Inequality Regimes and Gendered Labour Market Disadvantage within the New Zealand Film Industry

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses Acker’s concept of inequality regimes to analyse gendered labour market disadvantage within the Wellington film industry. Interviews with twelve female and eleven male production workers suggest that structural conditions, industry norms and collective practices within the industry mean that workers need to show total flexibility and commitment. This creates difficulties balancing work and family. This issue affects women disproportionately as cultural norms emphasise women’s childcare responsibilities. The dilemma facing women with children adversely affects the employment prospects of all women. Childless women need to prove their reliability and loyalty by dedicating themselves to the industry to a greater degree than their male colleagues. Consequently, inequality regimes are perpetuated by the actions of both male and female workers.
INTRODUCTION

This paper uses Acker’s (1992; 2006; 2009; 2012) concept of ‘inequality regimes’ to examine female freelance film production workers’ labour market disadvantage within the Wellington film industry. Acker defines inequality regimes as interlocking sets of structural conditions, cultural norms and collective practices which create and maintain gender, class or race based discrimination in organisations. She suggests that many organisational structures, cultures and routines which appear on the surface to exist solely to facilitate effective organisational functioning also have the effect of privileging some organisational groups and disadvantaging others. In contrast to some theorists (e.g. Giddens 1984) who suggest that structure and agency are so interwoven that they cannot be separated analytically, Acker treats structure and agency as analytically distinct, with structure preceding agency. Women entering organisations encounter gendered inequality regimes and find their choices and actions circumscribed by the organisational context. Women may therefore have full or partial awareness of the structural conditions, opportunities and constraints they face and still be confined by these circumstances into choosing actions which reproduce gendered inequities within the workplace.

A large body of empirical research supports Acker’s theoretical claims (e.g. Bryant and Jaworski 2011; DiTomaso, Post and Parks-Yancy 2007; Eveline and Booth 2002). Most of this research has been carried out in traditional organisations with clear organisational and career hierarchies and a permanently employed labour force (Britton and Logan 2008). This set of organisational arrangements has been overturned within the ‘new economy’ labour market which is increasingly characterised by job insecurity, networking and short-term, project-based labour (Williams, Muller and Kilanski 2012). Feminist critics of these developments suggest that the shift towards more flexible labour markets may have amplified gender based inequality by creating increasingly precarious and competitive employment and dismantling those forms of collective organising specifically designed to challenge gender based inequality regimes (Christopherson 2008; McRobbie 2009; Murray and Gollmitzer 2012). The increasing prominence of individualist models of society may also contribute to gendered inequality by focussing attention on individual choices and actions.
and minimising awareness of the structural conditions and collective practices which influence these activities.

The creative industries have been identified as sites where the new workplace realities of precarity and individualism have become well established and are seen by some as exemplars of emerging employment patterns within society (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009; Smith 2010). Gender inequality within the creative industries is therefore an important issue in its own right but may also be an indicator of future patterns of gender discrimination within other industries. Banks and Milestone (2011) suggest that the precarious labour market conditions within the creative industries and the extreme commitment expected of workers are inimical to family life. They draw upon Beck’s (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) analysis of individualisation to argue that the ‘ideal’ creative industries worker is a single individual, unhindered by obligations to either people or place and totally committed to their work.

Labour market conditions within the creative industries could, theoretically, be incompatible with family life without creating gendered environments which treat men and women differently. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that traditional gender roles are becoming less distinct as new economic models based on individualism and precarity gain prominence within modern economies. Individualism may therefore help to free women from traditional expectations and norms which they, and others, have concerning women’s social responsibilities. From this perspective, men and women working within the creative industries could accept the primacy of paid labour to an equal degree, have similar expectations concerning work and family roles, be perceived and dealt with in a gender-neutral fashion by organisational powerholders and have similar support systems facilitating or hindering work/family balance. Theoretically at least, the individualised workplace could be inimical to the family unit without having gendered inequality regimes in place.

The alternative argument, put forward by various feminist writers, suggests that concept of the ‘autonomous worker’ which dominates precarious labour markets is essentially masculine (Crump, Logan and McIlroy 2007; Gill and Pratt 2008). This perspective suggests that traditional cultural
norms concerning parenthood ensure that men and women are differentially affected by labour market conditions which are incompatible with family responsibilities (Adkins 2004; Fernandez-Mateo 2009; Wee and Brooks 2012).

