

# Conflicting Loyalties

## *Gender, Class and Equity Politics in Working Class Culture*

*By Pauline Gardiner Barber*

*Les expériences des femmes en matière de contrôle dans le milieu de travail sont très discriminatoires à leur égard et fortement subjectives. Outre les habituels obstacles de classe auxquels elles doivent faire face comme travailleuses industrielles, les femmes doivent aussi, dans leur rapport avec les structures du pouvoir, affronter les idéologies familiale et sexuelle qui sont sous-jacents à leur subordination comme travailleuses. Le présent document est basé sur l'expérience vécue par les travailleuses du secteur de traitement du poisson au Cap Breton. Il examine les différentes formes de sexisme et de sexualité qui caractérisent les relations de travail dans les entreprises paternalistes ou dans les grandes sociétés. On estime que, même si ces femmes peuvent accepter les contradictions qu'elles vivent comme travailleuses grâce à leur participation active au mouvement syndical, il leur est beaucoup plus difficile d'ignorer les dilemmes subjectifs auxquels leur subordination sexuelle les expose. À ce niveau, la lutte devient plus personnelle et suscite peu d'intérêt dans les milieux politiques.*

Gender inequities in the work-place are now well documented in feminist scholarship. In structural terms, the majority of women and men enter gendered labour markets where they seek forms of employment which will position them in sex-typed jobs in sex-segregated workplaces. With few exceptions the women will earn lower wage rates, receive fewer benefits and will be more likely to be employed on a part-time basis regardless of their desire for full time employment. Moreover, many full time jobs held by women, are being converted to part-time jobs, as employers utilize computer technologies to match workers to periods of peak demand for labour. In the service sector, a major source of employment for

women, banking and retail jobs well illustrate these patterns of conversion to casualized employment. While the loss of full time employment for males is certainly causing hardship, particularly in industrial and manufacturing jobs, but in other sectors as well, the impacts of these processes of economic and job restructuring have very different consequences for women and men.

This then is the backdrop within which the current struggles to achieve gender equity in the workplace are defined; women and men are structurally positioned in different jobs with different wages, many jobs are being re-organized or re-located and most workers are now realizing that they face an uncertain future. These changes, however, mean quite different things to women and men.

Going beyond the structural manifestations of gendered employment, what are the gender implications of political and economic changes from the point of view of the workers themselves? How do gender, class, and the dynamics of racism become transformed as workers, women and men from different class and cultural contexts, interpret and respond to these new threats to their livelihood, identity and sense of self worth? Clearly, this current situation introduces new forms of complexity and, quite probably, a whole new series of obstacles to the political struggles for gender equity in the workplace.

I will now explore these issues in more detail through an examination of the politics of class, gender, and sexuality on the shopfloor in one particular industrial and cultural niche, fish processing plants in industrial Cape Breton.<sup>1</sup> What I hope to demonstrate here in this all too brief thumb nail sketch is how class, cultural, and regional loyalties are cultivated through family and community relations in ways which obscure gender inequali-

ties. In turn, class and community perspectives carry over into social dynamics in the workplace. Here again, the structural nature of gender based inequalities and the forms of gender specific subordination women are subjected to are obscured by the gender organization of the labour process in the workplace and by the rich and varied aspects of gender specific workplace culture.

Women tend to place the needs of others ahead of their own needs and to hold loyalty to family and familial ideologies which privilege men in workplace and family relationships. Another way of putting this is that workers everywhere bring specific class cultural values to work. Women's identities as workers are never exclusively drawn from their work relations as suggested by Marxist models of production politics. Rather, any forms of critical consciousness that women develop must straddle their various complex, conflicting and sometimes contradictory loyalties which are shaped by meaningful ideologies in local culture.

In industrial Cape Breton community and family loyalties have deep roots. Generations of industrial Cape Bretoners have contended with insecure economic conditions caused by the long and steady de-industrialization of the area. From the outset, the coal and steel industries have been unstable and yet the workers and their families have clung to the region with tenacity, loyalty, and commitment. One significant aspect of regional culture is that in many households economic strategies rely heavily upon kinship networks and informal economic relationships in family and community-based networks. Informal is used here in the sense that people are acquiring goods and services through a barter system or by payments which are not calculated officially for the purposes of income and sales taxes.

