinating the distribution of food parcels, organising fund-raising and related events, speaking at meetings and to the media. During this process, as happened to so many people involved in the strike, her understanding of political structures and inequalities became much more explicit (Coulter et al, 1984; Parker, 1986). Nevertheless, she held fast to her personal approach to politics:

*That's the battle I had right the way through the year. At the end of the day I had to keep sitting down and working out why I was doing this and going back to my sister, to her husband and to the two kids (Jean, Interview).*

Jean is now a catalyst for informal, voluntary community action in her village. She uses her home, her personal knowledge, her extensive network of contacts in politics and higher education built up during and since the strike, and her access to the Internet as resources for problem solving, collective local action and wider networking. From her small mining cottage, which is always 'open for visitors', who 'just call in for a cup of tea', she runs what is locally (and laughingly) called either 'The Office' or (for women), 'The Stress Clinic'.

Jean's local importance was emphasised by members of the savings group:

*Angela.... you do get a wider spectrum of friends just by knowing Jean, because she knows everybody (laughter). She makes you feel so at ease and so welcome.*

*Hazel...I mean if you go to her house you have got to be up there by half past eight or you don't get a seat. You know what I mean? (general laughter)*

*Laura...The kettle is never off, the electric bill must be sky high!*

*Jean ... It's just tea and coffee.*

*Hazel... I know if anybody has got a problem, it's always Jean they go to.*



(Savings group discussion)

Jean's home combines private and public, bringing public troubles into her private world. As a home, her house is a place of friendship lived as kinship. As an office it is a place of politicised communication and community work. Roles and relationships are inextricably meshed. Neighbours and friends call in to discuss personal and financial problems; young people receive advice about homework; projects and campaigns are initiated there; at Christmas, she cooks for those who would otherwise be on their own. Through 'the office', Jean has supported friends at industrial tribunals and appealed against adverse benefit decisions. As an individual she has replaced a type of service which was once provided by NUM officials (Samuel et al, 1986) offering information and advice, intervening in relation to welfare and housing problems and helping to complete official forms from a position which makes no claim to be 'neutral'. Jean takes sides in a manner which signifies the continuing salience of class inequality and identity in local lives.

Whilst it could be argued that her work is indicative of a (feminised) individualisation which has replaced collectivised services based upon (masculinist) trade unionism, there is an emphasis on reciprocity, mutuality and collectivity in Jean's approach which she relates to her understanding of socialism. She is aware that she could take individual political advantage of the personal power generated by the use of her skills and resources, but chooses not to do so:

*It's tempting all these things, but with power comes a lot of ... My politics begin and end with a sort of – this is going to sound really poncy- a spiritual socialism. I want socialism because it will be good for people. I don't want socialism because it would give me a position. And I want people to understand why they should be socialist- I don't want to dictate to them (Jean, interview).*

The home/office is a place where reciprocal 'community-creating' relations are lived. Jean is repaid in kind for her services to others. Sometimes people bring her presents: 'He brought me a trout! Not that I expect anything for helping him'. Often this is based upon the trust which she earned during the strike: 'John came around and fixed up my computer so now I am on the Internet. He said he would never forget what I did for him in the strike.' Jean's approach is grounded in the friendship she gives and receives in the private sphere and this has implications for public life in the village and the possibilities for relations lived actively as 'community'.

Beyond 'the office' and from it, Jean helps to organise events and activities where the reference point is 'mining community'. Although this is grounded in the local historical experience of mining, it also uses the national and international networks and links generated over time through internationalism within trade unionism, specifically in the NUM, and within socialist organisations. Jean is particularly focused upon the memory of mining and its traditions and in educating children about mining life and values. She has helped to organise local exhibitions about mining, is involved in moves to

restore the local NUM Lodge Banner and is the motivating force behind the creation of a WAPC web site (wapc.org.uk). She continues to speak about the strike and links this to contemporary concerns at public events on a local and national stage. She writes for socialist publications and nurtures a national and international network of academic and political correspondents who are sympathetic to the issues raised during the miners' strike. Her interests range beyond mining and she has also promoted local campaigns relating to the environment and to poverty. The organisation of the savings group is one such response.

