



## Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal...

Book review

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### **Complex Inequality and “Working Mothers”**

*Edited by Clare O’Hagan*

Cork University Press

2015

296pp.

Hardback

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This book is about women who combine motherhood with paid work. Through looking at the lives of Irish women, it explores important issues including childcare, childminders, family life and employment. The author’s objective is to fill a gap in the literature on work and motherhood, by “exploring how women combine motherhood with paid work in Ireland from a sociological perspective and feminist standpoint” (p. ix). The case study shows that changes in the breadwinner model with women’s increasing participation in paid work have not been matched by changes in Irish society, polity and economy to support gender equality. Policies for supporting unpaid care work are undeveloped compared with labor market activation measures. Families are currently combining working and caring in many different ways, but with little social support. The author points to a complex inequality occurring at the intersection of motherhood with paid work, which makes life difficult for women who attempt the two. Women who do are a silent majority, blaming themselves for poor choices, rather than blaming the system which sets clear and defined limits to the choices available in the first place. The conclusion is that despite the valiant efforts of mothers who work, there is at present an irreconcilable construction of work and motherhood in Irish society. The final chapter recommends significant changes in the way men, women and the state view the important issues of care and caring work, which requires a fundamental shift away from a traditional male breadwinner/female caregiver model. To give more of an idea of the contents of the book, a list of the chapter titles follows:

- Chapter 1: No country for “working mothers”
- Chapter 2: Complex inequality
- Chapter 3: “Working mothers” research
- Chapter 4: Making the “right” choice
- Chapter 5: Reflexive moral reasoning
- Chapter 6: The myth of motherhood
- Chapter 7: Childcare
- Chapter 8: Who cares? Childminders
- Chapter 9: Children’s capitals
- Chapter 10: “Time for me is time for everybody”
- Chapter 11: A new gender regime

Even though the immediate context for the book is Irish society and economy, the case study clearly has relevance to most developed economies where women are increasingly part of the paid workforce, especially given the recent and growing interest in work life balance, both in the academe and in management practice. The primary intended audience seems to be academic sociologists and feminists specializing in, say, gender equality or women's studies, especially given the analytical framework chosen, of which more below. That being said, however, there is much in this book that would be of major interest to academic researchers into work life balance, employment equity, and human resource management, as well as management and union practitioners from a policy perspective. For most readers, and especially those not well versed in sociological or feminist theory and analysis, the chapters describing and analyzing the case study findings (Chapters 4-10) will possibly contain the most interesting and relevant aspects of this book. Any woman who is a "working mother" reading these chapters will identify with the many tensions, quandaries and difficult choices of the women whose voices we hear talking about their experiences.

There are many good points about this book. It is well researched with a solid qualitative methodology, based on focus groups and interviews with 30 professional and middle-class Irish women who have children and have worked or are working outside the home. Biographical details of the participants provided in both the body of the book (Chapter 3) and in Appendix 2 are very useful. There is a good mix of interviewees, with half having worked full time with the other half comprised of women who worked reduced hours, part-time or job sharing. The women interviewed represent a broadly even split between private and public sector workplaces.

An excellent background of the Irish political, economic and religious contexts for the study is provided. Of particular relevance is the unique religious background of Irish society, linked with the relatively late integration of women into the paid workforce. The importance of the discourse of motherhood is emphasized in a traditional society where, for example, it was only in 1973 that Irish legislation prohibiting married women from working was removed as a condition for joining the European Union. The author discusses in this background section (Chapter 1) the interconnections and frequent tensions between this strong motherhood discourse and others now dominant in Irish society, such as neo-liberalism, individualism, and feminism, and the impact such potential contradictions have on the women in her study. She revisits these themes in her analysis of the case study findings in the main body of the book.

The methodology features a very good explanation of the analytical framework the author develops in order to interpret the data. She builds on the feminist concept of complex inequality, whereby women's inequalities are "anchored in social systems and the ways the social relations of gender, class, motherhood and employment intersect with the institutions of family, workplace and society" (Introduction, p. xvii). Added to this linkage of individual with institutional inequality is an exploration of how the operation of power affects working women with children and how this process works to create "multiple intersecting inequalities and privileges, even while patterns are dynamic and changing" (p. 36).

Overall, the book is based on a thoroughly researched and well-organized study, with chapter titles that clearly reflect the author's focus in that particular chapter, and a good conclusion drawing the theoretical and practical strands together. Even though the case study is focussed on Ireland, and therefore understood in a particular Irish context, the findings and conclusions are relevant to any industrialized economy where women are

now a significant part of the workforce. In Canada, for example, although there was no legislative barrier to women working up until 1973, as in Ireland, the trend for women with children working outside the home is still increasing, we still have a gender wage gap, there is a rapidly growing interest in work life balance, and the provision of publicly funded childcare (and/or affordable private childcare) is now a controversial issue and seen as an important policy area in any political party's election platform.

There are in my opinion very few limitations with regard to this book. However, one that surfaces occasionally is the language used in the text, which for non-sociologists or those unfamiliar with discourse analysis or feminist analysis, is sometimes a little difficult to understand. However, in my opinion, the author does a very good job in Chapter 2 in explaining her analytical framework. I agree with her that in order to understand inequality we have to explore the dynamics of process and structure, and how individual agency relates to social structure, or social system.

Also, from a theoretical perspective, although the author does cite a number of sources in explaining how she developed her own analytical framework, I would have liked a clearer explanation of how Giddens' concept of "structuration" underlies her framework. She does cite Giddens (1990) but only once and almost in passing (p. 33); it seems to me that the scholars whose work she integrates into her own built their ideas upon Giddens' writings on agency, process and structure.

Although the conclusion is done well overall, and successfully broadens the relevance of the findings beyond Ireland, I would like to have seen more discussion of the likelihood of her "new gender regime" (Chapter 11) being implemented in Ireland, beyond the assertion that neo-liberal and motherhood discourses would act as strong barriers to change. For example, it is not only the political, economic and cultural nature of Irish society we have to consider, but we also have to take note of the political, economic and cultural context of such regimes being in place in the countries she uses as positive models, such as Iceland and Denmark. For example, both countries have a long history of social democracy informing government policy and process, which is not the case in Ireland.

In conclusion, the book is in hardback form with 296 pages. In my view, it is a good, informative read and well worth the money.

**Susan M. Hart**

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### Reference

Giddens, A. (1990), *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge.