

# New economy, neoliberal state and professionalised parenting: mothers' labour market engagement and state support for social reproduction in class-differentiated Britain

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Contemporary economic, political and social shifts in the Global North are reconfiguring the resolution of productive and reproductive labour. This paper explores how the emergence of the New Economy, the rolling out of the neoliberal state, and the professionalisation of parenting are transforming: (i) the landscape in which mothers with primary-school-aged children make decisions about how to secure a living and care for their children and (ii) what role they think the state should play in facilitating the provision of childcare to support working parenthood. The paper makes two innovative contributions to knowledge. First, it pinpoints strongly class-differentiated changes in women's reconciliation of paid employment and caring work in contemporary Britain. The academically dominant one-and-a-half breadwinner model is commonly reflected in middle-class lifestyles, but has little analytical purchase for working-class women in this study, as they are more likely to mother full-time in state-dependent family households. It is vital that we understand these changes in women's labour-force participation and their implications for class inequality. Second, the paper concentrates academic attention on the sweeping expansion in the state's role in social reproduction through the provision of wraparound childcare (breakfast and afterschool clubs) in primary schools. Novel insights into parental attitudes reveal that middle-class women demand choice and feel entitled to state-sponsored childcare provision which underpins the feminisation of the labour force. Working-class women value provision for others, but fear being coerced into using childcare instead of mothering in the home. Their responses reveal competing understandings of what counts as equality for women, and stark variations in different women's abilities to achieve this.

**Key words** paid work; unpaid work; work–life balance; mothering; childcare; welfare reform

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## Introduction

The 20th century saw sweeping transformations in women's place in the world, moves that feminist geographers strove to place on the geographical research agenda (Women and Geography Study Group [WGSG] 1997). In the 21st century, changing constellations of economic, political and social processes are once again reshaping the daily lives of women with children in the Global North. The purpose of this paper is to explore how these broad-scale shifts – including the emergence of the New Economy, the rolling out of the neoliberal state and the professionalisation of parenting – are reconfiguring the landscape in which mothers make decisions about how to secure a living and care for their children (MacLeavy 2011a; Richter and Andresen 2012).

Our agenda is two-fold. On the one hand, our concern is to explore how such global/local labour market conditions, national/local policy contexts and changing/enduring gendered moralities are shaping highly class-differentiated patterns of labour market attachment among mothers of primary-school-aged children in Britain. On the other hand, we are interested in the ways these employment patterns are implicated in mothers' demands for wraparound childcare in state schools. This breakfast and after-school-club provision has expanded rapidly in the context not only of rising maternal employment, but also cuts to welfare entitlements and the discursive marginalisation of full-time mothering (Cummings *et al.* 2011).

In interrogating the links between broad-scale processes and women's everyday lives, the paper makes two key contributions to debates about the resolution

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of production and reproduction in neoliberal states. First, it uses comparative research to move beyond the dominant focus on middle-class work–life balance (Dyer *et al.* 2011; Warren 2015), instead contrasting those in and out of paid work, and from middle- and working-class backgrounds. This approach brings previously ignored subjects into view, revealing the class-specificity of current analytic frameworks, and underlining the implications of contemporary reconfigurations in paid and unpaid work for class inequality. Second, the paper concentrates academic attention on the wholesale expansion in the state's role in social reproduction (Gallagher 2012; Mahon 2005), and uncovers class-differentiated responses to this resetting of the boundary between state and familial responsibility for childcare. This exposes disparities in the vision of equality demanded by middle- and working-class women, alongside stark variations in their abilities to achieve it.

### The shifting terrains of paid employment and social reproduction

One of the earliest calls in feminist geography was to place increases in women's labour force participation on the geographical agenda, and from this three inter-related research strands emerged. An early, ground-breaking piece by McDowell and Massey (1984) linked changing patterns of women's employment to the interaction between different rounds of capital investment, regional gender cultures and social policy, and the continuing significance of these factors can be seen in 21st-century research (Duncan and Smith 2002). A second research strand sought to emphasise the importance of residential environment – including the local availability of employment and support services – to labour market participation (Hanson and Pratt 1995). This remains a popular avenue of enquiry (Boterman and Karsten 2014), as is the focus on the time-space dynamics of those trying to coordinate everyday life in the context of working parenthood (Jain *et al.* 2011). Taking a multi-scalar approach, a final research thread sought to explore how diverse women situated in particular local contexts, which are understood to be (re)made through a nexus of wider social relations, make decisions about whether to undertake paid work or not, and how to care for their children (Holloway 1999; James 2009). The lesson from all three threads of research is that the economic landscape, government policy and gendered moralities matter (Duncan 2005) in women's reconciliation of paid and unpaid work, and that social class, which is experienced in place, is crucial in differentiating their practices.<sup>1</sup>

These economic, political and social influences on mothers' choices about paid work and unpaid caring

labour have been subject to radical change in recent decades. In the Global North, the emergence of a New Economy has been heralded, which is shaped not by Fordist production but by knowledge-based work. Initially, research from divergent theoretical perspectives adopted a 'productionist view', which placed educated, flexible workers' creation of innovative, high-value, knowledge-based goods and services centre stage in analyses of an increasingly open and volatile economy (McDowell and Dyson 2011). Later growing attention was paid to the absences in these accounts, in particular the parallel growth of low-wage, low-status jobs in an increasingly bifurcated economy (Bennett 2015; Warren 2015), including commodified forms of reproductive work (McDowell and Dyson 2011).

