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# Gender struggle, scale, and the production of place in the Appalachian coalfields

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Christiana E Miewald¶

Community Economic Development Centre, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6, Canada; e-mail: [cmiewald@sfu.ca](mailto:cmiewald@sfu.ca)

Eugene J McCann¶

Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6, Canada; e-mail: [emccann@sfu.ca](mailto:emccann@sfu.ca)

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**Abstract.** Recent changes in the coal mining industry of Appalachian Kentucky have entailed a widespread economic restructuring with profound effects on the character of the social relations that constitute place. As the traditionally male-dominated mining industry has seen a reduction in employment, there has been a parallel rise in service sector employment, in which women dominate many jobs. Drawing on in-depth interviews with fourteen women living in one coalfield community, we discuss how this economic restructuring has produced a series of struggles between men and women over appropriate gender roles relating to waged work and household work. We also show how these gender struggles—which we suggest are most evident in the microsites of the body and the household—influence the character of networks of social relations at the scale of the locality and, therefore, have an important impact on the production of place and scale. This case study contributes to ongoing discussions of the social production of place and the politics that surround this process. It draws on a feminist theoretical framework to argue that understandings of the production of place cannot disregard the role social relations shaped at the microscale play in shaping place and that our understandings of the politics of place and scale must include the gendered struggles of everyday life.

## Introduction

Evelyn is a woman in her forties who has lived her entire life in the Appalachian coalfield community of McKee County, Kentucky. (This is a pseudonym as are all the names in the paper.) Like many women in the region, she married a miner in her teens and was a mother and wife for almost twenty years. She did not work outside the home during those years. Today, however, she is divorced, is working toward an Associate's Degree in business; and is the owner of a small antique store. When asked about the changes she has experienced in the last several decades, she shakes her head and replies,

“All at once there just were all these things for women. Before, few women worked outside of the home. If your husband mined, you took care of the children, the house, the man .... But it's changing all around me.”

Evelyn's life and the lives of her neighbors have been profoundly changed in recent decades. The change is intertwined with processes of economic restructuring that have produced both sharp reductions in levels of unionized, secure mining jobs and the expansion of service industries in the coalfields.

The changes in Evelyn's life have been intertwined with a restructuring of the place in which she lives. Her life and those of her neighbors are shaped by political–economic change occurring at higher geographical scales. Nonetheless, individuals and communities are not passive objects of restructuring processes. Rather, decisions about how to cope with change and to maintain and support certain characteristics of

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¶Previous address for both authors: Department of Geography, The Ohio State University, 1036 Derby Hall, 154 North Oval Mall, Columbus, OH 43210-1361, USA.

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particular places are continually negotiated and struggled over. This point resonates both with the experiences of women and men living in McKee County, as we will show below, and with contemporary geographers' understanding of place as a social product which is both an outcome of and a constitutive element in ongoing social struggles at complexly interrelated scales. The paper explores how one form of social struggle—around issues of gender and work—is influenced by and implicated in the production of place and scale. We define gender struggle as the ongoing (re)negotiation of appropriate roles that women and men should play in society and we identify aspects of this struggle through a study of women's experiences of economic restructuring.

Place and scale, and their relationships, have been at the heart of conceptual discussion in human geography for over a decade (Agnew, 1997; Cox, 1998; Delaney and Leitner, 1997; Herod, 1997; Jonas, 1994; Smith, 1990; 1992; 1993; Swyngedouw, 1997; Taylor, 1982; and see Marston, 2000 for a comprehensive review). These discussions center on an understanding of scale as a complex and paradoxical social product. Individual scales, such as the body, the local, or the global, and the scalar hierarchies in which they are embedded at any particular time represent a 'scalar fix,' or political-geographical resolution of social conflict that allows a specific organization of society to be viable (Brenner, 1998; 2002; Jonas and Ward, 2002; McCann, 2003; McDowell, 2001; Smith, 1993; Swyngedouw, 1997; 2000). Places, such as nations, regions, and localities and households, among others, are distinguished one from another through this process of scalar resolution. Through what McDowell (2001, page 229) refers to as, "the routinization of decision making and everyday social interactions", some places, rather than others, are defined as the appropriate and legitimate locations for particular activities while being connected with and set in relation to other scales. Through this social process, social differentiation is spatialized (Delaney and Leitner, 1997; McDowell, 2001; Smith, 1993). An understanding of place and scale as socially produced, relational, and historically contingent also draws attention to the fact that any scalar configuration will not last forever but will, under specific circumstances, be reorganized. Activities that, in the past, were carried out at the national level may be devolved to the local level, for instance, and generally accepted sociospatial divisions, such as the powerful private-public, home and work distinctions will be questioned and struggled over (Agnew, 1997; McDowell, 2001; Marston, 2000; Oberhauser, 2002).

The majority of recent critical geographical research on place and scale has tended to refer mostly to the relations between places and social relations articulated at higher geographical scales such as the national and the global. This literature has little to say about the role that social relations shaped at microscales, such as the household, play in the production of place. Running parallel to this problem is a relative silence on the role that social reproduction plays in the production of place and scale (for exceptions to this, see McDowell, 2001; Marston, 2000; and for a debate on the relative merits of this argument see Brenner, 2001; Marston and Smith, 2001; Purcell, 2003). This paper will explore how social struggles around gender roles at the microscale sites of the body and the household complicate traditional distinctions between public and private, home and work, and production and reproduction. It will discuss how these sites of struggle are both influenced by larger scale processes and also reverberate through the social networks that constitute scaled places. Thus, we hope to contribute to ongoing attempts to locate issues of gender and reproduction more centrally in debates over the production of scale (McDowell, 2001; Marston, 2000).