### **The Savings Group**

The savings group is a community based response to the problem of debt. Its members include men, but it is the six women who participated in the focus group who maintain it. For Jean, it is also an effort to develop and communicate a politicised understanding of the problem:

*There is one thing in this place which I am afraid is a microcosm of a bigger problem and that is poverty. I am staging a personal war against these firms that come in and give you – ‘Oh you will get £100, it will only cost you £10 a week.’ I brought a letter in today that was sent to me – the APR on that sort of loan is 339 point something per cent....*

*It's the interest. I mean it has got to be recognised sometime or other that this would be the death of the communities. You need legislation*

*to control this because this is predominantly women...they are preying on poverty (Jean, savings group).*

The lesson has not been lost on the other women who in the discussion were keen to point out the vulnerability of local women to 'loan sharks'.

*The reason they target the women is that it is always the woman who has to provide for the kids as in clothes and things like that. If they are little bit short, it is there it is handy and they will do it just to give the kids that little bit extra (Angela, savings group).*

The political landscape of poverty is addressed in the female world through the 'politics of the doorstep' which are played out in 'the office'. It was from people coming to Jean for advice that the extent of dependence upon high interest loans became evident, and it was through gathering people in her home that she was able to initiate the savings group.

Jean collects the money and keeps the records. The organisation is decidedly informal and based entirely upon trust. To organise the savings group into a Credit Union would be problematic in this environment as it would entail the creation of formal systems of mutuality. Although this option seems not to have been entirely discarded, members seem to prefer their current personalised organisation which is derivative of the traditional informal organising approaches of local women.

The trust invested in Jean is based primarily on respect for her long-standing local activism, working in a way which the women believe represents their interests. Members of the group reminisced about Jean's activities over the years, providing her with opportunities and a platform in the discussion to tell her story. They gleefully recalled her role in the Jubilee celebrations in 1977, which they knew she would need to justify:

*Jean .... I am a republican, right! (Laughter). My sister wasn't. She really wanted to celebrate it but because I was there she got me to organise it... Well they wouldn't let us close the street down so we put the dustbins along to stop the cars!*

*Hazel.... Had the record player on the path! (Laughter).*

They also prompted her to tell of her struggle with the local community centre committee 'to do something for the kids' which the younger members remembered fondly:

*Jean .....When we put the first disco on in the community centre. We had to fight for it - not physically in the sense of fisticuffs, but it was a long hard fight to get them [committee] to agree to let us use the hall and the kitchen and even then, every cup was locked away - we weren't allowed to use any of the facilities...*

*Dorothy...We had to buy our own cups, the coffee, the pop, everything. But you were getting kids off the streets.*

*Laura...And we looked forward to that, growing up, you know, its Disco night tonight!...But we loved it.*

Despite their various ages and backgrounds, and the tenuous links with mining experience, the women in the savings group share a common understanding of women's traditional responsibilities within mining life. This is reinforced by the memories of the older members and particularly by the space given to Jean's narratives. Significantly, the memories and narratives are not of domestic dependence and continuity, but of neighbourhood involvement and organisation and of the movement and change which always characterised mining life (Wilson, 1980). Jean joked about her 1950s childhood in a neighbouring mining village: 'Where I lived in number 234 there were only 5 houses in the street. Now that's a decimated community!' 'Community' has never been unself-conscious in mining life. Dealing actively with the power of male dominated institutions and with change and insecurity is understood as part of the responsibility of women in relation to family and neighbourhood. Children, stability and security have traditionally been their responsibility.

### **Neighbourhood and Kin**

The strong sense of neighbourhood which is part of the dynamic of the savings group, is expressed partly through the terminology of kin. Two of the women, though not related by blood, have known Jean since childhood when they referred to her as 'auntie':

Hazel...*'She was everybody's Auntie Jean. She's great my Auntie Jean !'*

In contrast while actual extended family relationships continue to exist in the village, and are recognised as involving responsibilities and obligations, they are not integral to daily life. The strong ties identified by Strangleman (2001) remain significant in terms of immediate inter-generational relationships, but the savings group data suggests that the dependence on extended family should not be exaggerated:

