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ARTICLE

Gender, Paid Employment, and Deindustrialization in New Towns in North-West England, c. 1970–1990s

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Abstract

Existing research into the deindustrialization that afflicted northern England and Scotland during the twentieth century has focused predominantly on men's experiences of unemployment and strikes. In contrast, this article examines the relationship between women's employment and deindustrialization through the lens of three new towns in north-west England. Skelmersdale, Runcorn, and Central Lancashire were established during the 1960s and 1970s, partly with the aim of attracting employers and workers to a region experiencing industrial decline. Competing constructions of women's work, both paid and unpaid, informed how the towns were planned, managed, and experienced. The new towns widened employment opportunities for female workers, but they did not significantly reshape gender roles because women remained responsible for housework and childcare while men were conceptualized as breadwinners. To explore this contradiction, the article analyses archival material produced by the development corporations that planned the new towns, alongside original oral history interviews conducted with women who lived and worked in them. It argues that even in situations of deindustrialization and rising male unemployment, women's jobs did not displace men's. Rather, the new towns represented a continuation of and a departure from existing patterns of employment, demonstrating that state-led urban development was fraught with gendered tensions.

I

'Men in Skelmersdale can't find jobs [and] the new factories flanking the estate seem to provide only women's work.'[1] This was how a 1970 article in the *TV Times* magazine described life in Skelmersdale, a new town in north-west England established in 1961 to ease Liverpool's housing shortage and attract

[1] Alix Coleman, 'When father plays mother', *TV Times Granada*, 20–6 June, pp. 44–5.

employment to the region. According to the *TV Times*, Skelmersdale provided 'neat, fresh houses…away from the mean and dingy rooms' of the city, but 'nearly all the worthwhile jobs are available "for women only"'. The magazine reported that men were forced onto the dole and into the home, leading to a 'domestic switch-round' in which husbands were saddled with housework and childcare while their wives were at work. In portraying Skelmersdale as a town blighted by male unemployment, the *TV Times* constructed a masculine narrative of the deindustrialization that afflicted northern England and Scotland throughout the post-war period.[2] Existing historical research has also framed deindustrialization, unemployment, and poor labour relations as predominantly male experiences.[3] In contrast, this article examines the relationship between female employment and deindustrialization, building on scholarship which highlights women's role as both workers and activists during the late twentieth century.[4] Focusing on three new towns in north-west England that were planned as antidotes to regional decline, it interrogates the ways that women's work was understood by planners, employers, and female workers themselves. The new towns provided jobs in light-manufacturing and services industries that were suited to women, but this did not produce a significant change in gender relations. Men continued to be conceptualized as breadwinners and women as homemakers and mothers, meaning the 'domestic switch-round' was an exaggeration.

The state-funded new towns project sheds light on deindustrialization because one of its aims was to attract employers and skilled workers to regions beyond the prosperous south-east. In north-west England, traditional industries such as mining, textiles, and shipbuilding had suffered a long decline.[5] Accordingly, Skelmersdale, Runcorn, and Central Lancashire were designated as new towns during the 1960s and 1970s. The planners promised 36,000 new jobs in Skelmersdale, 31,000 in Runcorn, and 81,000 in Central

[2] Jim Tomlinson, 'De-industrialization not decline: a new meta-narrative for post-war British history', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), pp. 76–99.

[3] Jim Phillips, 'Workers' voice and the moral economy in Britain's "neoliberal" age', in Aled Davies, Ben Jackson, and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, eds., *The neoliberal age? Britain since the 1970s* (London, 2021), pp. 155–75; Colin Hay, 'Narrating crisis: the discursive construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology*, 30 (1996), pp. 253–77; David Howell, 'Defiant dominoes: working miners and the 1984–5 strike', in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders, eds., *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 148–64; Brian Marren, *We shall not be moved: how Liverpool's working class fought redundancies, closures, and cuts in the age of Thatcher* (Manchester, 2016).