In the following section, we discuss contemporary feminist approaches to place, struggle, and everyday life. In order to set a more detailed context for our analysis of gender struggle in the Appalachian coalfields, we then outline the present economic context in McKee County. The third section discusses the characteristics of gender

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struggle in the context of economic change by detailing three prominent themes that emerged from discussions with women in the county. These themes are: the legacy of traditional gender ideologies, negotiations around masculinity as men's economic roles change, and women's attempts to gain independence from men or to realize an ideal of a partnership marriage. We show how women and men actively negotiate economic change in ways that reconstitute long-held understandings of their relationships to work, home, and the local social world more generally. In the final section we address the question of how these struggles carried out at the microscale can shape the character of place at the wider scales. Again, we draw on interviews with women to show how the changing domestic division of labor and their changing interactions with the waged labor force are influencing their roles in kinship networks and community work. As women's lives change, so has the character of these activities. This, in turn, plays an important role in the production of place.

### **Living place and placing the struggles of everyday life: a theoretical framework**

Our discussion of restructuring in the Appalachian coalfields is framed by three inter-related concepts: place, everyday life, and struggle. Before concentrating on the details of the case study, it is necessary to identify the contemporary literatures from which we draw this framework. In the following paragraphs we will outline contemporary understandings of place as a relational, scaled concept, produced by and productive of the social practices of everyday life. We will also emphasize how contemporary feminists redefine formal definitions of the politics of place by arguing that politics includes a wide variety of power struggles, not merely formal politics. At the same time, this redefinition entails resituating politics by arguing that struggles and negotiations in and in reference to sites like the body and the household are political and that they shape other arenas of social life.

Central to contemporary geographical understandings of place has been the attempt to stress the complementarities between three aspects: its location in wider networks of social relations, its role as a locale, or setting for the routines of everyday life, and its attachment to social memory, identity, and sense of place (Agnew, 1987; Agnew and Duncan 1989; Massey, 1993a; 1993b; 1994). The restructuring of place—changes in the local economy or in the character of social institutions—is a social process complexly related to how a whole series of power relations—including gender relations—are negotiated and struggled over in everyday life. Place, according to Merrifield (1993, page 525), “is synonymous with what is lived in the sense that daily life practices are embedded in particular places. Social practice is place-bound, political organization demands place organization. Life is place-dependent ...”

This does not mean that life is *locally bound* and that struggles over gender roles in a restructuring labor market, for instance, are only worked out through face-to-face interactions and in reference to locally produced discourses. Rather, the understanding of place we draw upon sees it as relational, networked, multiplex, and fundamentally scaled (Massey, 1993a; 1994). As McDowell (2001, page 229) puts it,

“Social, economic, and political processes at the most local or closest-in level of the body or the family through the local and national state to the regulations and actions of agencies and organizations both affect and are affected by the complex surfaces of geographical differentiation. Thus a place—a village, a small town, or a region—may be local in the sense of a geographically relatively small unit but it is constituted by social processes that operate at a variety of geographical scales.”

This understanding has become increasingly important in recent years in light of the contemporary understanding of scale as a social construction used to divide the world for specific interests and purposes (Agnew, 1997; Brenner, 1998; Delaney and Leitner, 1997;

Swyngedouw, 1997). The politics of scale revolves around struggles over defining what practices are seen as appropriate at certain scales rather than others and around attempts to redefine the relationships between social processes and geographical scales, especially at times of profound political, economic, and social change (Brenner, 2001; McDowell, 2001; Swyngedouw, 1997). A key point can be drawn from this discussion that relates to our investigation of the production of place in McKee County: the politics of scale is particularly evident in places where economic restructuring entails the redefinition of social roles—including gender roles—and this politics frequently plays out in microsites such as the household even as it impacts the character of place more generally.

This is a point that Cravey (1997, pages 166–168) reinforces by discussing changes in the organization of production and reproduction in contemporary Mexico. Shifts in the Mexican economy—from state-organized import substitution to market-led neo-liberalism—are related to a renegotiation of the domestic division of labor. She suggests that in the context of political–economic change, Mexican households have become significant sites in which wider processes of socioeconomic change are struggled over. Given this, she argues that

“households must be examined more carefully in certain periods and places, with special attention to intrahousehold relationships between men and women ... [This can] lay the grounds for a concrete way of theorizing the intersection of class and gender within households and [will allow] the household to be seen as a key locus of struggle.”

Households, as Nelson and Smith (1998, page 80) in their study of women in rural Vermont note, “are critical units that shape and define economic life, including the social rules regarding the allocation of productive and reproductive labor.” They also argue that periods of profound economic change clearly reveal the decisionmaking processes and struggles that underlie these often taken-for-granted rules (also see Agnew, 1997; Oberhauser, 1997; 2002).

These arguments resonate with more recent statements about the state of contemporary conceptualizations of scale, place, production, and reproduction in critical human geography. For instance, McDowell (2001) and Marston (2000) are both concerned with dissolving two enduring and problematic conceptual distinctions in contemporary literatures on scale: first, the overemphasis on higher geographical scales at the expense of ‘closer-in’ levels, despite a conceptual acceptance of the relational and interpenetrating nature of scale; and, second, a related limited attention to the role gender relations, reproduction, and consumption play in the politics of scale. A key aspect of both contributions and of the debates these arguments are catalyzing (see Brenner, 2001; Marston and Smith, 2001; Purcell, 2003) is the question of how to (re)think scale in terms of gender relations and processes of social reproduction most evident at the scales of the body and the household without losing sight of the role of the state and capital in producing scale for the purposes of production. For McDowell (2001, page 234), this can be done by focusing on gender as a fundamental part of economic processes:

“Industrial discipline ... not only draws new family members into the industrial workforce but affects the organization of familial relationships and the structures of daily life, even for members outside the labour force. The reverse argument is also true as the nature of social relationships, in the family, in marriage, and childbearing and rearing customs, for example, mean that men and women in particular places are differently positioned as potential workers, employers, owners, and investors.”

