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Citation: Spence, Jean and Stephenson, Carol (2009) "Side by side with our men?": women's activism, community, and gender in the 1984–1985 British miners' strike. *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 75 (1). pp. 68-84. ISSN 0147-5479

Published by: UNSPECIFIED

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Published by: Cambridge University Press

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0147547909000064>  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0147547909000064>>

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# “Side by Side With Our Men?”<sup>1</sup> Women’s Activism, Community, and Gender in the 1984–1985 British Miners’ Strike

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## *Abstract*

This paper explores the gendered concept of community with reference to the activism of women during the UK 1984–1985 miners’ strike. Drawing on texts from the period and reflective discussions twenty years later with women associated with the strike, it interrogates the ways in which the idea of community was used to accommodate the activism of women. We argue that the apparently gender-neutral ideal of mining community carried meanings that had ambiguous political implications for the women and that the strike highlighted paradoxes that question established understanding of female strike activism.

## *Introduction*

The 1984–1985 British coal miners’ strike was fought and lost during a bitter one-year struggle by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in which women united with men in opposition to the National Coal Board (NCB) and Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Government. The dispute followed a government report recommending a 10 percent cut in capacity, involving the closure of twenty pits and the loss of twenty thousand jobs.<sup>2</sup> There had already been a significant decline in mining, with 505 of 822 pits closed and the labor force “almost halved”<sup>3</sup> between 1957 and 1968, but the miners had emerged victorious from two strikes in 1972 and 1974. The 1974 victory had resulted in the collapse of a Conservative Government and it is widely believed that the 1984 strike was provoked partly in revenge for that defeat.<sup>4</sup>

By the mid-1970s the miners had reasserted their iconic status within the labor movement. In the context of oil crises at the end of that decade a strong case was made for continued investment in coal.<sup>5</sup> However in 1979, Thatcher’s radical Conservative Government was elected on a wave of anti-union sentiment. In 1983, Ian MacGregor, who had previously been involved in cutting the labor force in British Leyland and British Steel, was appointed NCB Chairman. There followed an intransigent assault on “uneconomic” pits.<sup>6</sup> Previously the NUM and the NCB had engaged in a negotiated approach to pit closures, but there was no consultation about the proposal to accelerate the closure program in 1984.<sup>7</sup> The resulting national strike, which began in

March 1984, was mainly about the assault on jobs in localities that offered little alternative, comparable employment. As such, it encompassed concern for the futures of families and local communities dependent on mining.

The rhetoric from both sides of the dispute revealed the depth of political antagonism. Thatcher described the miners as “the enemy within,”<sup>8</sup> threatening her ideal of community of nation. For miners, the strike was defending local working-class communities and culture against the threat of the imposition of such a national community. On hearing of the appointment of MacGregor, John Cummings, the Labour MP for Easington, said, “He wants to take away our independence and our cultural heritage, our village life and our club life. All this is our heritage, and I’m not prepared to let him take my heritage away from me.”<sup>9</sup>

This article considers the appeal to community within the strike with particular reference to the role of activist women. It has been informed by textual evidence and draws on the recollections of women who were involved. Ten women from the North East Coalfield were interviewed between 2002 and 2004.<sup>10</sup> A two-hour recorded discussion among twenty women from the North East and Staffordshire, attending a commemorative conference at Northumbria University in July 2004, provided extra source material.<sup>11</sup> Finally a group of six women, involved in self-help activity in an ex-mining village in County Durham, three of whom had participated in the strike, participated in a collective interview in 2004.<sup>12</sup>

### *Mining and Community*

The idea of community in relation to mining seems self-evident. Interdependence among work, family, and locality in the nineteenth and early twentieth century created conditions for tight networks, affective ties, and reciprocal relationships in local settlements. Families migrated in community groups following new pits or better conditions. Group solidarity was an important protection against hostile physical conditions and conflictual employment relations.<sup>13</sup> Because “mining community” does not generally seem problematic, the notion of community has often been explained simply with reference to the centrality of the pit and the nature of male work:

To outsiders, mining communities are still objects of legend, mystery and even awe. It is not so much that pit villages are geographically isolated but rather that the pit, and the type of work done there dominates lives in a way that few other jobs do. Mining is always uncomfortable and dangerous, and the nature of the work binds men together. . .<sup>14</sup>

Most accounts of British mining life<sup>15</sup> emphasize the strength and importance of community as a self-contained way of life deriving from particular industrial conditions. These accounts demonstrate relationships of work, family, and neighborhood radiating from the mine, sustaining a local culture in which

“community” turns back toward the mine in a symbiotic, sustaining duality. The male world of the mine was the beating, economic heart of local community upon which female life was dependent. Female “community work” was deployed to sustain the affective, fluid relationships between work, local neighborhood, and family, while male “community work” focused upon the formality of systems and the management of welfare organizations, institutes, and clubs often linked to the NUM and thence to the national and international labor movement. The rhythms, structures, and processes of mining defined the everyday worlds and the personal and political identities of miners and their families. High levels of loyalty and support from kith and kin were needed to sustain the mining economy in which male workers were preeminent. As coal mining became more settled, these conditions encouraged a strong commitment to local place focused upon a particular pit.<sup>16</sup> This was intensified by the physical isolation of many mining villages developed exclusively in response to the sinking of a pit. Commitment to a particular community of place was symbolized in the lodge banner, which expressed the values and politics of the men and families through the union.<sup>17</sup>

The strong relationship between community and place has attracted a particular “community studies” type of approach to understanding mining life and relationships.<sup>18</sup> Historical and sociological analyses that adopt this perspective, typified in Dennis, et al.’s classic study of a Yorkshire mining village, draw attention to the self-contained relationship between locality, community, and identity.<sup>19</sup> Traditional gender relationships inscribed within a work-place-family triad are explained in this model, but the gendered meaning of community itself is not interrogated. Female agency is simply assumed to remain mechanistically subject to men and their work.