There has been relatively little research examining labour market conditions and collective practices within the creative industries from a gendered perspective (Banks and Milestone 2011; Taylor 2011). The limited research which does exist suggests that creative workplaces are often highly gendered environments where discourses of self-actualisation, egalitarianism and flexibility help to obscure structural conditions and normative practices which produce gender discrimination and disadvantage (Bielby 2009; Grugulis and Stoyanova 2012; Holgate and McKay 2009; Perrons 2003). Census data from Skillset, the British sector skills council for the creative industries, suggests that women working in film and television are less likely than their male colleagues to have children and more likely to abandon their careers after having children. Their research reveals that 40% of male film production workers have dependent children living with them compared to only 14% of women (Skillset 2010). The large gender differences in the percentage of workers with children under sixteen years and the higher dropout rate of women at around the age of thirty five suggests that men and women make different trade-offs between work and family, with women appearing less able to combine both roles successfully (Gill 2002; Murray and Gollmitzer 2012).

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that women have more difficulty than men combining successful careers in the film and television industries with family responsibilities. However, many women in these industries remain childfree and should therefore avoid the career penalties commonly associated with motherhood. This research described in this paper reveals that childfree women are also disadvantaged by motherhood, either because they are perceived as potentially risky employees who may have children in the future, or because they deviate from cultural norms which suggest women should have children. Ultimately, motherhood defines all women as imperfect workers unable to successfully enact the film industry ideal of the individualised and committed freelance worker.
METHODOLOGY

This research utilised Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a guiding methodological framework (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009). Essentially, this approach to qualitative research seeks to understand and interpret the experiential world of participants through careful and sympathetic analysis of events and issues which they find personally significant.

Participants were accessed through the authors’ personal connections with industry insiders. These contacts then facilitated access to a wider group through their personal and professional networks. The twelve female and eleven male participants were selected to provide a gender balanced and diverse mix of film production workers within the Wellington film industry. Eight production workers who had recently left the industry were included to provide insights into their reasons for leaving the industry (see Table One for participant details).

Participants were interviewed individually in non-work locations. Twenty one interviews were carried out as part of a more general study of film production workers’ experiences. Two interviews with female participants focussed entirely on gender issues and were designed to clarify themes which had emerged during the earlier interviews. Gender related issues covered in the interviews included working conditions, cultural norms, networking and social relationships, power relationships, work-life balance, childcare and attitudes towards parenting. Interviews were taped and transcribed by the authors.

A three stage analysis of the data was carried out. In the first stage each transcript was examined separately to identify key gender related issues within that individual’s narrative. In the second stage the key issues raise by all female participants were compared and contrasted with key issues raised by male participants to identify commonalities or discrepancies between female and male accounts. Finally, the emergent themes from the entire data set were analysed to interpret the ways in which structural conditions, cultural norms and everyday collective practices within the industry interact to produce gendered inequality regimes.
FINDINGS

Structural factors

The Wellington film industry is small by global standards and is heavily dependent on overseas funding. This creates large fluctuations in the amount of work and the industry can move rapidly from a situation where experienced production workers find work relatively easy to obtain to one where workers are competing for scarce employment. The industry is non-unionised with strong resistance to unionisation coming from international film studios, local film producers and the New Zealand government. Current legislation means that benefits such as holiday and sick pay, parental leave, workplace superannuation and the right to bargain collectively over pay and conditions are unavailable to film workers who are classified as self-employed contractors rather than employees. The industry is dominated by a few key individuals with established reputations and proven ability to secure international financing. The small size of the industry ensures that social networks and ‘latent organisations’ within the industry are tight knit and limited in number. The maintenance of strong networks and a good professional reputation is therefore essential to securing repeat employment.

Although women comprise around 40 percent of Wellington’s freelance film production workers they have made limited inroads into technical areas such as sound, lighting and camera or post production engineering and are predominately employed in traditionally female occupations such as hair, make-up and administration (Statistics New Zealand 2012). While women occupy some quite powerful administrative and creative positions within the industry the highest echelons remain male dominated.