Among other things, this is an argument for a move beyond the binary thinking which separates production from reproduction. It also motivates a continued rethinking of the

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social struggles (or politics) through which place and scale are produced. Distinctions between the public and private sphere and between formal and informal politics are less tenable in this politics. Alternative gender relations may be crafted at the intersections between the worlds of work and home, and through the contradictions struggles produced from the demands of capitalism and patriarchy. The politics of gender and the politics of place and scale can usefully be rethought in combination. A first step is a redefinition of politics

“as activities that are carried on in the daily lives of ordinary people and are enmeshed in the social institutions and political–economic processes of their society. When there is an attempt to change the social and economic institutions that embody the basic power relations in our society—that is politics” (Morgen and Bookman, 1988, page 4; for similar arguments see also Gilbert, 1999, page 101; Kofman and Peake, 1990, page 315; Staeheli, 1996).

Central to this definition is a focus on ‘basic power relations’ which recognizes the multiplicity of processes that constitute the politics of place. While dissolving the boundary between formal and informal politics, this definition can also be read as a challenge to the understanding of politics as an activity associated only with public spaces. Rather, the conduct of politics involves a constant interplay between supposedly public and private sites of struggle, as “roles and identities [are] conditioned by power relations at several scales and settings (i.e. the home, workplace, political organization, city, and society)” (Staeheli, 1994, page 133, cited in Gilbert, 1999, page 101; see also Cope, 1996; Staeheli, 1996). We will discuss these processes and how they are implicated in the larger scale processes of kinship and community that contribute to the production of place in McKee County.

### **Economic change and women’s lives in McKee County**

McKee County is located in the coalfield region of Appalachian Kentucky. Much of the county’s terrain is comprised of steep mountain ridges and thin, long valleys or hollows. The county, like most communities in the region, is primarily rural with the majority of the population residing outside its four main towns. Driving along the often narrow and winding roads, one passes strings of houses. Small grocery stores or churches provide the social center of these small communities. Occasionally, there will be a coal tippie or mine that hints at the continuing importance of the coal industry and drivers must be alert to trucks hauling coal. A view from the top of one of the county’s mountains appears, at first, to reveal nothing but forested mountaintops in all directions. Once the shroud of morning mist burns off, hamlets and villages appear in the valleys. When the sun finally hits the mountainsides, scars from strip mining and gravel quarries belie the initial appearance of pristine nature.

Although there is a widespread image of Appalachia as ‘persistently poor’, a more accurate picture would be of a heterogeneous region undergoing cycles of economic decline and prosperity (Cushing and Rogers, 1996). Despite the historic dependence on mining, economic data between the late 1960s to the late 1990s indicates a diversifying economy. Both the employment in and income generated from mining have declined significantly since 1977, when mining contributed almost half of the employment and income in the county (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 1969–1998). Currently, services constitute around 35% of the employment, retail trade and government make up approximately 25% each, and mining is 16%. In terms of income, mining still contributes 12%, approximately equal to the service sector (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 1997). Increasing economic diversification has not translated into economic security or well-being. Although there are more employment options available in the service and retail sectors, they do not provide the same level of income as mining.

In the mid to late 1990s, when the research described here was conducted, the US Census reported the county's poverty rate as approximately 33% and the median household income was approximately \$20 000. These are worse economic conditions than exist generally in the state, which has a rate nearly half that for poverty and a median household income of \$28 929. These effects of income inequality are even more noticeable when we look specifically at the position of women and children. In McKee County the poverty rate for single women with children approached 70% in 1990 (US Census Bureau, 1994). Although the percentage of female-headed households is below the national average, between 1980 and 1990 there was a 30% increase in this type of household (Kentucky State Data Center, 1990). In 1990, whereas married couples constituted 65% of households in McKee County, single women headed around 15% of households and approximately one fourth of children in McKee County lived in single-parent households.

The decline of employment in the male-dominated coal industry has provided both the opportunity and the necessity for women to enter the wage labor market as more 'flexible', low-wage, and often part-time workers in areas such as nursing, food service, secretarial work, and home-based production (Gaventa, 1988; Maggard; 1994a; 1994b; Oberhauser, 1993; 1995a; 1995b). In McKee County the rate of female labor-force participation in the late 1990s was approximately 35% (US Census, 2000). The majority of these women were working in the newly expanding service sector. Although this is a growing sector, particularly for women, it does not provide an income to rival mining or other traditionally male-dominated occupations (table 1).

This paper will discuss the changing character of the county as narrated by a number of its working women. This approach takes account of how women and men understand and negotiate change in various ways (Kingsolver, 1992). The case studies are based upon data collected through participant observation in McKee County and over 100 semistructured and informal interviews with community residents. The selection of interviewees followed a strategy of both purposive and snowball sampling. Because the focus was on women's experiences with work inside and outside of the home, the interviews are with women who were employed or working as a condition of receiving public assistance. Most of them were in 'pink collar' service or retail positions, often involving strenuous, difficult, and tiring labor. Women were selected who represent differing employment situations (dual-wage and single-wage families, formal and informal employment), family structures (single-parent and dual-parent households, extended households), and residence (in town and outside of town).

In order to highlight these stories, we have selected fourteen women from the larger set of interview data (table 2, see page 1052). All of these women worked outside of the household—including those on public assistance—and all had responsibilities at home, caring for children, husbands, and other relatives. The women were between the ages of

**Table 1.** Sample wages in Southeastern Kentucky, 1998 (source: Kentucky Department of Employment Services, 1998).

Sample occupation	Hourly wage (\$)
Mine electrician	15.00
Roof bolter	13.00
Sales clerk	5.15
Waitress	3.35, plus tips
Licensed practical nurse	5.55–8.00
Cleaning person	5.15–7.50
Childcare worker	6.00

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20 and 45, all had children in their home, ranging in age from 3 to 17 years, and some were also grandmothers. The women occupy different class positions—because of their education, marital status, age, and/or husband's occupation—that affected their decisions about work outside of the home. A few of the women, like Cindy and Marie, enjoy a relatively affluent lifestyle thanks to their husbands' income levels. They are working primarily for 'extras' like a new house or car. Others, like Melinda, whose husband is disabled, or Hazel, who is divorced, work in order to support their families. Louisa and Shelly are single parents who are in the process of transitioning away from public assistance, which leaves them in a particularly vulnerable economic position. These women often did not make enough to be financially self-sufficient, yet their benefits have been reduced because they are engaged in waged labor. Finally, there are those who are compelled to work as a condition of state public assistance policy. Inez and Rebekah are working for their benefits as part of the Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program's (K-TAP, formerly AFDC) Other Work Experience Program (OWEP). Despite their economic differences, these women each struggle with husbands, boyfriends, other family members, and the state as they attempt to fulfill their roles as both caregivers and wage earners.

The story we tell is partial, of course. The economic diversity in the sample is not matched by racial diversity. All the women interviewed are white (less than 1% of the county's population is African-American). Men were another group that was not systematically interviewed. This research decision was prompted by the primary interest in women's experiences, an intention to counterbalance male-centered depictions of Appalachia, and logistical concerns over the number of interviews feasible within the research timeframe. Furthermore, talking to the husbands of the women interviewed about their perception of gender relations would be challenging a particular type of gender segregation, particularly as an 'outsider' (see also Stewart, 1996; Tallichet, 1995).

### **Key aspects of gender struggle and economic change**

Women in McKee County are acutely aware that their place and their lives are being restructured by processes operating at a variety of scales and favoring interests over which they frequently have little direct control. At the same time, they must negotiate the restructured relationships to the workplace and household that have been produced by the decline in mining employment and the rise in the retail and service sectors. The interviews suggest that gender roles are a particularly contentious issue in the context of these changes. Three interrelated aspects of this gender struggle are prominent: (1) the legacy of traditional gender ideology; (2) masculinity and the renegotiation of the gender division of labor; and (3) new ideals of gender relations. We will discuss each in turn.

#### **The legacy of traditional gender ideology**

The traditional gender division of labor in the Appalachian coalfields—one that is not timeless but is "relatively recently instituted [and] locally naturalized as hegemonic" (Gibson-Graham, 1996, page 218)—entailed men and women working in separate but always interdependent spheres. This organization was related to the coal industry's pervasive influence on almost all aspects of life. People in McKee County often remark that, in the past, mining was a way of life in which the men worked hard, rarely had time for family life, and often died at an early age. Women who grew up in mining families speak of mothers who were the "backbone of the family", caring for children and the house while the husband's responsibility was to bring home a paycheck. Traditional ideologies relating to the appropriate roles of men and women and society developed as a result of and as a support for the gender division of labor upon which mining depended.

**Table 2.** Work and family history.

Pseudonym	Employment status	Number of hours worked	Education	Wages or benefits	Marital status	Husband's employment status (if married)
Rebekah	maintenance worker (JTPA)	32	7th grade; working on GED	minimum wage (\$5.15 an hour), plus food stamps, childcare, Medicaid, and transportation subsidy	married	former coal miner, currently unemployed
Inez	receptionist (JTPA)	32	2 years of vocational school	minimum wage, plus food stamps, childcare, Medicaid, and transportation subsidy	divorced	
Rulah	maintenance worker (OWEP)	20	high school and some training as a nurses' aid	K-TAP benefits (\$262), food stamps (\$312), and Medicaid	divorced	
Louisa	School Aid (OWEP), also part-time as teacher's aid and attendance monitor	5–10 30–35	2 years of college	K-TAP benefits (\$71), food stamps, Medicaid, transportation subsidy, plus \$600–\$700 a month pay for aid and monitor work	divorced	
Shelly	DSI caseworker	40	Associate's degree	\$20 000, plus transitional benefits (childcare subsidy and Medicaid)	divorced	
Melinda	childcare worker	40	GED	\$9000, plus food stamps and Medicaid for youngest son	married	former coal miner, now disabled
Hazel	food service worker	40	GED	\$16 000, plus medical insurance	divorced	
Charlene	DSI caseworker	40	nursing degree	\$24 000, plus state employee benefits	married	former coal miner, now disabled



**Table 2** (continued).

Pseudonym	Employment status	Number of hours worked	Education	Wages or benefits	Marital status	Husband's employment status (if married)
Evelyn	small business owner	40 plus	GED, is completing an associate's degree in business	income from her business varies tremendously	divorced	
Sonja	food service worker	40	high school	\$17 000, plus benefits	married	small business owner
Hannah	receptionist	20	some vocational training	\$15 000, plus benefits	married	electrician for the school board
Maureen	office manager	40	bachelor's degree in business administration	\$28 000, plus benefits	married	auto mechanic
Marie	bookkeeper	30	associate's degree	\$13 000	married	coal mine inspector
Cindy	education coordinator	30	vocational training in business	\$15 000	married	vice president of a coal company

Note:

DSI—Department of Social Insurance.

GED—General Equivalency Diploma.

JTPA—Job Training Partnership Act.

K-TAP—Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program.

OWEP—Other Work Experience Program.

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These circumstances are not peculiar to the Appalachian coalfields. Instead, they speak to ideological processes at the heart of capitalist development. Campbell (1986, cited in Gibson-Graham, 1996), for instance, makes similar points about the Australian mining industry and McDowell and Massey's (1984, pages 130–131) depiction of the colliery villages of Durham, England during much of the 19th century indicates that "For miners' wives almost without exception, and for many of their daughters, unpaid work in the home was the only and time-consuming option."

Women in contemporary McKee County would agree that their mothers' generation had few options outside of marriage. Women who grew up in the 1950s through the late 1970s often assumed that economic security would come through marriage, not education and a career. Lack of education, few places for women to work outside of the home, the need to care for children and other family members, and social pressure to follow gender norms meant that there were few alternatives to the traditional role for women. Unable to work outside of the home, women were dependent on their husbands to support them financially. On the other hand, men generally abdicated a great deal of the day-to-day responsibilities and decisionmaking power within the home. Sonja, who came from a family of seventeen children, explained that her mother had complete authority over household decisions, including the allocation of her husband's paycheck:

"My mother made all the decisions. My mom was the one that pulled our family through every crisis and everything that went on. My dad had no say so whatsoever. He just set in the rocking chair and rocked ever which child was little."

Even the few women who worked outside of the home, as Marie's mother did, could expect little help from their husbands:

"My dad didn't know how to do anything. [He] didn't even know how to take out the garbage. He didn't know what you were supposed to do with it. He thought you threw the whole can away. It always seemed to be my mother's responsibility. Everything was her responsibility."

As the number of mining jobs has declined, so has the traditionally strict gender division of labor. The legacy of its associated ideology, which assigned appropriated norms and roles based on gender, is still felt, however. In the following sections, we will discuss how men and women struggle over what a woman's societal role is and which jobs women should have in a rapidly changing economy. Here it is worth noting that a significant legacy of the traditional gender ideology relates to the types of jobs women are able to gain access to and the level of pay they can command once they have become workers in a particular sector of the waged labor force. Many interviewees noted that women are being 'pushed' into jobs that are an extension of their 'natural' roles and domestic responsibilities (Pudup, 1990). These positions usually offer minimum wages, rarely provide benefits, and offer little chance for advancement. At the same time, the majority of the 'good jobs'—those that paid a living wage and provided benefits—continue to be in the traditionally defined 'male side' of the economy, in sectors such as mining, construction, and timber. To some extent, the difference between men's and women's employment opportunities is a result of the continued assumption—based in the traditional gender ideology—that women's wages are ancillary to men's and that men are the family breadwinners (Maggard, 1998). Thus, the contemporary ideology of career 'choice' that is often used to legitimate the insecure hiring arrangements of the service economy in places like McKee County helps to mask the ongoing realities of gender segregation in the job market (Fisher, 1990, page 109).

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### **Masculinity and the renegotiation of the gender division of labor**

Economic restructuring changes the bases upon which traditional gender arrangements are built. Men can no longer be the sole breadwinners and, because of declining birthrates, increasing access to education, and modern conveniences, women are less tied to the home. In recognizing these trends in their own context, several of the women in McKee County argued that recent changes have been harder on men than on women. Cindy notes that men who were raised to perform a particular role that is now being phased out feel a great deal of strain in their everyday lives. They no longer have a place in the economy but are reluctant to take a greater role in household work because of the continuing legacy of the traditional gender ideology:

“I think that’s the reason there have been a lot of divorces is because the men feel inadequate because the women have had to take over in a lot of cases ... [A] lot of men, it makes them feel inadequate. I’ve seen a lot of changes in men. Just a lot of depression. We’ve had several suicides around here and divorces. Especially after a man loses his job.”

Even those men who do not develop depression often find it difficult to adjust to their new circumstances. Melinda’s husband, Hank, lost his job as a miner and while he receives benefits that are intended to help him be retrained, he is unwilling to take a job in the retail or service sector:

“He just doesn’t see himself being able to do anything like working at Wal-Mart or something that may be feasible for him. It’s not the pay, it’s just that he can’t see himself walking around talking to people ... because he’s done a different kind of work for so long that it’s just been really hard.”

For Hank, doing what might be perceived as ‘women’s work’—selling, or talking to people—is simply unthinkable for someone who has spent most of his life in a mine. Instead, he fills his time with activities that reassert his traditionally defined male identity—serving as the volunteer fire chief, raising hogs, and helping out around the yard.

Hank is not an unusual case. In fact, only one woman said that she and her husband shared housework and childcare equally. The rest of the married women said that they did the majority of the housework and that their husbands would only assist if the women got annoyed and complained about the unequal division of household work. For example, it was only by “screaming and yelling” that Sonja was able to get her husband to do his own laundry, occasionally make the bed and prepare dinner:

“It’s better [now] because when he worked full-time at a [mining] job he did absolutely no housework. It was an insult to him to have to pick up his own clothes to take to the bedroom. He has changed. He used to be [a] redneck chauvinist.”

There is, then, an ongoing struggle associated with the reconfiguration of power within the household. The insecure employment conditions experienced by men and their related anxiety about their masculine identity, coupled with women’s attempts to redefine their work roles, challenges, as Scott (1995, page 165) notes, “the traditional gender division of labor and threaten[s] patriarchal authority in the home and the community.” In some instances, these challenges are productive of new divisions of labor whereas in other households threats to patriarchal authority are met with marital conflict, violence, and divorce leading to single parenthood.

Women in McKee County noted that paid employment provided financial security and independence from men. Whereas women in previous generations were often unable to leave a marriage because of a lack of economic resources, waged work provides a means to survive independently, as Hannah explained:

“I like being an independent woman and although I love my husband very much if something happened, he had this bang on the head and he started to being some kind of mean person, I would not stay in a situation where I felt threatened.”

Of course, the prospect of women's independence is a threat to some men's masculinity. Some men react with fear and suspicion when their wives appear to be moving their primary sphere of activity away from the home and family. Several women spoke of how their husbands tried to control their contacts with work or education. At times these efforts at control were accompanied by accusations of infidelity, threats of violence, or physical harm. Louisa said that after ten years of marriage, her husband, John, became increasingly jealous of her involvement with college classes and tutoring. John, who had barely finished high school, felt threatened by Louisa's activities outside of the home. Louisa explains that, although John focused much of his anger and suspicion on Louisa's imagined relationships with men, in actuality he was afraid of the power she was gaining by going to school:

"Maybe he thought that when I got my big degree that I was going to leave him because I would be better than him, but in the end he pushing me away himself. He would tell me that I thought I was better than him and that I was smarter than him because I went to school."

Louisa eventually had enough of John's accusations and when their relationship turned violent, she filed for divorce. She related the night she decided to leave him:

"It just got to the point that I couldn't stand it any more. He wouldn't stop. He was getting more and more aggressive and more and more violent and crazy. I had laid in the bed before and heard him play with a pistol behind my head and heard it click, he'd just be sitting there talking and I would hear him with it. I was awake and I was scared to death to turn around because I didn't want to know who he had it pointed at, me or him."

The reconfiguration of the labor market in McKee County is intertwined with struggles over gender roles more generally. These struggles are frequently situated in the microscales of the body and household—sites that are, themselves, associated with powerful traditional definitions of male and female identity. The violence and depression that accompany threats to traditional notions of masculinity in particular constitute a major concern and play a significant part in women's attempts to assert new ideals of gender relations.

#### **New ideals of gender relations: the 'partnership marriage' and the independent woman**

Violence and divorce were not the only outcomes to the new economic and social realities facing men and women in McKee County. Several women said that they were struggling to create relationships based upon partnership, rather than dependency on men. For example, whereas Hazel brought up to believe that a woman's place was to marry and have her husband take care of her, she has taught her own daughter differently:

"[My daughter's] husband will be her partner, not her owner 'cause I would always sit and talk to her and tell her, 'don't let him run over you. Be good to him and demand he be good to you. First of all, demand respect. Never let him disrespect you.'"

In some cases, women are able to use their position as wage earners to create marriages that are more equitable. Hannah, for example, contrasted a marriage that was inequitable to one that was based on sharing of roles and responsibilities:

"If I had not been working when I married Bill I think that he would have dominated me a lot more. I feel like we have a partnership now, [but] I think that it would have been him being the boss and me being the worker in that family [if I didn't work]. I think that being a working woman gives women a lot of independence that they don't normally have."

Many women feel that, by working outside the home and earning wages, they are better able to make demands on their husbands to help out around the house. Maureen, for example, explains that when she and Dwight were first married, he refused to do "house stuff", but she was able to reframe their marriage as a partnership:

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“I told him, ‘I cook, you wash. I’m sorry that’s the way it goes’. I said, ‘You’re my partner. I’m not your mom. I don’t pick up after you. When we get married, we’ll be partners in this relationship. So if I need help doing something, I need you to be able to do it’. There was resistance at first but he realizes that there’s a lot to do with me working outside of the home; that in order to get things done, he has to help.”

Other women rejected marriage altogether, opting instead to head their own households. Rulah, who had one bad relationship, said she had given up on marriage. In Rulah’s view, a husband would probably not provide a significant economic benefit and would likely result in more work for her:

“[A man would be] more work than I’ve already got altogether. More clothes I got to wash and they’d be thrown everywhere probably, you know how men are. And there’d be more dishes; he’d be a griping over something that I didn’t fix that I should have. Probably that’s how it would be, it would be my luck. And I like the life that I live right now.”

Shelly commented that a relationship without an equitable division of labor makes little sense to her.

“If I’m going to work and my husband’s going to work then he’s gonna help me when he gets home. If I’m going to have to do it all myself then I really don’t need him because I can survive without a husband.”

As women increase their access to wage labor, they are envisioning alternatives to the housewife role that was the norm for previous generations. For example, Evelyn, with whose story we began this paper, states that the “turning point” in her marriage happened after she started her own business and enrolled in college:

“I was in a bad marriage from the very beginning. It was an abusive marriage. I always knew that I would get out of it but I didn’t know when. It was when I started my own business and went back to school that I could do it. Education and business taught me that there was more to life than what I was living.”

Rather than deal with the emotional pressures of living in a household with a man, some women choose either to rely on the state for assistance or to enter the wage labor market. Although both of these choices also cause pressures and stress for women, it is often preferable to living with a man who is a potential financial, emotional, and physical drain (Edin, 2000; Oliker, 2000).

As waged laborers, women often develop new needs with respect to their home lives or are driven to express needs they felt earlier but repressed. These struggles become transformative if they move households toward nonsexist arrangements (VanEvery, 1997) and, although we do not suggest that women in McKee County have achieved egalitarian partnerships with men, we do suggest that most of those interviewed are employing specific strategies aimed at reconfiguring household gender relations. Access to education and employment has given women in Appalachian Kentucky the economic and social opportunities to challenge traditional gender hierarchies. Women who earn a wage are not solely dependent upon their husbands, as were women of the previous generation. They can attempt to renegotiate a new ‘gender contract’ or leave the relationship all together.

### **Beyond individuals and households: gender struggle, scale, and the production of place**

The previous section identifies three key elements of contemporary gender struggle taking place primarily in the households of McKee County. Although they indicate the profound and wrenching effects of wider economic change on everyday lives, we argue that these microscale struggles in the ‘private’ sphere are also crucially important to the shaping and reshaping of the county as a place. They are essential to the politics of place and scale that is too often discussed at the macrolevel and in reference to

production rather than social reproduction (McDowell, 2001; Marston, 2000). Women's struggles to gain education and employment, leave or reformulate relationships with men, and change the gender ideologies and divisions of labor that structure their lives are all political acts. The feminist redefinition of politics that includes informal as well as formal struggles and the consequent resituating of politics to include sites such as the body and the household provides the opportunity to link everyday life and struggle in this way (Cope, 1996; Gilbert, 1999; Morgen and Bookman, 1988; Staeheli, 1996). As the traditional gender ideology and division of labor continue to be struggled over and reorganized in the household, the social relations that tie individuals into larger communities have also undergone change as have the places in which those communities are embedded.