In this context, critical attention is now being paid to the fact that the New Economy has been characterised by growing levels of individual risk and labour market insecurity for all (MacLeavy 2011a; Perrons *et al.* 2006). For those in well-paid employment, these dangers have been accompanied by heightened work intensity and a blurring of the boundaries between home and work, such that workers are never off duty (James 2011). In a divided economy, those at the other end of the occupational spectrum not only experience more pressured work environments, but also find it difficult to earn a living wage in the context of low pay, zero-hour contracts, agency working and a lack of full-time employment opportunities (Bennett 2015; Corlett and Whittaker 2014; MacInnes *et al.* 2014). One area of stability is that women's unpaid labour in the home remains crucial in the New Economy as it underpins the daily and generational reproduction of the labour force; however, its role is underplayed in tales of epochal transformation (McDowell and Dyson 2011).

Changes in the economic landscape have been associated with a growing neoliberalisation of government policy in much of the Global North. Neoliberalisation is a multi-faceted political-economic process (Peck *et al.* 2009), but of interest here is the radical shift that has been seen from welfare to workfare, as governments in OECD countries switched the emphasis from a right to welfare payments to the responsibility to work, and sought to 'Make Work Pay' (Jenson and Saint-Martin 2006). The manifestation of this move depends on the contingent neoliberalisms that emerge in specific time/spaces. In the UK, which is the focus of this paper, this model was central to the roll-out neoliberalism of the Labour Government (1997–2010) with HM Treasury declaring that 'work is the best form of welfare for people of working age' (2002, Department for Work and Pensions Objective II). The Labour Government combined these workfare-oriented economic policies with a social inclusion agenda. This workfare ethos continued under the Coalition Government's self-styled age of austerity,

but the concomitant commitment to reducing social inequality was less evident (MacLeavy 2011b), and has since been further reduced by the new Conservative administration (Wintour 2015).

This shift from a welfare to workfare state matters not just because it established the primacy of the notion that work is the best route out of poverty and into societal participation, but because it applied this idea to women (Lewis 2002). The post Second World War social contract was based on the male breadwinner model; by contrast, workfare states have seen a shift to an adult worker model that sees all adults as potential workers, with paid work being understood both as 'a citizen's moral obligation and a path to social inclusion' (Dyer *et al.* 2011, 687). In this discursively gender-blind approach, barriers to women's employment such as the unequal domestic division of labour and the high value placed on maternal care are obscured from view (Lewis 2002; MacLeavy 2011a; McDowell 2005). Consequently, what has often emerged in practice is a one-and-a-half breadwinner model in which men work full-time and women part-time (Lewis 2002). At first sight, this might appear to meet feminist demands for labour market openness and flexibility, as it allows women to balance dual roles as workers and mothers. However, this model fails to challenge the notion that caring work is a female responsibility, it severely confines women's prospects of promotion (Gatrell 2007) and mothers' combined working hours – in paid employment and domestic labour – exceed those of men, raising questions about the nature of women's emancipation (Hochschild and Machung 2003; MacLeavy 2011a; Perrons *et al.* 2006).

The move from the male breadwinner model demonstrates that social attitudes to women's role in paid employment have changed markedly in the early 21st century. The gendered moralities surrounding women's roles in the home have also seen discursive change. Hays identified the emergence of an ideology of intensive mothering – since explored in diverse global contexts (Faircloth *et al.* 2013) – which, while restating the mother's role as the central care giver, now emphasises the importance of 'lavishing copious amounts to time, energy, and material resources on the child' in '*child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive*' childrearing (Hays 1996, 8; emphasis in original). Hays argues that this ideology of intensive mothering is shared across class backgrounds, even if other research demonstrates it is an unachievable reality for some groups (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014). The cultural contradiction is that just as mothers are being more fully drawn into the capitalist labour market, ideological constructions of intensive mothering increase their workload at home.

Hays' (1996) analysis was prescient in identifying state and business reliance on ideologies of intensive mothering to legitimate the low-cost reproduction of future citizen-workers by women. In the 21st century, the roll-out neoliberal state has intensified this process through a professionalisation of parenting. This professionalisation has involved parenting being redefined from a loving relationship to a skilled job in which amateur parents need professional advice, and has enhanced parents' responsibility for producing compliant, educated citizen-workers (Faircloth *et al.* 2013; Gillies 2012). In the context of education, for example, Labour intensified parents' workloads by regularly tasking them with 'becoming their children's educators alongside teachers' (Reay 2008, 642). This ethos was matched by the subsequent Coalition Government, which argued:

[m]others and fathers are their children's first and most important educators. ... What happens in this home environment has more influence on future achievement than innate ability, material circumstances or the quality of pre-school and school provision. (DfE/DoH 2011, 36)

In this way, the professionalisation of parenting not only enables the state to enrol individual parents in the work of producing citizen-workers, but also allows them to lay the blame for unequal child outcomes at the door of the family rather than that of an inequalitarian society (Richter and Andresen 2012).

Our review of three early strands of feminist geography identified the importance of the economic landscape, government policy and gendered moralities in shaping women's attitudes to paid work and caring for their children. Each of these three facets has, as we have shown, changed markedly in the 21st century as the New Economy, neoliberalisation and the professionalisation of parenting have each placed new pressures on women. Consequently, there is an urgent need for research that explores how these changing contexts come together to shape the 'choices' mothers make about paid employment and mothering responsibilities.

The first aim of this paper is to explore the decisions women make about paid employment. Our analysis is driven by a two-fold comparative approach. First, we share Dyer *et al.*'s (2011) concern that work-life balance debates should extend beyond the middle classes; we achieve this not by shifting the focus to working-class women, but by comparing the experiences of provincial middle-class women with their working-class counterparts. Second, we resist the temptation to study women's employment and caring choices by focusing only on those in paid employment (Harden *et al.* 2013), and instead explore how some women become full-time workers, some move into part-time employment and others mother full-time in the home (in contexts of relative wealth and poverty).