Structurally, the Wellington film industry has many features which create gendered inequalities within the workplace. Several female participants noted that the freelance employment status of film workers is particularly invidious for women as it means they are ineligible for maternity leave and have no rights to re-employment. The long hours and physically demanding nature of some film work can also create practical difficulties for pregnant women and nursing mothers. Thus for women, though not for men, the decision to have children almost inevitably means a relatively long hiatus from employment in an industry where networking, visibility and reputation are crucial to gaining employment.
Cultural Norms and Collective Practices

Film workers’ perceptions of the relationship between work and family life contributed to the development of gendered inequality regimes which disadvantaged women. All participants acknowledged that working conditions within the industry are inimical to family life. However, most males saw the industry as gender-neutral. The comment of Ned, a freelance model maker in his early fifties is typical of male participants’ views:

‘I think the film industry is a genderless industry – everybody is screwed equally. You don’t have to be a woman to get a harder time than a man’

For men, the perception of the industry as genderless was often linked to their own difficulties combining work and family life. All males with children acknowledged that their partners took primary responsibility for childcare and running the household. Despite this, many gave graphic examples of the work/life balance problems they experienced and the detrimental impact of prioritising work on their family life. For male participants the problems they recounted related primarily to financial insecurity and difficulties shifting from work-related to family oriented modes of functioning. Paradoxically, recognition of their own work/life balance problems tended to obscure male participants’ awareness that women often made more difficult choices, frequently leaving the industry because they could not combine work and family or remaining childless in order to succeed.

Women were more likely to see the industry as gendered, however the examples they gave all centred on work related issues such as networking, pay bargaining or male dominated power structures. While all female participants were cognisant of the difficulties of combining film work and motherhood the dilemma was framed as an issue of individual choice rather than a consequence of gendered inequality regimes within the film industry. The analysis supplied by Juliet, a senior producer in her early 40s who had left the industry around eighteen months earlier when pregnant with her first child, typifies the rationale many women gave:

‘It’s a slightly sexist industry. Power in the industry is definitely held by men at the top and women may have to work a bit harder to gain authority. But I don’t think the industry discriminates against
women themselves – if you’re willing to give up on family you can potentially make it. A lot of the roles are very organisational and women do them really well – but what you see is that most of them drop out if they have children because it’s not a family friendly industry.’

Juliet’s response, like that of most other female participants, identifies the problems within the industry but rejects the idea of gendered inequality and frames the solution as an individual choice between family and career. This preserves the normative ideal of the autonomous film worker while obscuring the essentially masculine model of work and family relationships underpinning it.

Framing the ideal film worker as unencumbered by family enables women with children to be categorised as deviant. Melissa, a childfree producer in her early forties explained:

‘There are three genders in this industry, men, women without children and women with children. A male without children and a male with children and a female who is definitely without children are probably equivalent. A female with children is different.’

The discriminatory implications of this perspective were illustrated by Patrick, an art department head, when explaining his reluctance to employ women with children:

‘I’ve had situations where there’s been a woman and she’s got young children and you’ve got a nanny or childcare ... but its “can I come in at 8 rather than seven because I’ve got to take the child to ...” and you say fine as long as it doesn’t interfere with your work. But sometimes you have to say look sort it or I’ll have to let you go and get someone who can be here. Being a mother usually means more than being a father so it creates more problems.’

Similar sentiments were expressed by Juliet, describing past hiring decisions she had made:

‘I think female workers with children are potentially less reliable – that’s the reality. I think most employers –having been in that position myself- are more likely to employ the male because you’ve cut a high risk factor out. When I’m trying to think of people for roles I’ll say well they’ve got the skills for this role but they’ve got children and their husband’s doing this so they’re probably not workable. You’ve got to remember it’s your reputation on the line as well as theirs.’
The accuracy of statements concerning the unreliability of mothers is a moot point. Crucially, this perception has generalised to all women with children, creating a context where they are categorised as deviant workers unable to obey the rules of a work environment demanding total commitment to the exigencies of film production. This perception of mothers creates problems for all female film workers, irrespective of their reproductive status, as women without children need to prove their commitment to remaining unencumbered, childfree workers to a greater degree than men.

**Women’s Choices**

International data from countries such as Britain (Skillset 2010) and Canada (Coles 2013) shows that many women leave the film industry because of the difficulties of combining work and family. New Zealand data shows a similar pattern, with women tending to leave the industry in their mid-thirties when they have children (Statistics New Zealand 2012). Within this research five women had left the industry for this reason. Susan, a childless art department assistant in her mid-thirties, had decided to leave the industry before having children because of the problems she perceived women as having combining film work and family life:

‘It’s a male run industry and it is hard. Most females will be in production and they become known as the production spinsters. First in, last out. They are very good at their job (but) it replaces all those relationships that they have to give up on .......’I’m not going to have kids, I’m not going to bother having a partner’ and that’s why they bury themselves in work. Well that’s an individual choice but it’s not my cup of tea....’