"[P]laces", as McDowell (1993, page 313) notes, "are constructed from alliances and oppositional struggles to lines of power." The production of place is, then, constituted by the complex interrelationships between struggles at the microscale of the household and ideological processes that assign appropriate roles and behaviors to this scale and to that of the community, among others. These fundamentally scalar struggles play an important part in consolidating or weakening the stability of existing scalar distributions of social roles and power and the negotiation of new scalar fixes. As Swyngedouw (1997, page 142) puts it, "scale redefinitions alter and express changes in the geometry of social power by strengthening power and control by some while disempowering others." This 'power geometry' includes both power articulated in the 'big politics' of the public sphere and in the household politics of the private sphere while its fundamentally scalar character problematizes that binary distinction. If we are to argue for the importance of microscale gender struggles in the production of place, however, we must show how gender struggle in the household has shaped the "networks of social relations and understandings" (Massey, 1994, page 154) that constitute place. In the following paragraphs we highlight how women's roles in the production of place constitute and are constituted by the changing character of social relations based on kinship and community work—two important, interrelated aspects of place and everyday life in the coalfields (table 3).

Kinship has long been seen as a central component of Appalachian culture. Contemporary ethnographic studies of Appalachia note the ongoing importance of kinship and family survival strategies for labor, financial support, and assistance with large cooperative activities (Halperin, 1990). Kinship also serves as "the model for community cohesion and mutuality" (Seitz 1995, page 128), which can counter some of the disruptive trends of capitalism. It reflects a model of appropriate behavior extending from the family to the community that is an "oppositional economy to and a safety net against the exploitation of transnational corporations" (Taylor, 1992, page 125; see also Stewart, 1996). Kinship ties can also reproduce and reinforce the traditional gender divisions and inequalities (Billings and Blee, 2000; Duncan, 1999).

Most of the women interviewed describe models of kinship with which they were raised as being underpinned by reciprocity and sharing. The work of maintaining kinship and community ties was, under the traditional gender ideology, assigned primarily to women. This work involved, for example, participating in caring for the sick and attending wakes and funerals as important tasks of everyday life. According to Sonja,

"When we were growing up if someone in the neighborhood died you went to the church, or if they had them in a home ... you went to their house. Even if you didn't have a chocolate cake for yourself you found stuff to bake a chocolate cake to take to them. I think it's just part of our heritage and part of our culture to do stuff like that."

However, kinship is more than a model of behavior, ties are created and maintained through work (di Leonardo, 1984). Because kinship is produced through individual action, it is flexible and adaptable to changing socioeconomic conditions (Batteau, 1982). In McKee County the kinship norms that prescribed women's kin work have

**Table 3.** Sites of gender struggle and place making.

Site of struggle	Processes of restructuring	Place-making struggles
<i>Processes operating in microsites</i>		
The body	Constitution of passive, service-oriented, flexible workers.	Increased stress due to dual roles of caregiver and waged worker. Low wages, lack of health insurance, and social services reductions. Domestic violence.
Household	Economic necessity for women to become wage earners, resulting in reduced time for caregiving. Increased access to economic resources for women.	Intrahousehold struggles over the performance of domestic labor. Renegotiation of gender responsibilities.
<i>Impacts on place and social relations</i>		
Kinship networks	Wage labor resulting in less time available for kin work and a breakdown of kin relations.	Loosening of kinship ties and formulation of new network relations.
Community	Loss of traditional economic base (for example, mining). Breakdown of entrenched power relations based on class, race, and gender	Emergence of new 'ideals' for economic development. Community struggles over changes in the gender division of labor.

become increasingly difficult to put into practice. Several women noted that there are many reasons for changes in how members of the community interact. These included changes in residential patterns in which families and communities are increasingly dispersed, reducing their ability to interact on a regular, face-to-face basis (including out-migration from the region as a result of the search for employment). The increasing availability and popularity of individualized forms of entertainment were also identified as a reason for the reworking of kinship ties. Perhaps most prominent, however, are the demands of wage labor on women and the consequent decrease in their ability to juggle waged work, household work (in situations where the ideal of a 'partnership marriage' has not been achieved), and kin or community work. In short, with increased opportunities and pressures to become wage earners, women are more focused on their workplace and nuclear family rather than on engaging in traditional ways of maintaining extended networks of kin and community. For Melinda this is one of the more difficult aspects of the restructuring of her life:

"When you're at home, if somebody has a death or illness or a need, you have more time to do that than when you're working. It's really hard to find enough time to bake a cake and take it to the funeral, or go sit with somebody who's sick or fill in for childcare. So, what used to be homemade cakes and cooked food is Long John Silver's [fast food] and Ho-Hos [prepackaged 'snack cakes']"

This might be understood as one part of a much larger 'opening up' of the place to capitalist market forces (Gibson-Graham, 1996). There certainly seems to be evidence in the interviews of a change in the character of local economies of reciprocity, in which chocolate cakes would be baked as a matter of course to offer sustenance and sympathy to bereaved neighbors. Now market commodities, such as mass-produced 'snack cakes', have become more popular as elements of kinship networks and, more generally, goods and services, such as home-cooked meals and garden-grown vegetables that were often shared among community members, have become less available (Scott, 1995).

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We do not suggest that long-standing kinship and community ties have disappeared in the wake of this shift toward commodification of everyday life, however. Rather, the move away from home baking is an example of women's strategies for coping with the pressures of economic change and of the way in which negotiations over appropriate gender roles and the distribution of women's labor within the household extend beyond the walls of the house to have profound effects on the networks of social relations that constitute place. These effects entail not the disappearance of crucial forms of place-producing social interaction but a reformulation of their character. As the women's words suggest, these changes have, in turn, reconfigured their sense of place, leaving them with contradictory feelings towards the economic and social changes that have taken place in the county and their role in the networks of social relations that constitute it as a place.