[4] Jessica White, 'Black women's groups, life narratives, and the construction of the self in late twentieth-century Britain', *Historical Journal*, 65 (2022), pp. 797–817; Tara Martin López, *The Winter of Discontent: myth, memory, and history* (Liverpool, 2014); Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, 'National women against pit closures: gender, trade unionism, and community activism in the miners' strike, 1984–5', *Contemporary British History*, 32 (2018), pp. 78–100.

[5] Skelmersdale Development Corporation (SDC), *Skelmersdale new town planning proposals: report on basic plan* (2 vols., Skelmersdale, 1964), I, pp. 12–13; Runcorn Development Corporation (RDC), *Runcorn new town master plan*, 1967, Chester, Cheshire Archives and Local Studies (CALS), 125466, pp. 30–1; Central Lancashire Development Corporation (CLDC), *Central Lancashire Development Corporation outline plan* (Preston, 1974), p. 39.

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Lancashire.[6] The first were concentrated in light-manufacturing industries on peripheral industrial estates, and from the 1970s onwards, large shopping centres and modernist office blocks provided additional employment in the services sector. These jobs widened employment opportunities for women because they differed from those they had long performed in homes, small retailers, and regional industries such as Lancashire's cotton mills.[7] The towns were planned and built during a period when wives and mothers increasingly took up formal employment. Nationally, the percentage of married women registered as employed grew from 26 per cent to 62 per cent between 1951 and 1981, and the economic activity rate of women with dependent children rose from 24 per cent in 1961 to 50 per cent by 1985.[8] The new towns both reflected and reinforced these changing patterns of women's work, and they offer a window into shifting social ideals and cultural practices.[9] They allow us to analyse the gendered dimensions of paid employment in late twentieth-century Britain, indicating that deindustrialization did not just involve the loss of men's jobs but also facilitated a limited amount of mobility for women.

The new towns were underpinned by contradictory constructions of women's work, something which has not been fully problematized by urban historians. Scholars have examined the intellectual, administrative, and architectural aspects of the towns, but they have neglected gender, obscuring the ways that policies, plans, and built environments prescribed distinct roles for men and women.[10] Sociologists, conversely, have long acknowledged the relationship between gender and urban planning.[11] Meryl Aldridge argues that the post-war new towns were 'strikingly male-centred' because housing and employment policies were tied to the skills and income of a household's main earner, who was usually a man.[12] Yet gender relations were more complex than Aldridge suggests. As we shall see, the new town planners actively promoted women's employment as part of a deliberate strategy to meet changing industrial needs. They constructed women as paid workers as well as

[6] SDC, *Skelmersdale new town planning proposals*, I, p. 12; CALS, 125466, p. 34; CLDC, *Central Lancashire Development Corporation outline plan*, p. 101.

[7] Jutta Schwarzkopf, *Unpicking gender: the social construction of gender in the Lancashire cotton weaving industry, 1880–1914* (Aldershot, 2004), pp. 29–34.

[8] Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain since 1945: women, family, work, and the state in the post-war years* (Oxford, 1992), p. 74.

[9] On the use of new towns to illuminate national and global histories, see Guy Ortolano, 'Planning the urban future in 1960s Britain', *Historical Journal*, 54 (2011), pp. 477–507.

[10] For example, see Anthony Alexander, *Britain's new towns: garden cities to sustainable communities* (London, 2009); Rosemary Wakeman, *Practicing utopia: an intellectual history of the new town movement* (London, 2016); Katy Lock and Hugh Ellis, *New towns: the rise, fall and rebirth* (London, 2020); Salvatore Dellaria, 'A new town and a numbers game: Runcorn, Merseyside, and Liverpool', *Planning Perspectives*, 37 (2022), pp. 243–65; Thomas Szydlowski, 'Skelmersdale: design and implementation of a British new town, 1961–1985', *Planning Perspectives*, 37 (2022), pp. 341–68.

[11] Joan Goldstein, 'Planning for women in the new towns: new concepts and dated roles', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 9 (1978), pp. 385–92.

[12] Meryl Aldridge, 'Only demi-paradise? Women in garden cities and new towns', *Planning Perspectives*, 11 (1996), pp. 23–39, at p. 23.

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homemakers and mothers, and this conflict informed how the towns were planned, managed, and experienced.