One usually finds that *marras*<sup>20</sup> down the pit are also *marras* outside. They will be personal friends and go to the same places; their wives will probably become friends and arrange the same times to go shopping or to the laundry or to take the kids out.<sup>21</sup>

Women have not been ignored; indeed there has been deep respect for the level of responsibility that they have taken in family and community life. Nevertheless, an overwhelmingly one-sided male perspective has been presented in which the active female voice has been largely silent.<sup>22</sup>

Such interpretations rely upon classical sociological conceptions of historical change which equate “community” with the solidaristic relationships of pre-industrial economies, characterized by small-scale, isolated settlements, low levels of social mobility, a clear sexual division of labor, fixed social roles and status, and religiosity.<sup>23</sup> Yet from this perspective, mining villages were paradoxical. On the one hand, the conditions of separateness, the self-sufficiency, and the interdependent relationships characteristic of single-industry mining settlements suggested pre-modern conditions, conservatism, and social rigidity. On the other hand, because the social relations of mining were forged in industrial

and class conflict, they represented the possibilities of class cooperation and solidarity, which might be an example for a socialist future. There is therefore a significant tension within the idea of mining community: the conservatism of Tönnies’ notion of *gemeinschaft* is ever present within the progressive ideas about communism established within the Marxist tradition.<sup>24</sup> In the “red” mining villages of County Durham, bearing nicknames like “Little Moscow,” the solidaristic class relationships were prized as ideal communities upon which a progressive industrial future might be modelled.<sup>25</sup> But such solidarities of class retained inequalities and exclusions. Gender inequality was subsumed within and subject to the class dimensions of mining community. Moreover, insofar as women were responsible for sustaining the local, affective bonds of place, they came to embody the political ambiguities: conservative qualities of mining community were located in the social space that they inhabited, while socialist or communist associations were found in male organization.

The defeat of the 1984 strike, and the demise of mining following the decision to close thirty-one of the remaining fifty-one collieries in 1992, inevitably resulted in social upheaval in ex-mining areas, as “local pride notwithstanding, traditional bonds of family and community life [were] stretched to breaking point.”<sup>26</sup> Class and gender assumptions were disturbed in the process, but the ideal of community remained intact in national policy to deal with the consequences. Communitarian principles especially informed the approach of the Labour Government elected in 1997. In 1999, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust declared its aim to be “changing the face of coalfield communities.”<sup>27</sup> In this context, a more critical understanding of “community” and mining settlement has emerged. Significantly, the work of sociologists with reference to regeneration includes a more nuanced awareness of different gender perspectives and relationships, suggesting that the community activism of women contains its own dynamic, which is important in efforts toward rebuilding community cohesion.<sup>28</sup>

Before 1984, the threat to mining intrinsically implied a threat to community in an undifferentiated sense. Yet there were always aspects of women’s participation in social life that were not in themselves dependent upon mining. For example, women built their own organizations, such as the Women’s Co-operative Guild, and created social networks related to their own unpaid economic activity, such as mat-making, which were collective and home-based but redolent of community nevertheless. Moreover, women participated and took formal roles in religious and political organizations.<sup>29</sup> Despite male domination in such organizations, some women learned formal skills through participation in committee structures and the management of local resources. In relation to local place, “community” for women, just as much as for men, had dimensions and relationships in which the private and the public were interwoven and in which women exercised agency.

In abstract terms, the meaning of community is notoriously “slippery.” As Bauman suggests, while community always seems to be “a good thing,” its inclusivity is only meaningful with reference to what it excludes.<sup>30</sup> A place of security for those who “belong” and are “recognized” can be alien and unfriendly for those

who do not conform to or identify with dominant social mores. Community is often closed to outside influence and possibilities for change. Even for those who belong, the material realities of social change and power relations mean that the “feel good” promise of community is elusive in practice and uneven in distribution.

“Community as place” is particularly prone to generalizations and to undifferentiated and masculinist versions of mining life. Other notions of community question this dominant understanding.<sup>31</sup> For example, the ideas developed by Anderson relating to nationhood suggest that community is constructed through cultural processes by the imagination. Bauman takes the argument further, arguing that community does not exist at all in any material sense while Plant suggests that community can be fruitfully mobilized as a process, a set of relationships and values that people self-consciously attempt to establish.<sup>32</sup> Williams argued that the construction of community draws upon an idealization of the past, a place that always “has been” and for which no negative connotations exist.<sup>33</sup>

These complications in meaning were all evident in references to mining community in the 1984–1985 strike. Mining as community of place was associated with the mining villages that “had been” during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Meanwhile, engagement in strike activism drew upon political and historical imaginations to construct community with reference to the political ideals associated with socialism and working-class cooperation, which were pitted against the political and historical imaginations of nationhood promoted by Thatcherism. Cooperative principles were made material to some extent in the process of collective organization in support of the strike. However, complex considerations of insider-outsider status between miners, miners’ families, and “others” (friend or foe), meant that the promise of community could never be fully achieved; the very dynamism of the strike generated awareness of difference as much as commonality between those directly affected and supporters from “outside.”<sup>34</sup> The conflict associated with strike breakers, branded as traitors to community as much as to worker solidarity, particularly destabilized the assumption that community cohesion necessarily followed from the local conditions of work in the mine. Meanwhile, political alliances with groups not normally associated with mining suggested dimensions to community that might be derived from values rather than lived experiences. Different subject positions occupied by men and women in this process raised serious questions about gender inequalities and assumptions associated with traditional mining communities of place.