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## Women's participation in sexually explicit shop floor culture can be seen as their assertion of a form of agency.

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Cape Bretoners espouse an ideology of "taking care of one's own" combined with a strong suspicion of outsiders. These features of local culture deny gender difference and the disproportionately heavier role women play in contributing to household economic practices through their constant efforts to "stretch the dollar" and to "make ends meet." Mining has played a major role in the development of local working class culture and here again, the masculine ideologies reproduced in the mining workplace have been reproduced and reinforced by a male dominant gender division of labour in family life. Miner's wives were quick to discuss how they were expected to "wait hand and foot" on their husbands. These gender patterns have been over time and across the community at large as part of the general gender framework in community culture. Overall, this cultural framework, including its gender implications, defines worker's expectations and guides issues which workers, women and men, will respond to in the politics of the workplace.

Paternalistic fish plants in Cape Breton represent a strong fit with dominant themes in local culture. These plants reproduced the ideologies of family, community, and gender relations so compelling in local working class culture. Most relevant to the issue of gender equity, supervision of the workers involved the manipulation of gender ideologies (sexist by the standards of a feminist politics insensitive to class issues) compounded by sexual bantering as a major aspect to controlling the female labour force.

Women were alternately flattered for their qualities as women and, at times, berated for expressions of their femaleness. They were "the girls" to each other, to their male co-workers and to their boss. The "girls" confessed that they sometimes talked more than they should, spent more time in the bathroom than the boss wanted them to, and were sometimes in-

capable of the levels of concentration demanded of them because of their family responsibilities. Some women also pointed out their strengths as workers and noted that they were as skilled in their work as some of their male counterparts who appeared to get more credit for skill. The men were fewer in number and were more free to perform a greater range of tasks throughout the plant and away from the supervision of the production line. Their masculinity was discussed less in terms of their deficiencies and more in terms of what they were capable of because of their male strength. They were "the men" and unlike "the girls," they were not described through generalities and accorded negative attributes based upon their gender.

Paternalistic management practices created a family-like atmosphere, albeit a gendered one, characterized for the most part by a sense of mutuality and common interest. This tone was reinforced by the practice of hiring relatives of workers from the plant. Loyalty to the "Boss," a father figure whom one looked to for help with financial and personal problems, and to the company in which one takes pride because of the close ties with co-workers, often relatives whom one has "helped to get a job," fuel the sense of "one big family." The ideologies which support paternalism incorporate dominant gender ideologies, including male privileges (men as breadwinners and women as objects of male sexual gratification), while contributing to the suppression of plant-specific class-based politics.

By the same token, my research revealed that women working in paternalistic plants do exert control and seek to restore personal dignity in the verbal exchanges of the shopfloor sexual bantering through their participation in the bawdy humour; a form of seizing control of the situation. They do make jokes against men and male anatomy and they manipulate the gendered joking relationships

by attempting to out-joke the men and their boss. Shocking people with one's jokes was a source of personal pride, perhaps a way of women communicating to their male and female co-workers that women too can be tough. However, these women remain limited in their expressions of gendered dignity and self-worth in a workplace culture riddled with sexist sexual bantering by the fact that such practices reinforce rather than critically assess predominant gender ideologies.

One further aspect of gendered workplace culture relied upon women's common interests and experiences. Ritual celebrations of births, marriages, family reunions, and anniversary parties often included contributions of food and gifts from co-workers; emphasizing the family dynamics of workplace culture. The sharing of significant events in their lives and the support they provided for each other in times of grief and hardship provided further forms of personal satisfaction arising out of the work experience. In some cases women spoke of these shared experiences as a form of compensation for the hardships of fish plant work. Such personal ties could become critical in the event that women might choose to develop collective critical agendas around class or even gender issues; in the meantime these aspect of women's work culture provided positive women-defined spaces for the expression and practice of women's identity. The flexible, production-line orientation of the paternalistic plant supported this aspect of women's workculture; the locus of a possible future context for gender specific solidarity in contradiction to the male dominant gendered nature of class and community culture.