Four other women left the industry after having children, sometimes because they recognised the difficulties of combining parenting and film work and made a conscious decision to leave, sometimes because work opportunities dried up after they became mothers. Two female participants noted that senior women who worked in organisational roles where they needed to co-ordinate staff and activities had more problems remaining in the industry than women working in less prestigious areas like make-up or hairdressing. Such women are often highly educated and are faced, in their mid-thirties or early forties with finding new careers. As Juliet explained:
‘I did think about going back into producing because that’s my background. But the people that (X) surrounds himself with work absolutely horrendous hours and I don’t know that I want to make that sacrifice – you wouldn’t see your family grow up or spend time with your children. So no – I can’t see myself going back. But that raises the problem of what to do next. I’m faced with retraining and starting near the bottom again in another industry and that’s not really something I want to do.’

Women with children who remained within the industry needed to conform to the industry ideal of the autonomous worker in order to be successful. As Melissa observed:

‘The females who are high up in X’s empire don’t have children – with the exception of one who has two children and two full-time nannies.’

Women with less financial resources often experienced considerable problems arranging suitable childcare. The five female participants with children all pointed out that long hours, possible location shooting and the intermittent availability of work made it difficult to use conventional day care or after school facilities or to employ nannies on a regular basis. This problem was exacerbated because many workers had partners who also worked in the industry and had equally problematic work schedules. Some participants had tried shared parenting systems where only one parent worked at a time but such systems inevitably meant that the ability of both partners to work simultaneously on prestigious, long-term, productions such as the Hobbit, was compromised. Consequently, couples often decided to prioritise one career and women’s careers were frequently subordinated to their partners. Emma, a sculptor with one child, who was married to another film production worker, explained:

‘I was working 13 hours a day and really missed my daughter. I don’t really do work for films anymore because I choose to work from home. Working for Weta I can work as few hours or as many hours as I can manage as long as I meet the deadline for the project. It’s important to keep in touch to get referred for a new project though and I’m not very good at that’

In contrast to male participants, none of whom perceived themselves as forced to choose between their careers and having a family, five female participants explained that they had made a deliberate
decision to remain childless in order to succeed in the industry. Hilary, a production manager in her mid-thirties explained:

‘At this point I have ruled out having children as an option and what’s interesting to notice is the other women in the industry who have made the same choices. I call them film widows. They’re married to their work; they have very little else........the other term for it is Brides of Peter – yeah, you know we’re all Brides of Peter and to be honest with you I fit in the genre and it is really scary.’

The terms ‘production spinsters’, ‘film widows’ and Brides of Peter’ were used by several participants, both male and female, to describe highly skilled women who had risen to important production roles by being totally work focussed. While such women were often admired for their drive and dedication they were also criticised, particularly by male participants, for being difficult to work with. Michael, an assistant director in his late forties commented:

‘Women, for some reason, seem more prone to becoming film widows, where their whole life becomes the job. First in at 6am in the morning and they will still be working away at 12pm at night.........and what happens when you are in a job that is totally consuming is it becomes all your life and you start expressing your emotional life through the job. They become difficult to work with because it’s not actually about the job; it’s about their emotional state’.

In conclusion, the interview data suggests that female freelance production workers are disadvantaged by motherhood regardless of their parental status. Participants’ comments show that women who are mothers are regarded, by both males and females, as less reliable workers, unable or unwilling to give the total organisational commitment expected of film industry workers. In contrast, women who remain childless are criticised for problems created by their over-identification with work and their failure to embrace family life. Ultimately, motherhood defines all women as flawed workers unable to successfully achieve the creative industries archetype of the autonomous worker.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this research show that female production workers in the Wellington film industry entered an environment in which the ostensibly gender neutral image of the dedicated and
autonomous freelance worker concealed an array of structural arrangements and cultural norms which privileged male workers. Workers who had, or might gain, childcare responsibilities were seen within the industry as less desirable than unencumbered labour. This preference was clearly gendered, with women regarded as less reliable workers because they were presumed to be more likely than men to undertake caring roles.