This twin comparison broadens the research frame to include previously marginalised groups of white working-class mothers, many of whom live in households where no one is in paid work, alongside their more commonly visible employed, middle-class counterparts. In deploying this two-fold comparison, we strategically focus on households with primary-school-aged children. This not only counters the over-emphasis on women with pre-school-aged children in studies of mothering, but also focuses attention on the stage in the family life-cycle that is associated with higher rates of labour force participation (Office for National Statistics 2013).

These increases in women's employment have depended on a growth in childcare, and there is a developing geographical literature on the mixed economy of provision that makes mothers' employment a possibility. Most of this research has focused on the commodification of care as it represents a transfer of work from individual middle-class to working-class women, and the ways some migrant childcare workers are bound into transnational care chains (Busch 2013). A minor, but illuminating, thread in the literature focuses on the state and explores whether/how the state is involved in the provision of childcare as a collective good (Fincher 1996). The topic has received less attention than it merits, nevertheless, two 21st-century studies highlight potentially interesting directions in this field of research. Mahon's (2005) focus on Canada and Sweden demonstrates that increased demands for childcare are not simply met in ways consistent with their national welfare models but that, contrary to welfare regime theory, path-shifting responses are possible. Moreover, Gallagher's (2012) research shows how neoliberal forces have reshaped the childcare market in Ireland from being an overwhelmingly private one dominated by childminders, to a mixed economy of state and private education-based-provision.

These studies are important in demonstrating how the state is reworking its role in childcare provision, both because women are increasingly being cast as workers in the here and now, and because such provision is assumed to enhance social inclusion in the future (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2012). Despite their importance, however, both are based on the pre-school sector and there is a need for further research that focuses on the primary school years where wraparound childcare plays an important role in facilitating parental employment. Moreover, these studies are based on analyses of state functions and do not explore parents' attitudes to the changing roles of the state. Given that the post-War social contract has been subject to change, and that women now find themselves cast as adult workers at the same time as their mothering duties have been intensified, it is crucial that we ask what rights mothers think they

should be able to demand from the state. The second aim of this paper is, therefore, to explore parents' attitudes to state involvement in stimulating wrap-around childcare provision for primary-aged children.

## Researching paid work, motherhood and childcare

Our study of middle- and working-class parents' attitudes to paid employment, and the state's role in facilitating childcare provision, was undertaken in the English Midlands. *Hortonshire*<sup>2</sup> contains schools serving children from diverse class backgrounds, while overall roughly conforming to mid-teen national averages in terms of the percentage of children receiving free school meals (FSM) (DCSF 2009). Children were living in a mixture of large urban, smaller urban and rural communities but not, given their shire-county location, in inner-city areas. These settlements were less ethnically diverse than England as a whole: over 95 per cent of residents were White British, compared with the national average of 87 per cent (Office for National Statistics 2005). Residents have access to professional employment in the health, education and private sectors within commuting distance, but traditional working-class employment has been hit by de-industrialisation.

We classify parents as middle class if their children attend a school with an economically advantaged intake (FSM < 2.5%) and their household's primary wage earner works in a managerial/professional occupation. We define parents as working class if their children attend a school that draws from more financially impoverished communities (FSM > 30%) and their household's primary wage earner is in a routine/manual occupation (or had never worked/is long-term unemployed). This two-fold approach allows insight into parents' individual and community context (Irwin and Elley 2011), but terms such as middle and working class should always be used with care. It is noteworthy that ours is a regional sample rather than one located in a global city.

The research involved a questionnaire survey of middle- and working-class parents with children in Years 2 (ages 6–7) and 6 (ages 10–11) in 18 primary schools (8 low FSM rates; 10 high FSM rates); this asked about their ideas and practices about employment and childcare (n = 321; middle-class 160; working-class 161; response rate > 40% in both areas). The survey was followed up with 26 semi-structured interviews (14 middle-class; 12 working-class). In total, 93 per cent of parents who returned the questionnaire were women, as were all the interviewees. Interviewees were selected from questionnaire respondents to reflect the types of family formation and employment background evident in each group. All were White British, a

**Table 1** Employment in middle- and working-class households

	Middle-class households		Working-class households	
	% of two-parent families	% of all families	% of two-parent families	% of all families
<i>Two-parent families</i>				
2 FT workers	15	14	6	3
1 FT worker & 1 PT worker	60	56	27	16
1 FT worker & 1 NPW	21	19	19	11
2 PT workers	3	3	2	1
1 PT worker & 1 NPW	1	1	8	5
2 NPW	0	0	38	22
<i>Lone-parent families</i>	% of lone-parent families	% of all families	% of lone-parent families	% of all families
1 FT worker	67	4	5	2
1 PT worker	33	2	25	10
1 NPW	0	0	71	30

FT = full-time; PT = part-time; NPW = not in paid work

Source: Authors' questionnaire survey

reflection of the ethnic make-up of the area. The interviews were fully transcribed, coded and analysed through NVivo; to ensure anonymity interviewees have been allocated numerical identifiers.

### Mothers, employment and state involvement in social reproduction

#### *Middle-class mothers: balancing work and family?*

Contemporary neoliberal policy has eroded the post-War social contract, based on a male breadwinner and female housewife, and replaced it with an adult worker model, which discursively assumes that men and women are both available for, and indeed ought to be in, paid employment (MacLeavy 2011a). The first aim of this paper is to explore what decisions mothers with primary-aged children make about paid employment. Results from our questionnaire survey of middle-class families demonstrate that this model of universal, theoretically egalitarian, adult employment does not dominate in practice (see Table I): only a fifth of households conform to the adult worker model (Smith *et al.* 2011). Another fifth of households continue to follow the 'traditional' household structure favoured by the middle classes since the early 19th century, where one adult goes out to work while the other stays at home to manage family life (Oram 1996). Between these two poles are three-fifths of families who have a more mixed labour market attachment. Some contain only part-time workers, but 56 per cent of households adopt a one-and-a-half breadwinner model where one adult works full-time and another part-time (Lewis 2002; Perrons *et al.* 2006).