In terms of labour process control in the paternalistic plant an individual's work discipline was only one factor in management's assessment of the aptitude of their labour force. There was also concern

for the pacing of the labour process as a whole through group work output, hence management supported joking and teasing on the line in the interests of creating a pleasant work environment for all. Productivity was measured more on a plant-wide basis than in terms of the productive capacity of each individual worker. Individual output was not evaluated in a systematic way and workers were encouraged to see themselves as members of one "big family" under the control of a relatively benevolent patriarch (figuratively and literally). Labour process organization thus also supported the familial ideology and was inhibiting to the emergence of class consciousness.

Some aspects of this situation might inspire discussion of sexual harassment in a different context both in terms of the unequal power differential between the boss and his women workers and the fact that women workers new to the plant were compelled to take part or be ridiculed for taking a prudish morally superior stand. Some examples of the sexual humour repeated to me involved the ridicule of men and many were blatantly sexist containing negative references to women and their bodies. Nonetheless, it was my impression that the women I spoke with did not recognize an obvious disadvantage to this aspect of the gendering of their workplace. In this sense, the women's participation in this sexually explicit shop floor culture can be seen as their assertion of a form of agency. That is they were not merely the objects of sexual humour, they also participated in the humour, no doubt turning the situation to their advantage with male targeted jokes. (One worker had received a reputation for getting cheeky with the boss on this score.)

More insidious and less within the control of the women employees was the fact that this shop-floor culture served to continually define gender difference which invariably advantages men over women in the politics and economics of the workplace. It was more in the interests of the women plant workers to have their boss adopt an attitude of gender neutrality, to perceive the similarities in the abilities of male and female workers.

In stark contrast, class expressions and identification were found in a second type of fish plant organized along corporate lines. Here, after modernizing an older

plant, previously organized along paternalistic lines, the new corporate management had utilized computer technologies to impose a more individualized form of control over the labour process. In this context the production line was re-organized to individually isolate each cutting and trimming work station. This was where the majority of the plant's female labour force was set to work. In this context, gendered forms of control over workers were less immediately visible in sexually explicit terms and there was less space for informal types of resistance and the carving out of female defined spaces such as through long trips to the bathroom.

In the stresses of the restructuring of the labour process, gender differences in the plant were highlighted through the pressures placed disproportionately upon women trimmers on the processing production line, the one section of production not amenable to mechanization. Yet this gender specific pressure, experienced only by women workers who were widely acknowledged to be the worst off under the new labour process organization, was not translated into gendered class dynamics and put forward as a matter of collective concern. Despite the fact that women workers bore the brunt of the stresses of the new squeeze to increase productivity, and women's jobs were most at risk under the new measures of productivity, the discourse of militancy was class-focused rather than gender-motivated. Resistance to gender domination remained at a more individual level. The situation is summed up in the comment of one woman, I shall call her May, who worked in the corporate plant at the time the collective agreement was being negotiated. May expressed surprise that the union she and her co-workers had chosen to represent them had introduced a standardized sexual harassment clause for inclusion in their collective agreement. May told me that she saw harassment in terms of extreme forms of sexually explicit, coercive behaviours. She told me:

*We don't have any of that down there. We never have either (that is in the old days). We've got everything else wrong but none of that stuff goes on there — not really.*

On the other hand, another trimmer, confided to me that the re-organization of the workplace and the labour process communicated misogyny through the lack of regard for the comfort (physical and social) of the women on the line:

*Whoever designed this plant must have hated women. He's got us lifting and carrying so much it hurts. And then we have to stand in one spot all the time.*

It is perspectives like this which suggest an emergent gender consciousness along with the class consciousness demonstrated in the unionization. Moreover, it would appear there is a clear gender dimension to the litany of complaints about management's harassment of the trimming labourforce and the many reports of increased manifestations of stress — including health problems and increased absenteeism. But to reiterate, it is the overall threat, interpreted according to the tenets of a community-based class culture, which motivates union militancy on this occasion. While this is hardly surprising given the pre-dominance of masculine priorities and privileges which any expressions of women's gender consciousness would need to challenge it is noteworthy that male workers, under less immediate threat of meeting the new exacting production quotas, collaborated with their women co-workers in the unionization. They might have equally resolved to use the opportunity to strengthen their privileged position in the plant's labour force at the expense of the besieged female labourforce.