### *Women, Mining Community, and the Strike*

The collaborative relationships established between men in the hostile conditions of the pit undoubtedly had their counterpart in solidaristic relationships associated with home and place. Such community relationships were not only derivative but had a material foundation. Mine owners were also landlords: employer-owned housing for mining families was typically substandard. Conflicts with mine owners as employers were mirrored in landlord-tenant

disputes.<sup>35</sup> Mass eviction often followed nineteenth-century strikes, and, well into the twentieth century, landlord power was being used against union leaders.<sup>36</sup> The immediate interests of women and children were therefore interwoven with labor relations while the provision of decent housing was a central concern of the miners' union. The mutual gender struggle was particularly evident in the campaign for pithead baths which, when established, allowed men to wash at work when they finished their shift, rather than after they returned to homes without running water or bathroom facilities. This took a massive burden off the women, who were responsible for preparing water and filling the tin baths, helping the men to wash the grime from their bodies, and washing their male relatives' filthy work clothes. Standing “side by side with their men” in class struggle was directly grounded in the conditions of female existence although the emphasis in the benefits to be gained was different for men and women.

The centrality of class in mining campaigns has had particular implications for the gendered understanding of community. Excluded from underground mining since the Coal Mines Act of 1842, in many regions women were entirely outside the labor market and therefore perceived as secondary to the class struggle as conceptualized within labor politics. Women's role could only be understood with reference to the conditions of labor in the mines. The interdependent structural and material basis of the political struggles of women was obscured by the fact of their personal dependence upon the men. Consequently their independent voices have not been heard, and they have been caricatured as the most oppressed of creatures. “Every reference to miners' wives in regional writings on coal communities . . . comments on the hard labour of these ‘semi-imprisoned’ women.”<sup>37</sup>

Yet female community activism had historically independent dimensions:

Women are very active in this village. Always have been . . . Have you ever noticed . . . when you are talking to a miners' group, it's the women who are talking, not the men? The men went to work to get the pennies to bring back to the wives to sort out the problems.<sup>38</sup>

That there was always an independent aspect to the community orientation of women in mining life is obscured by the dominant narrative of the transformative quality of the strike for women. This narrative suggests that the typical strike activist was a miner's wife who, in solidarity with her man, left the domestic sphere to defend her family, community, and inherited “way of life.” Through her actions, she underwent a metamorphosis from housewife to political activist, transformed by collective engagement with the men's struggle into a new female working-class vanguard.<sup>39</sup>

The iconography of the strike supports this interpretation. As the strike progressed, images of domesticated women serving in kitchens and observing male actions were supplemented by pictures of women participating in mass rallies, conferences, and marches, carrying banners articulating their views;

shouting at strike-breakers; speaking on public platforms; and supporting other struggles.<sup>40</sup>

Yet this narrative of “transformation” relies on a partial understanding that privileges a conservative view of the inherited gender relations of the mining community. The extent to which the women responded to their own perceptions of the problems associated with mine closure, the extent to which they used already existing political skill and knowledge, and the extent to which changes in gender roles and responsibilities prevalent in “the outside world” had already affected those involved in mining went unnoticed, and, instead, “archetypal images came into play, remembered traumas of the bad old days.”<sup>41</sup> The complexity of the relations between gender and community prior to 1984 remained unacknowledged and unexplored.

In the absence of employment and child-care options, in the face of male shift work, it was inevitable that some women continued to occupy traditional roles up to and beyond the strike year. However, disruption to traditional patterns of life had occurred long before 1984. As the mining industry declined during the 1960s, substitute industries offered mainly low-paid employment opportunities to women.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, local links between family, neighborhood and work were broken for those displaced and dispersed by previous mine closures.<sup>43</sup> “Mining community” was becoming both spatially and affectively less cohesive. There was a growing disjuncture between the historical presumptions upon which gender relations were based and the realities of family, place of residence, and working life across different coalfields.

By 1984, mining community and mining village were no longer necessarily synonymous. For example, in the Durham coalfield there had been a serious decline in the small village structure with migration toward the larger mines on the coast. Even in areas where mining continued to dominate, the physical boundaries of place had less relevance in the face of modern communication systems, while expanded educational opportunities enabled some of the younger postwar generation to leave mining altogether. Yet the frequent references to “mining village,” usually in association with female action, in the discourse of the strike suggested the continuing vibrancy of historically discrete, spatially isolated and bounded places in the imagination of the Left.<sup>44</sup> Raphael Samuel reported that, “. . . housing estates were talked of as though they were villages, places of hereditary settlements where generations of miners had lived.”<sup>45</sup>

That loss of mining would mean degradation to the conditions of local community was uncontroversial. Yet, objectively, the quality of local social conditions and relations were not dependent upon mining, *per se*. Indeed, it could be argued that if adequate economic investment were to follow, the physical quality of localities might improve with the closure of coal mines, and that the relational qualities of locality associated with the female role might be harnessed to good effect in a post-mining world. However, the premises for the dominant arguments of the Left were located in the past rather than in the real conditions of the present or any imagined alternative future. In this sense, they contained their own brand of conservatism.

Predictions of community degradation were important in forging links between the NUM's concern for employment with broader political questions about values and how to live. The imagery of collectivism and cooperation associated with local mining communities of the past offered an alternative, working-class vision to the radical individualism of the new conservative hegemony. However, the appeal to the preservation of mining community legitimated and explained female activism in exclusive terms, invoking traditional roles, reasserting meanings whereby acting “side by side” with the men meant conforming to unequal gender relationships in a predetermined sexual division of labor. This was sometimes communicated directly by the NUM and individual men who attempted to allocate “appropriate” tasks to the women:

The men came over . . . and Vera says, “How are the couples and single lads getting on?” He says, “Whey that’s up to you to find out! You’re the women! Get on with it!”<sup>46</sup>

The Sacriston Lodge members were traditional males—they wanted their women to stay at home and they held very specific views about what women could and couldn’t do. Making sandwiches was fine; as long as we didn’t ask to do anything else, their equilibrium was intact. It was such a fight even to get onto the picket line.<sup>47</sup>

Such positioning neither accommodated the complex realities of the lives of women before the strike, nor acknowledged the independent political well-spring of their opposition to Thatcherism. Despite the efforts of women to participate as socialist political actors in the strike, references to their traditional roles in community resituated them continuously in fundamentally conservative positions. Women had to deal with this in order to maintain cooperative relations with the union. At the same time the complex and self-conscious nature of their activism transcended such stereotypes.<sup>48</sup> In a dance of domination and dependence, women activists thus found themselves performing different subject positions for different audiences:

The women . . . were appealing on behalf of the working class . . . when they went to other towns and cities. But inside the coalfield they would appeal to people and say “it is nothing to do with the union. It’s us. We are looking after families,”—the most unpolitical message you could possibly get.<sup>49</sup>

Whether or not they had any relationship with a miner was not the issue, but it was primarily as “us,” as “miners’ wives,” fighting for the virtues of traditional mining community that the women were accommodated by the NUM and applauded by the labor movement. Thus it was in these terms that they performed.<sup>50</sup>

Romantic notions about miners’ wives implicitly resituated women in a secondary role as a community ideal for which to struggle. The fact that the transformative qualities of the women’s actions during the strike depended

significantly upon female skills gained outside the home, was obscured. That many women who lived in mining areas had independent community perspectives and prior histories of political activism was ignored. That the collective female action was not only local, but national and even global, based upon political values as much as place and identity, was not elaborated.

Many women who were miners' wives did, of course, find in the support groups a means of coping with and contributing to the strike. Strategically, their activism was privileged in order to emphasize the solidarities of family and community and to communicate the strength of the striking miners. However the rhetoric of "the wife" obscured the varied positions adopted by miners' wives and compounded the silence around the importance of the public responsibilities taken by women:

We had Florence. You see, with her being on the Council and always being set up to do things properly, our support group was structured from the start.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, not all miners' wives were active in the strike:

The notion that there had been a great big army of very politicized miners' wives that had risen up and done this and that . . . it wasn't remotely true. God, if they had we would have had an easy time of it . . .<sup>52</sup>

Some wives had jobs whose work became the only source of family income during the strike. Some women, employed by the NCB in canteens and offices, were on strike on their own account whether or not they were wives. Many involved in support groups were not wives at all. Often it was the *mothers* of miners who stimulated local female action.<sup>53</sup> The different women involved drew from a combination of informal and formal networks, deploying skills gained from waged work and from participation in public institutions, including the Labour Party.

The skills used by activist women might be considered a type of "bridging" social capital connecting the traditional female sphere of family/neighborhood with the male sphere of politics and social organization.<sup>54</sup> Only very rarely did the men undertake a "bridging" role into the informal community dimensions of family and neighborhood. The experience of women active in local Labour Party and community politics prior to 1984 was crucial in structuring, informing, and sustaining the women's activities during the strike.<sup>55</sup> It was primarily this which enabled them to link the personal meanings of the strike with the values of community and left-wing politics to such powerful effect. The mobilization of pre-existing skills and knowledge used with reference to the traditional and more stereotyped versions of women's roles contributed to the powerful "bonding" associated with the values of community promoted during the miners' strike. Myrtle MacPherson, quoted below, did not mention either her paid employment in school kitchens or her role as a parish councillor,

but she effectively used both in order to achieve cooperation from a wide constituency of supporters in the neighborhood:

The whole year they got a meal at dinner time. One man had a fish and chip shop and he sent us flour and everything and once a week he made us fish cakes and chips for them. He used to send potatoes and the lard for the pastry. I used to do the pastry and take it over there and do the corned beef mash. The girls used to put it into the tins for us and I used to roll out and they used to put the tops on for me and I used to milk them. The lad who was the baker had been a school friend of my husband's and he said, “If you like, I'll be putting the ovens off and I can finish off the pies for you.” So he used to cook them and bring them up for us.<sup>56</sup>

The practical and strategic realities of serving the cause of the strike thus drew upon conceptions of women's traditional role through the rhetorical device of community. This enabled women to assert the value of their domestic and relationship skills in the political sphere giving romantic vigor to the public discourse of the struggle as one of ordinary men and women fighting to save a way of life. However, it simultaneously accommodated conservative views of gender by allowing the possibility of women's activism to be resituated and confined to those traditional roles. Characteristics of loyalty, friendship, sympathy, generosity, and solidarity, and the interdependence of different groups in mining districts were emphasized and reaffirmed by the experience of mutual support. These could be, and were, connected with nostalgic representations of mining community and recollections of past struggles as much as with possibilities for an alternative future.

### *Changing Perceptions*

Throughout the strike, women were allocated responsibility for domestic and emotional labor, while the men assumed primary responsibility for strategic and political labor. Female activism at the beginning was located in the traditional institutions associated with community life (community centers and welfare halls), concentrated upon feeding and nurturing, while male activism was located at the sites of work (the mines) concentrated on picketing, mobilizing political alliances, and negotiating.<sup>57</sup> However, as the strike progressed, so too did the complexity of the activism:

At that first meeting . . . the women were given lessons in what benefits they were entitled to. The second one was on what constitutes food parcels. . . . The third was on fundraising. Now I just brought the women together thinking they could organize themselves from there. . . . Then suddenly I became Co-ordinator . . .<sup>58</sup>

Many women found themselves taking organizing roles which were not expressive of women's traditional place as an apparently accidental consequence of

their desire to do something practical to help striking families to survive, but even here they brought into play other skills and allegiances.<sup>59</sup> Female involvement was based on their own personal histories, which were frequently outside the conventionally understood parameters of the lives of women in the community life of mining:

My involvement was initially with CND nationally and in Peace Action Durham locally. I was about 23–24 at the time, had three young children and was involved in the “Woodcraft Folk.” . . . I was not married to a miner. . . .<sup>60</sup>

Such women often began by accommodating themselves to the principal work of the early support groups, cooking meals and distributing parcels, but inevitably they increasingly mobilized their political expertise and networks, extending the possibilities for activist development beyond the boundaries imposed by the personal relations of mining community and the political relations of the NUM.<sup>61</sup>

Some women who participated in the strike came from places where the pit was already closed. Their engagement drew upon networks disassociated from community as place and gaining community from a broader political constituency:

We didn’t get the support in this village during the miners’ strike. It was just the miners’ wives that stuck together. Other people said, “You’ve got a job. Get back to it.” And we were cut off. . . . Where the pit was they seemed to be alright because they could have canteen support and whatever. We didn’t have a pit. We were stuck out here and we had no support. So that’s when I had to write away to all these different Labour Parties all over the country.<sup>62</sup>

The basis of the strike partnership between men and women was never straightforward. Women’s “support” groups signified the secondary and dependent nature of female participation. However, these groups developed their own internal dynamic. Association in the women’s groups was not dependent upon mining life, even when the group adopted an “authentic” rule for membership, but upon solidarities between women choosing to support a particular political struggle. Identification did not depend upon “identity” so much as upon a recognition of common interests and values. However the terms of the central struggle remained in the male arena of mining and the NUM. Inevitably in these circumstances, relationships between women and men, between individual members of support groups and between the support groups and the NUM were characterized not only by cooperation, but also conflict and resistance regarding gender and authority, inevitably exacerbated by the experience of an intense and painful year of struggle.<sup>63</sup>

The miners’ strike asserted the importance of class solidarity at a time when class was being displaced by different “issues,” including that of gender, in political organization. With working-class activism in retreat, the supportive role of women for the strike suggested possibilities for uniting class struggle with a

range of private and public issues. “Community” was a loose enough concept to emphasize commonality across difference, distinguishing this struggle from the meanings associated with labor disputes of the 1970s, which had been used to discredit the Left. It also effectively elided negative connotations of feminism; female activism performed in service of the larger community had no need of feminism or an independent women’s movement.<sup>64</sup>

Community cooperation didn’t just “happen” as activity derived from traditional female responsibilities for family and neighborhood. Initiative and leadership were required to realize support for the strike in practice. Thus individual women who understood community in terms of politics and values rather than as simply a feature of place or lived identity, often came to the fore:

You could not have got a more hard-working person than Heather. She was fantastic. This is what I mean about the myths of the self-motivated women who rose up. They didn’t. Heather . . . was very active politically with the Labour Party and it was all political activists who started everything really in the coalfield. And . . . she went to all these places and said, “Look you have got to get yourselves a support group . . .” and she started it up and she kept it going. . . . Her husband is a plumber.<sup>65</sup>

Ambiguities in the meaning of community were intrinsic to the support of the strike. Women Against Pit Closures (WAPC) demonstrated its concern with legitimacy and the authenticity of community by insisting that 75 percent of its membership be from mining families. Yet although this confirmed acceptance of dependence upon male-dominated community, the conservatism of the position enabled WAPC to use its influence with the NUM to facilitate an extensive campaign in the UK and abroad which extended the normal terrain of female influence and the discourses of trade unionism. WAPC’s positioning invited NUM acknowledgement of the value of female political activism, and offered access to male-dominated political territory. New and more extensive networks, combined with increased opportunities to speak on behalf of the miners’ cause created new bridging dimensions to female social capital. Thus WAPC was able ultimately to extend its terms of reference beyond community as place and beyond traditional roles and positions for women:

Its aims include the promotion and development of education for working class women and campaigns on all issues which affect mining communities, particularly peace, jobs, health and education, and the issues of nuclear power and nuclear weapons.<sup>66</sup>

The tension between conservatism and transformative action within WAPC expressed a central difficulty of the wider movement of women who supported the miners’ strike. By inhabiting their traditional roles in community life and by performing these roles in relation to an undifferentiated view of class, family, and place, women could appeal to the nostalgia of the male-dominated labor

movement, which was under serious attack, and could play an important part in helping to reunite factions around the miners' cause. However, participation in political action went beyond the control of the male-dominated union. Women established their own networks amongst themselves and with other community groups and movements where different, value-led versions of community challenged inherited traditional meanings tied to mining.

Inevitably, organized female action became increasingly problematic for preconceived ideas about women's place in and relationship with mining community. Self-awareness and perhaps an acknowledgement of "performance" was expressed in the decision of one women's support group to choose to call itself "Miners' Wives" after the strike was over. Although many members were not miners' wives, this group argued that the term would enable them to be understood by "outsiders" in terms of their class allegiance and would ensure legitimacy and respect for their action in the post-industrial context.<sup>67</sup>

Some women took up a different position, claiming the authenticity which they had promoted, attempting to relive and consolidate traditional ideas of a common identity. Authentic position-taking reasserted the uniqueness and separateness of mining community, drawing upon the heritage of political struggle and paying particular homage to the oral history of the experience of the 1926 lockout when, ironically, the miners were also defeated. Community as marshalled by these women raised serious disputes about "belonging," questioning who was entitled to join support groups, who was "one of us" and "not one of us."<sup>68</sup> Such a tightly defined view of community was defensive and inward looking, continuous with the historical self-protectionism characteristic of isolated mining villages of the past. It also fed into a nostalgia that remains in the post-mining period. The appeal to authenticity was inextricably connected with a view of class in which the subject positions of women as women were secondary to their support for the class struggle in which, as wives, their interests were held to be inscribed.

It was those women whose activism was prompted by considerations other than any relationship with a miner who were most active in questioning the meaning of authenticity of community and its relevance for the struggle. These women challenged inherited gender positions and conservative views of class associated with mining identity:

We were all working class and what united us in that class definition wasn't about whether your dad was a doctor, a teacher, or what job he did, but was the values we shared. The values of believing that fighting for a society based on collectivism, and a society not based on private greed; [it] was the class values we shared; and what struggle threw up, was a redefining of class in a way.<sup>69</sup>

The links made between different women associated with the miners' cause and with supporters outside mining, rather than the claim to authenticity, were responsible for the dynamism of the movement.<sup>70</sup> Such links opened the possibility of informed choices beyond what was normally ascribed to women

associated with mining. This was manifest in the common cause made with non-traditional political identity groups such as lesbians and gays and also through the international contact made with the wider labor and trade union movement. Both of these features of the experience of the strike challenged closed ideas about women's role in the work-family-community model of mining, extending the idea of community as commonality of politics and values and opening the possibility of community-building as an activity separate from mining itself in which women could play an independent and active role.

### *Conclusion*

Community is an emotive concept, which serves both conservative and progressive purposes. Within it the implications for gender relations are seldom analyzed. The enactment of community through the miners' strike, drawing on representations, experiences, memories, hopes, and imagination of what a community could be, situated female action at a pivotal political conjuncture in which a series of hitherto fixed gender dichotomies were thrown into flux.

Women activists in the miners' strike were positioned in traditional and conservative community roles. Not everyone involved fitted the description of “miners' wives,” and whatever their relationship with mining the skills base from which they drew was independent of domestic positioning. Women used traditional conceptions of community to galvanize their organization. “Community” allowed and demanded political involvement without disturbing partnership with men or threatening the men's cause. However, support for the men's strike was undertaken in terms that both reaffirmed and challenged traditional female dependence in mining life; the fluidity of the concept of community as a central organizing trope facilitated the possibility of holding both positions and working within ambiguity.

The dominant discourse of female activism in the strike is located in a community studies model of mining relationships and involves privileging historical relationships, which were dissonant with the real conditions of 1984. Women found themselves performing roles that resituated their activism in an undifferentiated historical model. While relevant to maintaining solidarity in the strike, this was neither expressive of everyday lived relations, nor of their own histories. Insofar as the performance was sustained, it was inevitable that individual female activism would not survive the strike. Insofar as an independent and self-defining activism was achieved, it was more likely to emerge after the strike to inhabit a different understanding of the nature and value of community.

The actual female experience of organization and activism increasingly highlighted the importance of political values in the establishment and maintenance of community in which human agency plays a key role. Gender and community became reflexive categories for some women through the process of involvement in the strike, but for others, their awareness was enhanced rather than created by strike activism.