The vast majority of middle-class households (80%) thus have all parents in employment. Our qualitative research with mothers highlights two broad categories of reasons for why they reject the 'traditional' middle-class model and choose to undertake paid work. The first of

these is financial. It would be neat to argue that labour market insecurity in the New Economy (Perrons *et al.* 2006) accounts for increases in women's employment as couples make a rational choice to manage this financial risk by having two earners. This does happen, as this mother who is a professional in the education sector explains:

I think his [partner's] job's quite precarious ... is more susceptible to redundancy, even though I'm the one that's being made redundant! So I always feel, or we feel, that I need a reasonable level of income to cushion us in case he's made redundant. And actually, we need both salaries. (MC6-FT-PT<sup>3</sup>)

However, her account also hints at a second more prevalent trend, explicated below, that for many families one income is no longer sufficient to deliver a middle-class lifestyle:

*And why do you work?* Mainly to give us that cushion really so that we can give the boys those extra activities, so that we can do a holiday, so that we're not completely stressed out about money every month. And also I do enjoy, I get some sort of personal fulfilment out of working. (MC9-FT-PT)

Women's work has, even in quite recent history, been cast as 'pin money' with which fripperies can be bought after the male wage has paid for household living expenses (Harkness *et al.* 1997). Rather than pins, these mothers' occasional references to cushions seems more appropriate here. In a context where middle-class concern about their ability to reproduce socio-economic advantage on a generational basis has underpinned intensive investment in children (Devine 2004; Katz 2008), women's earnings not only pay for ephemeral goods that mark class status in the present, but also fund investment in goods of more enduring value. These include homes near good state schools and extracurricular activities (Hamnett and Butler 2011; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014) that will



help ensure children accrue sufficient capital to remain in the middle classes in the longer term.

Women's decisions to undertake paid work are not simply about the need of their families, however; it is also about their own identity and happiness. Some in this generation of middle-class women simply see work as normal, while others imagined a more traditional role for themselves but find work is a norm to which they had become accustomed prior to having children:

[I]t wasn't in the plan, I wasn't going to go back to work full-time because I'd always said I wanted to be around for [child], I wanted to be there to pick him up and drop him off at school, because my mum was for me ... I think because ... I'd worked for a long time, full-time before I had [child], I think I missed it! (MC13-FT-FT)

This tendency to experience paid work as a norm sits well within neoliberal understandings of the adult worker model (Lewis 2002), which MacLeavy (2007) argues creates an idealised female subject who will be fulfilled through her economic contribution. Women's descriptions of their work, often in the health and education sectors (Perrons *et al.* 2006), do indeed demonstrate their passion for and sense of achievement from their socially valued employment. More than this, women also argue that work provides an escape from the problem identified by second wave feminists: the wearisome reality of full-time mothering (Friedan 1963):

I really absolutely love my job ... I wouldn't not work because ... I'm a much happier person now that I'm working ... when I was at home with the children I found it really hard, I'll be really honest, I was quite depressed I think, because I just found [it], just incredibly monotonous. (MC11-FT-FT)

These women want to be more than solely a mum and, despite the imperatives of intensive mothering (Faircloth *et al.* 2013; Hays 1996), are happy to reject the need to mother 24/7: 'I don't understand why you would want to spend every hour with your children, because I ... personally find that very smothering' (MC2-PT-FT).

This commitment to paid work, however, does not manifest itself as a desire to work full-time in the manner assumed in the adult worker model (Lewis 2002). Only a fifth of households comprise only full-time workers, and full-time working mothers express concern about their ability to meet the demands of contemporary parenting, demands that stem from the intensification of mothering in general (Hays 1996) and, for the parents of primary-school-aged children, their enrolment in education in particular (Gillies 2012):

I think there is a much greater expectation from the school that parents will ... be actively involved in a lot of the

learning activities ... a lot of the children learning to read now falls on the parents, not on the school, and I feel that that's where I've missed out, I don't feel that I've been able to support them enough with those things. (MC6-FT-PT)

In a context where women have both demanding professional jobs, and increasing demands placed on them as parents, it is perhaps unsurprising that all the full-time working mothers interviewed in this study expressed a desire for shorter working-hours: 'I would dearly love to work four days a week ... it doesn't wash unfortunately!' (MC11-FT-FT).

The majority of mothers in this area, however, are in part-time employment in households that adopt a one-and-a-half breadwinner model (see Table I). Twenty-first century debates about work-life balance have often been shaped by middle-class concerns, and those in high-quality employment are most likely to be able to benefit from family-friendly employment policies (James 2011; Smith *et al.* 2011; Warren 2015). Part-time work is valued by these mothers for giving them an appropriate work-life balance:

I think I get the right balance of everything. With being part-time I get to be the mum, I get to be a work colleague, you know, I get the best of everything, I'm really lucky at the moment! (MC8-FT-PT)

This balance includes time in rewarding jobs; time for domestic chores that are still disproportionately women's responsibility (Hochschild and Machung 2003); time to focus on labour-intensive work with children that is an imperative of modern parenting (Gillies 2012); as well as time for themselves. Thus while the one-and-a-half breadwinner model may not emancipate women as a group (Gatrell 2007), it is valued by individual women seeking to reconcile the demands of paid work, unpaid labour and life.