In conclusion, I have taken up the issues concerning gender and resistance in labour process control and I have suggested that a focus upon class dynamics must be balanced by an equally detailed analysis of the content of gender as this is produced and reproduced through work relations in a given context. There is more at stake here than is often acknowledged in the current struggles over policies to counteract sexism in the workplace. Heterosexuality remains a major dimension of control over women by men in the workplace and the home. Through the sex-typing and the sex-segregating of jobs and the engenderment of labour process control, the structuring of male domina-

tion and female exploitation in class and race specific ways is perpetuated. It is the direct assault upon women's self-esteem and their femininity that renders women most vulnerable to forms of labour process control involving the manipulation of femininity by management and, in assertions of personal control by workers. These processes render women's experience of their exploitation as qualitatively different than the experience of exploitation by men of their class and/or race. The underlying conditions which surface in sexism in the workplace are structural in nature and will not be resolved through the implementation of piecemeal employment related policies.

Sexual harassment policies are a necessary first step in dealing with workplace sexism but they are by no means a solution to the problems of the denigration, the objectification and the many other manifestations of sexual and social violence towards women. Because class politics and community loyalties are important reference points in women's lives, many women are unable or unlikely to risk trading off these loyalties in favour of gender politics and for gender specific issues like workplace equity.

The women I knew in Cape Breton impressed me with their strength, their resourcefulness in the face of economic insecurities and the degree of their commitment to put the needs of others before their own interests. If I were to ask them specifically about gender equity, I predict they would suggest all should be treated fairly, no one group should receive special privileges, workers should defend their rights, yet men as workers deserve the right to decent jobs in order to support their families.

Hegemonic gender ideologies, which we know to be extremely efficient at obscuring the many forms of gendered structural inequities women experience, receive greater potency as gender relations are produced and reproduced in working class communities and in workplace culture. Women resist in individual ways but there are powerful obstacles confronting their collective organization around gender issues. My projection for the future, based upon my own research and a review of comparative studies on gender, work and de-industrialization, is that working class women are likely to continue to

affirm non-gendered loyalties and working class men will continue to assert masculinity in the gender division of labour at work and at home. Male identities and self-esteem in working class culture also depend upon these arrangements which are proving resilient in contexts of high male unemployment and redundancy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The research which I report on here was conducted during 1987 as part of the requirements for my doctoral dissertation in social anthropology from the University of Toronto. My knowledge of class and gender politics in Cape Breton is based upon participant-observation field work during 9 months of community residence as well as in-depth interviews with 45 plant workers and managers. I remain grateful to the women and men who shared their stories and interpreted their workplace politics for me. With the assistance of a SSHRC Post-doctoral Fellowship from 1989 to 1991, I have been re-considering the complexities of class and gender consciousness as I came to understand these issues from the field work. While I appreciate my interpretations will differ from local understandings, it is my sincere hope that I continue to hold the trust given to me and to show my deep respect for the strength, courage, and dignity women fish plant workers bring to their labour and their lives.

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of these issues, see, for example, Armstrong and Armstrong, 1988; Bradley, 1989; Hossfeld, 1990; Jenson et al., 1988; Livingstone and Luxton, 1989; MacDonald and Connelly, 1989; and Morris, 1990.

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# The New Workforce

## More dual-earner families

- More mothers and fathers will be combining the responsibilities of child raising with the requirements of their jobs.
- In 1961, only 20 per cent of all two-parent families reported both parents working in the paid labour force. By 1986, more than half (53 per cent) of all two-parent families were dual-earner (Judith MacBride-King and Hélène Paris, "Balancing Work and Family Responsibilities," *Canadian Business Review*, Autumn 1989, p. 17).
- For many households, having both partners in the paid labour force is an economic imperative. The number of two-parent families below the poverty line would increase by an estimated 78 per cent only if one person in the household had paid work (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, *Women and Labour Market Poverty*, Ottawa, 1990, p. 22).