*Q.... Are you all still in touch with your own families?*

*Theresa.... Yes*

*Hazel.... Well if I see them on the street I'll speak but I don't go and knock on the door for a cup of tea. I mean I never have done...*

*Q... Do you go to funerals and things?*

*Hazel.... Oh yes...*

*Theresa.... Christenings and weddings and funerals.*

*Hazel..... But if I see them on the street, I say 'Hiya, are you alright?' But I would never dream of going knocking on the door and saying 'Put the kettle on'. But I've never been like that with any of my aunties or uncles. I know they are there, I know who they are and I'll speak to them.*

Each of the women, including those too young to remember a local pit, referred to the importance of their family history in mining,. For instance Angela who had not been brought up in the village explained the importance to her of her grandfather who had been a miner there. However, solidarity is not necessarily manifest in blood ties. Rather, collective and reciprocal

relations are self-consciously experienced rather through a local friendship network which overlaps and attains the status of kinship.

The notion of kin links women's traditional family responsibilities with the meaning they give to community. Jean is able to use this association to affirm her own authority and to encourage co-operation amongst the women in her network. Reference to her as an 'auntie', is taken seriously and symbolises her benevolent relationship with younger members of the group. The youngest member has consolidated this kin relationship by asking Jean to be godmother to her baby daughter. The freedom which group members feel about gathering in Jean's house also mirrors the connection between home and family. Jean enjoys the respect gained from her familial role and experiences the responsibilities which come with it as a privilege.

The elision between kinship and community is not unproblematic in the sense that it speaks of a tendency towards the more conservative notions of 'community' as a set of closed relationship which by virtue of their inclusivity for those who belong, exclude those identified as 'strangers' (Bauman, 2001). It certainly created some difficulties during the strike in relation to the identification of activist women with 'miners' wives' and some support groups actively excluded those who would be members but who were not directly related to miners (Stead, 1987). Nevertheless, there is evidence that in the post-mining context, the meanings of kinship have begun to take a different form. For example, a women's group in Staffordshire self consciously named itself a 'Miners' Wives Support Group' at the end of the strike, not as an



expression of a familial relationship, but as an indication of a political relationship in relation to coal (Newcastle, 2004)

Similarly, the savings group has been created to some extent as a 'family of choice' (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001) as a contemporary response based on traditional patterns and ideals. Jean and Hazel are single women. Hazel's mother's mother, Dorothy is divorced, and the three other women involved live with men. Only three of the women are mothers. Yet they unanimously identified their primary collective concern in terms of the needs of local children. The loss of community resources associated with pit closures, was epitomised for them by the absence of facilities and services for children: 'There are not even any swings any more.' Their concern echoes that of the residents of Warsop Vale whose initial collective efforts were energised by a successful campaign for play facilities (Waddington, 2003; 2005). Members of the savings group had at various times voluntarily organised activities for local children and young people. Meanwhile, Jean creates space for the participation and education of children in all her projects.

During the strike, the initial role taken by women extended their traditional domestic work into the public arena (Allen, 2001). It has been argued that women's activism could only be fully accommodated by the class politics of the NUM with reference to traditional private roles within home and family (Spence, 1998). Insofar as it fitted this pattern, female activism during the strike was indicative of an exceptional moment. However, 'the private' for women in mining life has never been fully contained within the home. Rather it

has always been an aspect of their everyday lives, overlapping with the public sphere.

Women's public participation has sometimes been characterised by historians of community and of social policy as 'maternalism' (Koven and Michel, 1990). Maternalism suggests the means whereby 'natural' feminine concerns can be publicly played out without threatening gender stereotypes. The concept is often used to refer to the historical role of middle class women in social work. In the miners' strike, working class identification foreclosed the intervention of a type of maternalism which is born of class patronage (Rowbotham and McCrindle, 1986; Stead, 1987). Nevertheless, the concept can explain a sense of 'mothering' as a co-operative, neighbourhood endeavour based on a common understanding of the responsibilities of women and as the means whereby women, and in particular single women, are enabled to engage in collective, community action (see also Reynolds, 2003).