Stay-at-home mothers are a minority group in the middle classes. Some of these had themselves previously been working mothers when their first child was young, but found this was not financially rational as they had further children and childcare costs rose (Rutter and Stocker 2014). Economics are undeniably important, but so too are traditional gendered moralities surrounding the importance of being there for children (Duncan 2005). These women's positive choice to be there also means they avoid a double burden of paid and unpaid work (Hochschild and Machung 2003), and thus some of the stress and time pressures experienced by working mothers (Warren 2015):

I think it's quite important to be around when your children are little. And it's made life easier for everybody as well ... like if they're ill then you're not having to worry about taking time off work. Just being able to be organised and cope with all the stuff that needs doing ... just enjoying being a mum

really without the pressures of having to fit work in as well. (MC5-FT-NPW)

They are not, however, immune to the strains of mothering in the home and miss the broader outlook that working for a living had given them. Indeed, while some women will remain stay-at-home mothers in the long term, others are preparing themselves for a move back into the labour market as their children get older. This they explain will meet both their own needs and, by role modelling women's successful employment, those of their children:

[I]t would be nice to do something for me now ... they don't need me so much in the day ... I think it's important for the mum to be around, but [daughter's] ten now, and I think it's important that she then thinks that her mum does something, that her mum just isn't at home doing nothing, because she's got to start thinking ... what ... she wants to do. And I think you've got to be a bit of a role model. (MC14-FT-NPW)

### *State support for middle-class women and other communities*

Our second aim is to explore parental attitudes to state support for school-based wraparound care that can facilitate parental employment. Provision of such care marks a radical change in the purpose of schools and a sharp increase in the roll-out neoliberal state's involvement in social reproduction (Cummings *et al.* 2011). State schools have been strongly encouraged by Government to provide wraparound care (DfES 2005) and this provision, which is paid for by parents, is delivered through the mixed economy seen elsewhere in neoliberal childcare markets (Gallagher 2012). In this context, this includes provision by not-for-profit organisations under school management and private companies who are brought onto the school site. These services are positively welcomed by parents: our questionnaire survey shows that 90 per cent of middle-class households think schools should have breakfast and afterschool clubs because this helps working families, and 9 per cent use breakfast clubs, while 32 per cent have children at after-school clubs designed to provide childcare for working families.

The reason this service development is so widely appreciated is because it is seen to offer women a life beyond motherhood, and a life that will enable them to provide financially for their families (Holloway 1999):

If it [wraparound care] means that ... you can get back to work and find life more fulfilling and have some ambition, and maybe build a better life for your children, then that can't be a bad thing. (MC11-FT-FT)

The notion that there cannot be anything bad about state-stimulated childcare – the use of which profoundly reshapes family time-space geographies – is

underpinned by the understanding that no one is obliged to use such provision. Rather, it is seen to empower parental choice and more specifically *women's* right to opt into the workplace:

[I]t gives parents a choice to do what's right for them ... Because you know it might be right for somebody to stay at home, and that might be their values, so that's fine. But some people might want to have a career, and you know why do we send girls to school, and encourage them to do well academically, to then turn around and say, 'Actually, be a stay at home mum'. You know it's almost going back into the dark ages isn't it?! It's going backwards, and if we want to encourage and continue for women to be at work ... then that support network's got to be there. (MC15-FT-PT)

Most middle-class mothers thus welcome this radical reworking of schools' role as it promotes a service to which they think working women are entitled.

It is interesting that the value middle-class mothers find this service has in their own lives, or those of parents around them, underpins their support for this service in other locations. They are aware that the state has a pro-employment agenda, including encouraging paid work among mothers with responsibilities for primary-aged children (Smith *et al.* 2011; Wainwright *et al.* 2011), and argue that this aim can only be achieved through subsidised provision in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Cummings *et al.* 2011):

[T]here are some areas where people live on benefits ... I think the Government has to do something ... I mean I know what the [childcare] costs are like ... you've got to earn a reasonable amount before it makes it worthwhile you actually going to work ... if they want people to get back into work, they're going to have to look at ways of supporting childcare, because without it people can't afford to work. (MC6-FT-PT)

The rolling-out of the state in the context of childcare provision is consequently seen to offer other people the support they need to work, in the process also making the Government's workfare reforms a possibility.

The lack of controversy over such a marked increase in state involvement in social reproduction, and the shift it marks away from home-based mothering, is striking: only 2 per cent of households agree with the notion that wraparound childcare undermines full-time motherhood and family life. Our qualitative data reveal that these minority concerns centre on the ideological work done through this provision:

under the last [Labour] Government, the big incentive was get everyone working, provide childcare for everybody ... so that almost the message is everyone should work ... I think there should be support for working parents, but I think it's a shame if it's at the expense of people [who] wanted to ... not work! ... you can feel a bit undermined ... it's a

subliminal kind of message isn't it ... I have my doubts about the Government normalising ... before school/after school care ... that being the thing that is the expectation across the board. (MC7-FT-NPW)

Nevertheless, it is insightful to note that this mother too is considering using wraparound care if she returns to work when her youngest child goes to school.

### *Working-class mothers: being there and/or being trapped there*

Results from our questionnaire survey illustrate that the adult worker model of neoliberal discourse is very far from a reality for working-class households: only 1 in 20 households have all parents in full-time employment (MacLeavy 2011a). Even more striking is the fact that the one-and-a-half breadwinner model (Lewis 2002), which dominates in middle-class areas, and academic discourse, has little traction for this group, reflecting the experiences of only 16 per cent of households. In stark contrast to their middle-class counterparts, two-thirds of working-class households have someone available to care for children on a full-time basis (see Table I). This comprises the majority of households (52%) who have no one in paid employment, as well as a further tenth who conform to the 'traditional' model, adopted among the skilled working classes by the turn of the 20th century (Oram 1996) of one full-time worker and one stay-at-home parent.