Flisback (2012) notes that traditional models of fatherhood emphasise men’s public roles as workers and financial providers. While the often precarious income of creative workers is at odds with the ideal of the reliable male provider traditional models of masculinity do enable men to prioritise work commitments without compromising their identities and role obligations as fathers. From an organisational perspective, childless male workers and male workers with children both conform reasonable closely to the creative labour market ideal of the independent worker unfettered by constraints on their work availability and commitment. Consequently, male workers with and without offspring were perceived and treated similarly by their colleagues and organisational power-holders.

Normative expectations of motherhood emphasise women’s nurturing responsibilities. While the strict divisions of labour and care which traditionally characterised male and female roles within the nuclear family have loosened women are still expected to focus on family more than men and to identify more fully with the parental role. From an organisational perspective, women with children deviate more from the ideal worker than men or childless women. As this research shows, female film production workers with children may therefore experience discrimination because they are perceived as potentially unreliable workers.

Women without children conform more closely to the creative industries ideal of the individualised worker. However during their childbearing years there is always the possibility that women will change categories and become mothers. Childless women are therefore potentially more deviant than men simply because of their gender. Consequently, women needed to sacrifice family relationships to a greater degree than males in order to prove their commitment. While this strategy could lead to
success women who prioritized their careers were sometimes critiqued for being emotionally enmeshed in work.

Faced with this situation female participants had two main coping strategies. One was to opt out of the industry in order to have and raise children. For many participants, this choice was one which, while deeply personal, was heavily influenced by structural conditions and cultural norms within the industry. Unfortunately, framing this choice as a purely personal one reinforced the stereotype that women naturally prioritize family over careers and diverted attention from the need to organise the work environment differently.

A second coping strategy was to conform to organisational norms concerning the primacy of work by remaining childfree or, less frequently, by hiding the effects of family life on work commitments. Women who remained childfree could succeed but rarely attained the top echelons of power or the same acceptance as their male colleagues. Once successful these women tended to conform to dominant practises within industry and to join their male colleagues in treating women with children as less reliable workers. The strategies these women used to defend their marginal positions thus tended to reinforce, rather than challenge, gendered inequality regimes within the industry.

It is clearly important to try and change industry practices to make it easier for workers to combine work and family life. Such change is unlikely to come from within the industry. While the large proportion of women who leave in their mid thirties deprives the industry of experienced workers this pattern of withdrawal also gives a hard working and committed female labour force who conveniently dispense with themselves when they no longer serve the industry’s needs. Similar patterns have been observed in other industries and function to reinforce male dominance of the upper echelons of most organisations (Cahusac and Kanji 2013). Industry norms are therefore unlikely to change without government intervention to limit practices such as excessively long and unpredictable hours.

Murray and Gollmitzer (2012) argue that the creative industry policies of most countries pay insufficient attention to the working conditions of creative workers. They suggest that governments need to recognise the precarity of cultural work and devise welfare policies and employment laws
which make self-employed cultural workers eligible for traditional employment related benefits such as maternity pay, paid parental leave, sickness and unemployment benefits. The traditional employer contribution to such entitlements could be met by industry wide levies or by government subsidies rather than the labour force.

In conclusion, Acker’s research demonstrated the ubiquity of gendered inequality regimes within traditional organisations. This research shows that similar regimes occur within non-traditional sectors such as the New Zealand film industry. Combating gendered inequalities within film production is problematic, partly because the dismantling of traditional employment conditions increases the difficulties of implementing anti-discrimination policies but also because the rhetoric of individualism prevalent within the industry obscures the structural constraints underpinning female film production workers’ career choices. Preventing gender inequity within the industry will therefore necessitate changing cultural norms and collective practises as well as organisational structures.
REFERENCES


Anzam 2013

Table One: Respondent Details

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<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Years in Industry</th>
<th>Work Areas</th>
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<td>Male =11</td>
<td>Mid 30s-50+</td>
<td>8 partnered 3 single 6 with dependent children 3 childless</td>
<td>7-30 years 8 still in industry, 3 left within past year</td>
<td>Model making, special effects, artist dept, dialogue coach, design engineer, assistant director, director</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female =12</td>
<td>Mid 20s-50</td>
<td>8 partnered 4 single 5 with dependent children 7 childless</td>
<td>3-20 years 7 still in industry, 5 left within past two years</td>
<td>Makeup, sculptor, designer, producer, casting supervisor, production manager, transport co-ordinator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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