The savings group discussion suggests that such public 'mothering' expresses the manner in which kin, neighbourhood and community of place and interest overlap. Domestic space for women in mining communities traditionally included the 'community of place' in neighbourhood, which was the bedrock for a 'community of interest' manifest in more formal, male dominated local institutions (Dennis et al, 1956; Williamson, 1982; Thew, 1985). The traditional political virtues of collectivity and solidarity associated with mining have traditionally been expressed in female discourse through the language of kinship and maternalism. This was the framework within which

women's actions in the strike were conceived and it remains pertinent in the post-mining environment as a location for collective organisation and political awareness. The actions and understanding of the women in the savings group, facilitated and encouraged by Jean are in direct lineage from those mobilised by WAPC during the strike.

### **Strike Stories**

A politically informed maternalism became particularly meaningful during the strike in the lead up to Christmas 1984. This traditional time for families and for indulging children was seriously threatened by the hardship endured by those who had lived without wages for eight months. The stress experienced by families threatened the solidarity of the strike. That Christmas was experienced as a pivotal moment for those involved and Jean's memories are no exception. She communicates her understanding of its significance, incorporating the values of the strike, primarily through her story of the 'Toy and Turkey' appeal- 'A toy for every child and a turkey for every family':

*Have I ever told you the full story of that day? So there was one load of turkeys arrived a day early. The second load was delayed, so it came on 21<sup>st</sup> December. And then the chickens, which we got from Liverpool, couldn't find Easington, never mind Murton. So the lorry load we got from Cardiff found us, and we got the chickens, but the ones from Liverpool we couldn't find anywhere and we kept getting calls from them! We'd go, 'Where are you now?' (Laughter).*

*That's bad enough as an organisational thing, but my car wouldn't start at four o'clock in the morning and I had to get people out of bed to give me a push. I got down there to find all this chaos was going on at Murton Welfare and the next thing that happened was the flying picket which we hadn't been told about was at Murton this week. So we had all these miners descending on us to picket Hawthorn Coke Works at Murton.*

*The next thing was that the women in Murton say 'There's a hell of a lot of people here, how are we going to put on meals for all these?' It was decided that they had better do something you know, 'Do what you can!' But then two Euro MPs arrived to draw the Toy and Turkey appeal tickets. And they gave us this big drum, which didn't work. Every time it was turned it fell off the pedestal and poured the tickets out. But we finally got the miners fixing that up and there was all these people waiting for the Toy and Turkey appeal and there were loads of prizes to give out.*

She ends the story by saying:

*Once we got the turkeys and chickens on-site, the organisation was spot-on. Because once we got them there, people collected their stuff and went. By 3 o'clock in the afternoon, it was all over. They decided to give me a chicken, but I couldn't face it. We had pork instead. I couldn't face it; they were coming out of my ears. I don't know if you've ever seen 21,000 frozen chickens and turkeys? (Jean, savings group).*

This is one of Jean 's favourite memories. It was repeated in the individual interview and later in a WAPC reunion discussion (Newcastle, 2004). The story was clearly part of the repertoire of the savings group: the women encouraged Jean to retell it.

It is meaningful to the women not only because it resonates with responsibilities for kin and community, but also because it displays a collective commitment which involves and connects neighbours, local women, miners, trade unionists, workers from other parts of Britain and European politicians. The story is underpinned by the virtue of tenacity in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. It emphasises the possibility of creating order out of chaos against overwhelming odds, through the values of determination, selflessness, mutuality and above all collective endeavour and organisation which is lived in the local context, but links with unknown others from external locations who share the same principles. At the same time, it incorporates the possibility of individual choice ('I had pork instead'). This affirms the model for the savings group and for the type of community for which they strive.

Story telling is a source of great humour and entertainment and an important method of making sense of the changes which are being experienced in the locality. In particular, Jean's stories derived from the political education gained during the strike, and validated by the shared experiences with the others, encourages the savings group women, helping to establish a set of meanings which facilitate the maintenance of the group as a coherent entity (Plummer,

1995; Southerton, 2002) They also reinforce the legitimacy of Jean's position in relation to the group and the neighbourhood.

Repeated stories recreate the mining past as a place of self reliance and mutual support. The village is represented as a community of place and interest with a collective memory of a positive way of living which enabled people to come out winning, whatever the reality. Jean is a particularly powerful narrator because she is able to weave together tales in which personal details and action are situated within a larger context – invariably involving struggles for control, if not power, in which justice wins out. Her stories gain influence because her communication skills combine with her reputation as an activist and a sympathetic and reliable friend/auntie to local people in need.