A minority of working-class mothers in our study do undertake paid employment, and despite their less advantageous position in the labour market (for example, three interviewees worked as cleaners), their reasons for working sometimes reflect those articulated by middle-class women. Part-time working is seen as a benefit to mothers themselves: they have the chance to get out of the house, meet other people and maintain their self-confidence. Their earnings are also seen to improve children's standard of living:

*Why do you work?* Money! I like going to work ... I just like the people I work with, I like my job, I like where I work. (WC4-PT-PT)

I wanted to go back to work, I wanted to get my confidence back, meet new people, I'd had enough of being in the house ... Obviously it's the break from the house, different things, you've got that bit extra to spend on the kids, to treat them every now and then. (WC11-NPW-PT)

In this respect, these working mothers' attitudes parallel neoliberal policy discourses (Dyer *et al.* 2011; HM Treasury 2002) as they see work as their route to participation in society, and they include material provision for children in their definitions of good mothering (Holloway 1999).

Women's participation in the labour market is also seen by these working mothers to set a good example to

children. For middle-class women role-modelling is about gender equality, but these working-class mothers are more concerned with modelling work as a normal part of adult life. This is important to them as employment is not necessarily an everyday reality for families in their locality: 'Why do I work?! Because I think it's good for the kids to see me working, because structurally when they grow up, that's how life should be, you should work' (WC6-PT). Class status also matters in their attitudes to income, as working-class mothers emphasise the personal self-worth they feel by earning a wage rather than receiving benefits:

It's just knowing that you're going out there earning and bringing something home for the family, you're actually providing it ... a lot of people say 'Oh I can't be bothered with work, I don't see why I should do it, I get more on Social.' I do it because I want to do it. It's a different feeling... (WC11-NPW-PT)

In this quotation, it is evident that a women's status as a worker can act as a badge of respectability through which to differentiate herself from other working-class mothers (Perrier 2010). This strategy works because the group as a whole is often derided in wider public discourses as lazy and irresponsible for their lack of commitment to paid employment (Dodson 2013).

This gendered morality, shared by the minority of working mothers, contrasts with the great value placed on maternal care in the two-thirds of households that have at least one parent available to care full-time (see Table I). These mothers take their maternal role in the home as a source of pride (Duncan 2005; Vincent *et al.* 2010), and make what they see as a moral choice to be there to cater for children's physical, emotional and educational needs:

I'm quite old fashioned and I think that the mother should be the one there to bring up the children, or the father ... I get a lot of satisfaction out of it because I know that my children are well looked after ... when they come home like their dinner's ready not long after they've got home ... I've got all their clothes done... (WC9-FT-NPW)

I think it's important [for me to be there]. *In what ways is it important?* Their growth, their learning, the bonding. (WC8-NPW)

[Parents] can help with the extra learning, so like when they come home with their reading books, they can help, like help them carry on with their reading ... I just say 'Right, come on, let's have a read' ... you know what your children's learning then don't you? (WC15-NPW-NPW)

This commitment to full-time mothering chimes both with long-standing ideologies of mothering and contemporary state efforts to co-opt parents into children's education through the professionalisation of parenting (Gillies 2012; Reay 2008).



Underpinning this gendered morality is the figure of the selfless stay-at-home mother. Some mothers explained that they put their children's interests first and wanted to be there for them despite the personal costs of doing so (Friedan 1963): 'I'm happy I'm here for the kids but then I also get bored' (WC13-NPW); 'it's very isolating and very lonely' (WC8-NPW) (Vincent *et al.* 2010). Others refuse to countenance what they saw as a selfish move into the labour market if this involves working outside school hours when children ought, in their view, to be at home:

[I] couldn't do owt after school, or owt like that, because of the kids, it would have to be like a 9 till 3 job, not 9 till 5 ... I could say to one mum, 'yeah but why are you doing full-time work? Don't you miss out on your kids?' ... 'You're right selfish' ... it's my choice what I do and they could say the same to me. (WC3-NPW-NPW)

These figures of the selfless and selfish mother merit consideration. Hays notes that there are dangers in reproducing gendered stereotypes if we emphasise women's unselfish nurturing, and herself casts women's commitment to intensive mothering not as 'passive selflessness but an active rejection of market logic' (1996, 171). Hays is not suggesting that women who mother intensively are engaging in conscious collective action to challenge capitalist values, but there is no doubt that the individual decisions women make in the home can have a cumulative impact on the capitalist state. In this context, we can see that working-class women's commitment to mothering can mean that neoliberal policies to encourage labour market participation by reducing access to, and the value of, state benefits can falter (MacLeavy 2011b; Wainwright *et al.* 2011). Mothers' commitment to an ethic of care can mean they make a moral choice to mother in the home even though this leaves them in poverty.

It would be wrong, however, to describe these working-class women's decisions to mother in the home as solely shaped by their gendered moralities. The nature of the new economy, and the way it intersects with the changing welfare regimes of the neoliberal state, is a crucial influence (Corlett and Whittaker 2014). The new economy has seen a bifurcation in jobs, with both greater opportunities for professional work for women in our middle-class sample, and a growth in low-paid service work (Dyer *et al.* 2011; MacInnes *et al.* 2014). Qualifications have become increasingly important even for those entering the labour market at its lower levels, and this was tricky for some, and this mother explains: 'I ain't got no qualifications' (WC12-NPW). Employment during the school day, which totals the minimum 16 hours per week needed to trigger in-work benefits, is also problematic:

Half 9 till 3 would be absolutely perfect. But it don't happen ... You can't find it, no employer does them hours, you ask

any mum who's trying to work, it just don't happen ... I would be a lot better off if I could work 16 hours or more. I cannot find a job with the hours that I want to work. (WC8-NPW)

Moreover, the issue of low pay in this section of the New Economy means some feel unable to take the risk of losing benefits (Bennett 2015; Corlett and Whittaker 2014).