The history of the engagement of women in the regions affected by pit closures since the strike is indicative of the significance of female agency, as women became involved in creating, leading, and sustaining locally based regeneration projects, adult education, and citizen action informed by ideals of community cohesion.<sup>71</sup>

Analysis of mining community and ex-mining community has been distorted by monodimensional perspectives that ignore the historical changes in mining and that fail to acknowledge the complexity associated with female agency in that history. During the miners' strike, women did stand "side by side" with the men. Yet they did not do so simply from a sense of their traditional roles in maintaining community cohesion, but also self-consciously as a means of contributing to the maintenance of the strike and to promote the socialist values that it represented. Understanding their experiences and the strategies adopted to deal with their realities has much to offer in relation to broader contemporary problems associated with the regeneration of localities and with the regeneration of an activist political engagement in which women really do stand "side by side" with men across a range of social and economic fronts.

## NOTES

\* The authors wish to thank Monica Shaw and Anne Suddick.

1. Mal Finch, *We Are Women We Are Strong*, (1984). This became known as "The women's song" during the strike. Its chorus lines are, "We are women, We are strong, We are fighting for our lives, Side by side with our men, Who work the nation's mines, United by the struggle, United by the past, It's 'Here we go! Here we go!' We're the Women of the Working Class."

2. *The Times*, (June 24, 1983), 1; (April 27, 1984), 28.

3. Sarah Baxter, "Coming Together at the Seams," *New Statesman*, (October 23, 1992), 13.

4. See e.g., Ben Pimlott, "Divided Loyalties," *New Society*, (March 14, 1985), 408; "Editorial," *New Statesman*, (October 16, 1992), 5; John Pilger, "The Pit and The Pendulum," *Guardian Weekend*, (January 30, 1993), 6.

5. Tony Hall, *King Coal: Miners, Coal and Britain's Industrial future*, (Harmondsworth, 1981); Sarah Baxter, "Coming Together at the Seams"; Martin Bulmer, ed., *Mining and Social Change*, (London, 1978).

6. What is meant by "uneconomic" in the context of mining is disputed in relation to levels of investment as well as absolute levels of productivity.

7. Keith Pattison and Huw Beynon, *Easington August '84*, (Newcastle, Undated); See also P. Green, *The Enemy Without: Policing and Class Consciousness in the Miners' Strike*, (Milton Keynes, 1990).

8. Raphael Samuel, Barbara Bloomfield, and Guy Boanas, eds., *The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984-5*, (London, 1986).

9. John Cummings, Easington MP, quoted in Keith Pattison and Huw Beynon *Easington August '84*. See also *The Times*, (Sept 10, 1984), 4.

10. Undertaken by Monica Shaw and Carol Stephenson following previous research undertaken by Shaw. See, Monica Shaw, *Women in Protest and Beyond: Greenham Common and Mining Support Groups*, PhD thesis (Durham University, 1993).

11. Northumbria University, July 2004. *The Miners' Strike. Twenty Years On*.

12. For a fuller account, see Monica Shaw and Mave Mundy, "Complexities of Class and Gender Relations: Recollections of Women Active in the 1984-5 Miners' Strike," *Capital and Class*, 87 (Autumn 2005), 151-174; Jean Spence and Carol Stephenson, "Female Involvement in the Miners' Strike: Trajectories of Activism," *Sociological Research Online*, 12 (March 2007); Jean Spence and Carol Stephenson, "The Politics of the Doorstep: Female Survival Strategies

and the Politics of the Miners’ Strike, 1984–85,” *Community, Work and Family*, 10 (August 2007), 307–325.

13. Robert Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield: Work, Culture and Protest, 1790–1850* (Manchester, 1987); William A. Moyes, *Mostly Mining* (Newcastle, 1969); Hall, *King Coal*; John Wilson, *Memories of a Labour Leader*, (Firle, Sussex, 1980 [1910]).

14. Hall, *King Coal*, 45.

15. For example, Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques, and Clifford Slaughter, *Coal is Our Life*, (London, 1956); Martin Bulmer, “Sociological Models of the Mining Community,” *Sociological Review*, 23 (1975), 61–92; Bill Williamson, *Class, Culture and Community: A Biographical Study of Social Change in Mining*, (London, 1982); Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield*; Grizelda Carr, *Pit Women: Coal Communities in Northern England in the Early Twentieth Century*, (London, 2001).

16. Sid Chaplin, “Durham Mining Villages,” in Bulmer, ed., *Mining and Social Change*.

17. Mary Mellor and Carol Stephenson, “The Durham Miners’ Gala and the Spirit of Community,” *Community Development Journal*, 40 (July 2004), 343–351.

18. E.g., Williamson, *Class, Culture and Community*; David Waddington, Maggie Wykes, and Chas Critcher, *Split at the Seams? Community, Continuity and Change after the 1984–5 Coal Dispute* (Milton Keynes, 1991).

19. Dennis et al., *Coal is our Life*.

20. A marra is a workmate.

21. David Douglass, “The Durham Pitman” in Raphael Samuel, ed., *Miners, Quarrymen and Saltworkers*, (London, 1977) 205–296, 228.

22. For example, in Tony Curtis, ed., *Coal: An Anthology of Mining* (Brigend, 1997), a section is dedicated to “The Women” (133–162), but there is no named female contribution.

23. Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (London, 1984 [1893]).

24. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society* (Cambridge, 2001 [1887]).

25. David Douglass, “Pit Life in Co. Durham: Rank and File Movements and Workers’ Control,” *History Workshop Pamphlet 6* (Oxford, 1972).