As some networks of social relations have been reconfigured in the county, women's increased participation in the waged labor force has allowed them to cultivate new social relations. Many of the women noted that coworkers, who more often provided emotional rather than material support, were important components of their social network. In many cases, coworkers offered support in coping with and responding to the pressures inside the workplace (Anglin, 1993). For instance, Shelly's coworkers help her deal with the stress of dealing with clients:

"They keep you going and keep you laughing when you've got this client that's just gripe, gripe, gripe, gripe, wants everything done this way and you just can't do it. And they get up and leave and you [go to your coworkers] and gripe about it and then they make you laugh about it instead of griping."

Coworkers are described as being "like family", although they are not related. In these cases they also served as an antidote to the stress of family and kin relations. Sonja's coworkers, for instance, provided emotional support when any one of them was having a problem at home:

"We supported each other at everything. If you come in mad at your husband, we were all mad at your husband and no matter what, you were right."

In other examples, friends provided a means for women to escape from a difficult marriage, take a job, or go back to school (Hanson and Pratt, 1995).

The pressure for women to engage in waged labor has, as we illustrated in the previous section, precipitated a great deal of struggle and negotiation in the household over the appropriate roles men and women should carry out, definitions of the ideal form of domestic partnership, and the proper scale or site in which these roles should be performed. The character of women's participation in the labor force and the new networks of social relations they construct in the workplace reflect the nature of the negotiations in the household. At the same time, the supportive bonds between women in the workplace serve to validate and encourage women's struggles within the household. These bonds have a mutually reinforcing relationship with individual women's attempts to renegotiate what are seen to be appropriate gender roles at the scale of the household and extended family. As such, the production of place is a scaled process in which politics and struggle focus on complex negotiations over defining what activities are appropriate, who should properly engage in specific activities, and where they should be carried out.

As gender struggles over how to maintain kinship and community ties and how to accommodate women's new roles in the wage labor force shape place, a third aspect of the changing nature of women's relationships to wider networks of social relations has also become more prominent in the county. Many of the women interviewed are increasingly engaged in attempts to create the conditions and policies that meet their multiple, yet overlapping, aspirations and responsibilities through work in their communities and in formal politics. As the dominance of the coal industry declines, some



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have developed their own businesses and it is becoming more common for women, especially younger ones, to speak out about issues that affect them, such as domestic violence and welfare reform (Miewald, 2001; 2004). They are now more able, or more willing, to fight for the opportunity to be involved in political and economic arenas from which they were previously excluded. For Evelyn her world is “completely different” from that of her mother because she is able to participate in activities that were inaccessible to her mother because of both physical barriers, such as the lack of transportation, and social barriers. This restructuring of social relations and of place is produced through the combination of large-scale economic change and the struggles occurring in various microsities, including the body and the household.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper we draw upon a study of the changing lives of women in the Appalachian coalfields as they experience the effects of economic restructuring in order to discuss the production of a particular place—McKee County, Kentucky. In the coalfields the decline in employment opportunities in the traditionally male-dominated mining industry and the rise of the female-dominated service sector have entailed a series of related reorganizations of men’s and women’s lives. Changes in the domestic division of labor have often been resisted by men who adhere to local norms regarding what constitutes appropriate men’s and women’s work. Many women, on the other hand, strive to redefine the traditional ideology and take advantage of new opportunities in waged work.

The increasingly insecure employment conditions experienced by men contribute to their anxiety over the status of their masculinity, which had long been closely tied to the hard physical labor most of them performed in or around the mines. This insecurity is compounded by women’s attempts to redefine their work roles and produces a great deal of tension that is manifested in struggle between men and women to control every aspect of daily life. The struggle is evident in attempts by women to assert an ideal of equality in their relations with men, or to break away from traditionally defined family formations altogether. Although these struggles have profound effects on relationships within households, we argue that they also have an impact on the character of place. For instance, as women reorganize their relationships to domestic work and the waged labor market, the kinship relationships they have traditionally been charged with maintaining are reorganized. Furthermore, the terms of local community development and formal politics are being changed by the increasing involvement of women who are asserting their influence in the public sphere and in the local economy.

The paper contributes to literatures on place and scale by utilizing a feminist perspective that emphasizes the important role gender struggle—carried out at the scale of the household and focused both on issues of social reproduction and on changing relationships between women and the waged labor market—in the production and reproduction of place. It suggests that the politics of making and remaking place is manifest not only in “big politics” (Staeheli, 1996, page 616) but also in the everyday microstruggles in which women and men engage as they negotiate profound economic change (Morgen and Bookman, 1988). In this light, we argue that, in periods of rapid and profound economic change, struggles over appropriate gender roles at the microscale can provide significant insight into the politics of place and scale. There has been too little attention paid to how social relations that are produced in and through microsities of struggle impact place. We argue for a greater focus on the everyday struggles of living in a place and on the microsities where these struggles occur not as a retreat from important questions about the scalar structuring of contemporary society and economy at scales ranging from the locality to the globe but as a contribution to our understanding of the complex multiscale processes, including those articulated most clearly at the scales of

the body and the household, that produce place. As Oberhauser (1997, page 169; see also Oberhauser, 2002) has recently argued in her work on Appalachia, the household “provides an important context for understanding everyday events and their connection to broader structures. Examining the intersections of these different scales of socio-economic change leads to a more comprehensive and less gender biased understanding of [economic restructuring].”

Therefore, the restructuring of place and the restructuring of lives are complexly and strongly connected. Studying the production of place in and through the situated struggles occurring in important nodes within larger networks of social relations allows us to assert relational and gender-sensitive understandings of place.

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