## More heads of single-parent families

- Between 1977 and 1984, 163,000 more single parents joined the workforce. While the vast majority of Canadian single-parent families were mother-led (82.2 per cent), the proportion of father-led single-parent families is growing (MacBride-King and Paris, p. 18).

## More women of all ages and at all stages of their lives

- The enormous influx of women into the paid labour force is perhaps the most striking trend in Canada's demographic profile. Among western democracies Canada ranks behind only Scandinavia in dependence on women in the labour force (Fran Sussner Rodgers and Charles Rodgers, "Business and the Facts of Family Life," *Harvard Business Review* November-December 1989, p. 121).
- In 1951, only 23.5 per cent of Canadian women worked for pay outside

the home. By 1987, this was up to 56.2 per cent. The Conference Board of Canada estimates that by 1993, the number of women in the paid labour force could reach 63.1 per cent (MacBride-King and Paris, p. 18).

- Approximately half of the paid workforce will be women. Not only are more women entering the workforce, but they are also staying longer than ever before. Women now spend between 34 and 37 years on average in the paid labour force—a term comparable to men (Pam Smith, "Working Life and Unemployment Tables for Males and Females," Discussion Paper 55, University of Alberta, 1988).

## More women with children, particularly mothers of young children

- Labour force participation for women with children under 16 has risen steadily over the past number of years (from 41.6 per cent in 1975 to 56.8 per cent in 1983—MacBride-King and Paris, p. 18). For women with young children, however, the increase has been dramatic. In 1976, fewer than 32 per cent of mothers with children under three years of age were in the paid workforce. By 1986, one out of every two mothers with children under three were in the labour force, with 66 per cent of them working full time (Labour Canada, *Leave for Employees with Family Responsibilities*, 1988, p. 8).

## More men with direct responsibility for family care

- While historically women have been the primary family caregivers, recent surveys and articles show that responsibility for the care of children and elderly relatives is now being shared increasingly by men. Many men are pursuing more balanced lifestyles and exploring work settings and arrangements that enable them to participate fully and directly in family care.
- At Du Pont U.S., for example, a 1985 study of 6,600 employees showed that 18 per cent of male workers were interested in the option of part-time work to accommodate their child care responsibilities. In a similar study conducted only three years later, a full 33

per cent of men expressed an interest in the part-time option for family reasons ("Family Benefits for Men: The Pay-off for Companies," *Perspective*, April 1989).

## More workers caring for elderly parents or relatives

- With the aging of the baby-boom generation, the fastest-growing group in Ontario's labour force over the next 12 years will be workers 45 to 54 years of age. Their share of the labour force will rise from 15.9 per cent in 1988 to 21.8 per cent in the year 2001 (Interministerial Committee on Labour Supply, *Ontario Participation Rate Projections to the Year 2001*, October 12, 1989, p. 16). Not only will this be the fastest-growing segment of the workforce, but also it will be the group sharing much of the responsibility for the care of older family members.
- Right now, two out of five people 30 years of age and older provide some kind of care for elderly relatives (Dan Remington, "When Your Parents Need You...", *The Globe and Mail* supplement *Today's Health*, December 3, 1989, p. 37). As the parents of baby boomers continue to age, more of their adult children will be combining a job with elder care.

## More workers caring for people with disabilities

- The number of people combining a job with caregiving for a relative or friend with a disability will also increase. A national study on health and disability showed that out of a population of 2.5 million people (aged 15 and over) with disabilities, only 842,000 were physically independent. Some 400,000 were partially dependent, and 1.1 million were dependent on others. Close to 1 million people had a disability that prevented them from working (Report of the Canadian health and Disability Survey, 1983-84).

(Reprinted from *Work and Family: The Crucial Balance*, Ontario Women's Directorate, 1991, pp. 8-9.)