26. Kevin Morgan and Adam Price, 1992, “Rebuilding Our Communities: A New Agenda for the Valleys,” quoted in Sarah Baxter, “Valleys in the Shadow of Coal,” *New Statesman* (September 11, 1992), 12.

27. www.coalfields-regen.org.uk.

28. See Waddington et al., *Split at the Seams*; David Waddington, *Developing Coalfield Communities: Breathing New Life into Warsop Vale*, (Bristol, 2003); David Waddington, “With a Little Help From Our Friends: The Role of New Solidarities and Alliances in the Remaking of Warsop Vale,” *Capital and Class*, 87 (Autumn 2005), 201–225.

29. Linda McCullough Thew, *The Pit Village and the Store: The portrait of a mining past*, (London, 1985).

30. Zygmunt Bauman, *Community, Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, (Cambridge, 2001).

31. Colin Bell and Howard Newby, *Community Studies*, (London, 1971).

32. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991); Bauman, *Community*; Raymond Plant, *Community and Ideology: an Essay in Applied Social Philosophy*, (London, 1974).

33. Raymond Williams cited in Bauman, *Community*, 3; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, (Harmondsworth, 1958).

34. Jean Stead, *Never the Same Again: Women and the Miners’ Strike*, (London, 1986).

35. Robert Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield: Work, Culture and Protest, 1790–1850*, (Manchester, 1987), 257; Carr, *Pit Women*, 46–59.

36. For example, Peter Lee and Will Lawther. See Carr, *Pit Women*, 47; Moyes, *Mostly Mining*; V. L. Allen, “The Ethics of Trade Union Leaders,” in *British Journal of Sociology*, 7 (1956), 314–336.

37. Carr, *Pit Women*, 34.

38. Lily Ross, interview.

39. See for example post-strike films such as *Brassed Off*; *Billy Elliot*; *Faith*.

40. Samuel et al., *The Enemy Within*, 119, 171; *The Times*, (June 18, 1984), 2; Vicky Seddon, ed., *The Cutting Edge: Women and the Pit Strike*, 31, 92.

41. Samuel et al., *The Enemy Within*, 5.

42. Bulmer, ed., *Mining and Social Change*.

43. Hall, *King Coal*.
44. *The Times*, (May 16, 1984), 9; (June 18, 1984), 2.
45. Samuel et al., *The Enemy Within*, 5.
46. Julia Heron, interview. See also, eg., Stead, *Never the Same Again*; Monica Shaw, *Women in Protest*; Meg Allen, "Women, 'Community' and the British Miners' Strike" in Sheila Rowbotham and S. Linkogle, eds., *Women Resist Globalization: Mobilizing for Livelihood and Rights*, (London, 2001).
47. Anna Lawson, written response to interview questions.
48. See Allen, *Women, "Community" and the British Miners' Strike*.
49. Pat Macintyre, interview.
50. Pat McIntyre, *The Response to the 1984–5 Miners' Strike in Durham County: Women, the Labour Party and Community*, PhD thesis (Durham, 1992); Jean Spence, "Women, Wives and the Campaign Against Pit Closures in Co. Durham: Understanding the Vane Tempest Vigil," *Feminist Review*, 60 (Autumn 1998), 33–60.
51. Julianna Heron, interview.
52. Pat MacIntyre, interview.
53. See Spence and Stephenson 2007, *Socresonline*.
54. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, (New York, 2000).
55. Spence and Stephenson, *Female Involvement in the Miners' Strike*.
56. Myrtle MacPherson, interview.
57. See, for example, *The Times*, (May 16, 1984), 9; (June 18, 1984), 2.
58. Anne Suddick, interview.
59. S. Hyatt, "By the bottle of the people." *Activists' campaigns and the challenge of community development*. AGM paper, Churches Community Work Alliance, West Yorkshire Network (October 14, 1993) uses the concept of "accidental activism."
60. Anna Lawson, written interview.
61. Spence and Stephenson, *Female Involvement in the Miners' Strike*.
62. Lily Ross, interview.
63. See e.g., Jean McCrindle, 115–116 in Sheila Rowbotham interviews Jean McCrindle, "More than Just a Memory: Some Political Implications of Women's Involvement in the Miners' Strike" in *Feminist Review*, 23, (Summer 1986), 109–124.
64. See, Loretta Loach, "We'll Be Here Right to the End . . . and After: Women in the Miners' Strike" in Huw Beynon, ed., *Digging Deeper*, 177; See also discussion between Jean McCrindle and Sheila Rowbotham, "More than Just a Memory."
65. Pat MacIntyre, interview. See also Shaw and Mundy, *Complexities of Class and Gender Relations*.
66. Stead, *Never the Same Again*, 22.
67. Women's Forum Discussion.
68. Stead, *Never the Same Again*.
69. Women's Forum Discussion.
70. See Samuel et al., *The Enemy Within*; Shaw, *Women in Protest*; and Anne Suddick, "The Past We Inherit The Future We Build" in *Capital and Class* 87, (Autumn 2005), 3–16 for discussion of "Links."
71. The contemporary engagement of the women activists is apparent in all our interviews and is continuous with a prehistory of activism stimulated by the strike. See Spence and Stephenson, *Female Involvement in the Miners' Strike*; and also e.g., Lesley Gerard, "Lessons from the University of Life," *Independent*, (February 16, 1995) 29.