These political-economic factors, which constrain employment opportunities, combine with women's genuine commitment to caring to underpin low levels of labour market participation. A further set of social factors, which are missing from the adult worker model, which assumes all citizens are potential workers (Lewis 2002; MacLeavy 2011a), also militate against women's paid employment. For some interviewees, health problems mean they were unable to work. Wider caring responsibilities too limit mothers' availability for work. As one mother of three who struggles with depression, is the official carer for her elderly parents, as well as an unofficial carer for her partner with mental health problems explains: 'I ain't got no time to work' (WC7-NPW-NPW). She is therefore highly concerned about Government efforts to move mothers from benefits and into the workforce: 'I started panicking because I thought "Oh my God, how am I going to cope?"' (WC7-NPW-NPW). Time pressures are also important because there are significant numbers of lone parents: some found affordable, time-appropriate childcare difficult to access (Root and Young 2011); others feel their lone carer status makes paid employment unmanageable:

I was able to work through the others [children] because I was together with my husband, but we separated before she was born, so I've not been able to work, with three kids, well two kids and a baby it was, I think that was enough. (WC8-NPW)

#### *State support for other working-class parents?*

Parental support for school-based wraparound care is high in working-class communities. The questionnaire survey demonstrates that 93 per cent of working-class households think schools should have wraparound care because this helps working families; and more households (29%) use a breakfast club here than in middle-class communities, though fewer (17%) use afterschool clubs. Previous research with headteachers (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2012) showed that this higher use of breakfast clubs is partly to do with their differing functions in low-income communities. In higher income areas breakfast clubs provide childcare for working parents who pay a commercial rate for this service (e.g. £5 a morning). However, in low-income areas these clubs are often subsidised services run, from the school's perspective, to enhance school attendance and ensure children have eaten before lessons, with parents paying a contribution to food costs (e.g. 50p-£1) (Cummings *et al.* 2011). This was a service that

many of our interviewees had used for their children, regarding it not as childcare, but as a club their children chose to attend: '[I]t was just something they wanted to try really. For 50p they got a bacon cob, cereal and a drink. So for 50p you can't moan' (WC2-NPW-NPW). Indeed, it was perfectly logical for the mother below to declare her dislike of childcare (Duncan 2005), while also reporting that some of her children had used breakfast club:

I just don't agree with this childcare lark ... you've had the kids, you should look after them ... they wanted to go [to breakfast club]! ... their mates were going and they wanted to go, so I took them. (WC14-NPW-NPW)

Some afterschool clubs are also run as a subsidised service in low-income areas giving children somewhere to play until perhaps 4 pm, although other schools do have a service for working parents that charge commercial rates and finish at 6 pm (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2012).

Attitudes to the state initiating wraparound care are generally positive, with only 5 per cent agreeing with the notion that this undermines full-time motherhood and family life. Parents are clearly highly cognisant of the fact that the Government wants to 'encourage' parents into paid work (MacLeavy 2011a; Smith *et al.* 2011). A few working mothers wholeheartedly agree with this sentiment and think help should therefore be provided; others were less vocal in their support of this target, but felt if access to benefits were being reduced, childcare should be increased to allow mothers access to employment:

I think it would be a good idea for the Government to get involved. *Do you think it goes against family life or does it support it?* I think it supports it, because they're trying to get to working people and things like that, I think it's a good idea. (WC6-PT)

[T]hey are trying to get them into work, after so long they try and get you back into work. I know they're making it harder to get back on benefits or anything at the moment, so ... they've got to support childcare at least, or do something. If they want us to go back to work, they need to be able to provide decent enough childcare for the kids. (WC11-NPW-PT)

The reference above to decent childcare is illuminating. Many mothers in this area not only have a high commitment to maternal care, they are also vociferously against non-family care, seeing individuals such as childminders as a risk in terms of neglect and paedophilia (Duncan 2005; Vincent *et al.* 2010). Schools, however, are trusted and so by extension is childcare provided on the school site: 'you know your children are safe at school don't you' (WC12-NPW). In a context where mothers are committed to caring for their own children (McDowell 2005), it is noteworthy that this backing for school-based

provision often emerges as assistance for others that they might not wish to use themselves:

I think it supports family life ... because there's help there if they need it. (WC13-NPW)

I think that option should be there, for anybody that wants to use it, I mean just because I don't use them, doesn't mean to say that everybody else don't. (WC14-NPW-NPW)

In sum, while middle- and working-class parents seem to hold very positive views on state support for school-based childcare, middle-class parents are more likely to demand this as a right for themselves (and other less well-off families), while working-class parents more often demand it as a right for others, with many seeing pressure on mothers to enter the workforce as a risk to themselves given their own moral or practical commitment to mothering at home.

## Conclusion

In the late 20th century, feminist geographers placed radical changes witnessed in women's employment and caring labour onto the geographical agenda (WGSG 1997). This paper demonstrates that profound change in what is expected of women as workers and mothers continues apace in the 21st century Global North. The reconfiguration of a constellation of economic, political and social processes – most notably the emergence of the New Economy, the increasing neoliberalisation of the state and the deepening professionalisation of parenting – means mothers are not only making class-differentiated decisions about how to secure a living and care for their children in circumstances different to previous generations, but are also making different demands of the state in terms of its expanding role in social reproduction. This paper elucidates the links between these broad-scale processes of wider interest to human geographers, and the apparently mundane choices women make about paid work and maternal care, in order to make two innovative contributions to our understanding of the contemporary accommodation between production and reproduction in neoliberal states.

First, the paper pinpoints the highly class-differentiated nature of contemporary reconfigurations in women's paid and unpaid work. The origins of this contribution lie in the conceptual framing of the study, and the innovative adoption of a two-fold comparative approach that moves beyond the tendency to understand parents' labour market engagement simply through a focus on those in paid work, and away from the dominance of middle-class accounts in studies of work–life reconciliation (Dyer *et al.* 2011; Harden *et al.* 2013). Analytically, the direct comparison between working mothers *and* those not in paid employment, and between middle- *and* working-class mothers, is

crucial as it elucidates the differential importance of wider social processes to these groups' highly divergent patterns of labour market engagement.