### **Constructing a community ideal**

Through their friendship, the women in the savings group attempt to create and recreate an ideal of community promoted in Jean's stories. The axis upon which this is balanced is a shared understanding of a mining past which is viewed by the women as a community of security and intimacy.

*Q.....What was it like when you were younger to live in [the village]?*

*Hazel...Secure. Because everybody knew everybody.*

*Q.....Secure?*

*Hazel.....You felt secure because everybody knew everybody. You felt secure because you could go out when you were young and you knew*

*everybody. You know what I mean; it was a village where everybody knew everybody as you were growing up.*

The idea, remembered or imagined, that the village represented the security of a known community, encouraged identification with place. It drew the women back even when they or their families had been forced away to find work. The group concluded that this was about a sense of belonging:

*Q...Have you moved around?*

*Hazel: ....Where the jobs are... I would move away for jobs. Which I've done, but I always seem to end up coming back. I would stay for a couple of years and another job would come up and I would move down to Southend or somewhere and stay there for a couple of years, and I always end up coming back here for some stupid reason.*

*Laura.... Somewhere you know: home!*

*Dorothy...It's called roots*

However, community as a place located in family and neighbourhood is no longer real.

*Hazel...In my street, I mean, I would never think of going and knocking on my next-door neighbour and say and 'have you got a spare bit milk or an egg?' I mean if I need anything I ring Jean, because I know Jean, you know what I mean? Or I would ring Angela, but not like my next-door neighbour.*

For these women in the post mining context, cohesive local relationships are facilitated primarily by friendship groups who draw from the discourses of kin and community to shape their activities and their understanding of the forces impacting upon their lives.

## **Conclusion**

The working class women who spoke to us bring public matters into the home, and private matters into the street and public office. They do not distinguish the private and public as separate places. The home can become an office. What is of interest is not the separation of these two spaces, but their inter-relationship in the process of women's organisation. This broadens the sphere of class politics for working class women, and to maintain such an inter-relationship has been a conscious choice for activist women who were involved in the miners' strike in the North East of England.

The interactions of the everyday world of doorstep politics are largely mundane ('Who can I borrow an egg from?') but for self-consciously political women such as Jean, organisation based upon the collective principle associated with trade unionism and the labour movement exists just as much within the reciprocal relations which can be fostered within the private and the mundane as within the public and the exotic. A failure to examine the 'private' and 'everyday' is to be gender blind to the possibility that collective principles and action exist not just in the formal world of work, labour politics and civic institutions but in the back street and the living rooms of working class houses.



In a period when 'community' based upon common conditions derived from labour relations cannot be taken for granted, it should not be assumed that consequently the possibility of constructing community based upon locally defined, self consciously held values has disappeared. The locus of the maintenance of a co-operative approach to practical problems and political issues in ex-mining localities has shifted from the industrial front to what traditionally has been the female sphere associated with friendship, kin and neighbourhood. Understanding the nature of agency exercised by women activists in these circumstances suggests the possibility of building new and more extensive forms of political organisation which interconnect the separate spheres of work and home, public and private, male and female.

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<sup>1</sup> All the names used are pseudonyms. Although there is a strong case for using the women's own names in terms of the contribution which they have made to the history of mining life, it was agreed with the women at the outset to anonymise them. 'Jean' was the name chosen by this important participant.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hepburn founded the Northern Union of Pitmen in 1831. He was known as a man of peace and used his influence to help prevent rioting and violence during strikes. Nevertheless he was banned from working in the northern coalfield because of his role in the organisation of strikes in 1831 and 1832.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Lee was a miner who became leader of England's first all-Labour County Council in Durham in 1909. The new town Peterlee is named after him.

<sup>4</sup> Sam Watson (1898-1967) was Secretary of the Durham Miners' Union until 1963. He was known for his commitment to the education of miners and ran tutorial classes in Redhill the Durham Headquarters

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of the Union. His name is linked with a convalescent home for miners' wives, opened in 1961 in honour of his commitment to the well being of women associated with mining.