What the two-fold comparative analysis points to is the class-specific nature of the one-and-a-half breadwinner model. Though neoliberal policies have in theory worked with an adult worker model, research has traced how in practice what has emerged more often are households with one full-time and one part-time earner (Lewis 2002; MacLeavy 2011a; Perrons *et al.* 2006). This is indeed true for many of the middle-class households in our study, over half of whom conformed to the one-and-a-half breadwinner model. The findings demonstrate that the New Economy offers enticing employment opportunities to professional mothers (James 2011; Perrons *et al.* 2006), careers that are both personally fulfilling and financially attractive in an economic landscape where male partners might not earn a family-wage sufficient to fund a contemporary middle-class lifestyle and generational social reproduction (Katz 2008). These factors combine with gendered moralities that normalise women's paid employment, leading to high levels of labour market engagement (Office for National Statistics 2013). However, this is most often undertaken on a part-time basis, not least to allow women to meet the demands of intensive mothering, including their enrolment through the professionalisation of parenting in supporting the education of their primary-school-aged children (Hays 1996; Faircloth *et al.* 2013).

In contrast, the one-and-a-half breadwinner model has little analytical purchase for working-class women in our study: only 16 per cent of households adopt this model compared with 68 per cent who have one (or two) parents available to care for children on a full-time basis. Women's moral commitment to maternal care in the home (McDowell 2005), alongside their mounting enrolment as teachers for their children (DfE/DoH 2011), reinforces the importance of stay-at-home mothering for this group. This gendered morality intersects with structural inequalities that mean the New Economy has fewer financially and temporally feasible jobs open to them as low-qualified workers (Corlett and Whittaker 2014; Smith *et al.* 2011). Without question, this lack of employment opportunities is one reason why neoliberal policies, most notably efforts to 'make work pay' (HM Treasury 2002) through changes to the out-of-work benefits regime, and the provision of in-work benefits for low-paid workers (MacLeavy 2011b), do not translate smoothly into higher labour force participation, notwithstanding the climate of fear created among the recipients of state benefits.

In sum, the one-and-a-half breadwinner model continues to have much to offer to our understanding of middle-class lives, but it lacks relevance for these working-class families, over half of whom are surviving with no workers in what we might term a

state-dependent family model. Attention to this class specificity is vital because extensive differences in labour market engagement underpin growing inequality between middle-class families, who are able to use women's earnings to cushion their position, and working-class families who may choose to, but often have little option but to, rely on dwindling state benefits as a source of income. This demonstrates that women's everyday choices about paid work and unpaid caring labour are anything but mundane; rather they demand academic attention as a key site for the reproduction of contemporary class relations. Indeed, in a political context shaped by austerity, it is vital that we make state-dependent families conceptually visible, as only then can we contextualise their limited labour market engagement in relation to moral commitments to caring, barriers to paid work and limited employment opportunities, and consequently challenge simplistic political discourses about strivers versus skivers (Williams 2013). Furthermore, it is vital that future research into one-and-a-half breadwinner and state-dependent family models considers whether the ethnic-majority patterns revealed here hold analytical weight for Black and Asian middle- and working-class families.

This paper's second contribution is to concentrate academic attention on the sweeping expansion in the state's role in social reproduction (Gallagher 2012; Mahon 2005), as within a generation state schooling has emerged as a crucial location for primary-school-age childcare. The paper is novel in exploring parents' attitudes to this shift in the boundary between state and family responsibility for childcare. Among the middle classes, the profound leap this represents away from full-time mothering attracts remarkably little controversy. Rather, neoliberal shifts towards the adult worker model have created a discursive climate where paid work is seen as a norm, entitling middle-class women to demand services that facilitate their own, and indeed other women's, employment. Working-class women too argued that new demands being placed on them to enter the labour market required state action on childcare; however, this was often a demand for the rights of others, as individuals feared being coerced into leaving their own children in favour of paid work outside the home.

This service's provision, and its reception, raises essential questions about women's equality. For middle-class women, the state's redefinition of women as workers has largely chimed with their own desire to enter paid employment. Women's right to participate in the labour market on an equal footing was a key demand of second wave feminism, and the state is now facilitating the reconciliation of paid and unpaid work through a mixed economy of school-based childcare. For working-class women, a sense of trepidation about being forced to use childcare is well-founded. Long-term economic change resulting in declining male working-class

employment, and the neoliberal adoption of the adult worker model, pull at the rug under the feet of working-class women who want to mother in the home. Changing gender identities are being prescribed for this group, some of whom would prefer to reject participation in capitalist production in favour of their commitment to caring labour. Future research into the state's role in social reproduction is therefore vital, not only so we might examine the rolling out and rolling back in its functions, but also how these shape gender in/equality for groups of women with very different gendered moralities. This understanding can underpin a feminist politics that embraces both some women's right to equal treatment in the labour market, and supports other women's refusal to bow to the discourse that all adults should be full-time workers, valuing instead their commitment to social reproduction in the home.

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## Notes

- 1 Productive and reproductive labour are both forms of work that are essential to the workings of capitalist economies (McDowell and Massey 1984). Academic recognition of this presents some linguistic difficulties when in common cultural practice the term 'work' is generally used in reference to the paid, productive sphere. We negotiate this tension by referring to paid work/employment wherever this label does not become too cumbersome. We also refer to unpaid or caring work/labour to emphasise the monetary and social significance attached to reproductive work. Nevertheless, we find we cannot avoid using short-hand phrases such as 'working mothers' to describe those in paid employment, and 'stay-at-home mothers' to describe those who concentrate on unpaid caring work without causing undue awkwardness in the text.
- 2 We use a pseudonym and generalised area description to maintain anonymity.
- 3 H6 is the interviewee number; the central code refers to the father's employment status (in two-parent households); the final code indicates the mother's employment status. FT = full-time; PT = part-time; NPW = not-in-paid-work.

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