We know little about women's paid work in the new towns because historians have prioritized 'home' and 'community' over employment.[13] Lynn Abrams et al. argue that shifts in gender and class identities facilitated 'newly fashioned family and home-centred lifestyles' and 'elective social networks characterised by choice' among people who moved to East Kilbride new town in Scotland.[14] With reference to Milton Keynes new town in Buckinghamshire, Mark Clapson emphasizes the 'organising role of working-class women in local social action', and Guy Ortolano notes that interest-based clubs and voluntary associations 'were created by and for women'.[15] Whilst these historians locate women within the home and neighbourhood, this article offers a new perspective through its exploration of women's work in factories, shops, and offices. By foregrounding the workplace, it builds on Selina Todd's assertion that 'working-class people's everyday lives and aspirations embraced a broader urban landscape than the street on which they lived'.[16] An interrogation of women's role as workers suggests that the new towns signalled both a continuation of and a departure from traditional patterns of employment. Industrial estates, shopping centres, and office blocks created new jobs for women, but they remained concentrated in poorly paid, lower skilled, precarious roles, and childcare provision continued to be inadequate.

These circumstances were not unique to the new towns; rather, they reflected the contradictions in women's work throughout the country. Historians have shown that although female employment steadily increased in the post-war period, working wives were conceptualized as threatening to the male breadwinner and female homemaker ideals.[17] Women's jobs were persistently devalued, and recent research by Eve Worth demonstrates that despite the growing availability of public sector employment in the 1960s and 1970s, female workers experienced deprofessionalization and downwards social mobility from the 1980s.[18] Other scholars have explored the conflict

[13] For example, see Mark Clapson, *Invincible green suburbs, brave new towns: social change and urban dispersal in post-war England* (Manchester, 1998); Judy Attfield, 'Inside pram town: a case study of Harlow house interiors, 1951–61', in Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham, eds., *A view from the interior: feminism, women, and design* (London, 1989), pp. 215–38; Jon Lawrence, *Me, me, me? The search for community in post-war England* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 84–100.

[14] Lynn Abrams et al., 'Aspiration, agency, and the production of new selves in a Scottish new town, c.1947–c.2016', *Twentieth Century British History*, 29 (2018), pp. 576–604, at p. 580.

[15] Mark Clapson, 'Working-class women's experiences of moving to new housing estates in England since 1919', *Twentieth Century British History*, 10 (1999), pp. 345–65, at p. 363; Guy Ortolano, *Thatcher's progress: from social democracy to market liberalism through an English new town* (Cambridge, 2019), p. 177.

[16] Selina Todd, 'Phoenix rising: working-class life and urban reconstruction, c.1945–1967', *Journal of British Studies*, 54 (2015), pp. 679–702, at p. 680.

[17] Helen McCarthy, 'Women, marriage and paid work in post-war Britain', *Women's History Review*, 26 (2017), pp. 46–61; Stephen Brooke, 'Gender and working-class identity in Britain during the 1950s', *Journal of Social History*, 34 (2001), pp. 773–95.

[18] Eve Worth, *The welfare state generation: women, agency, and class in Britain since 1945* (London, 2022). See also Pat Thane, 'Women and inequalities', in Nicole Robertson, John Singleton, and

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between paid work and motherhood.[19] Laura Paterson argues that mothers who resumed employment after having children understood paid work as integral to their sense of self.[20] Yet affordable childcare was limited, and parenting remained a gendered activity which fell primarily to women.[21] Helen McCarthy and others suggest that the onus was placed on mothers to meet the demands of working motherhood, meaning women used organizational strategies including part-time hours and informal childcare to balance their multiple roles.[22] Lone mothers experienced specific barriers, Pat Thane and Tanya Evans argue, particularly when faced with the welfare cuts and rising unemployment of the 1980s.[23] This article builds on this scholarship by arguing that competing constructions of women's employment were negotiated, adapted, and contested through state-led urban redevelopment projects such as new towns. Town plans and built environments prescribed particular gender roles, and women's experiences of employment were grounded in urban space.

Because the new towns were planned and managed by publicly funded development corporations in dialogue with employers and central government, it is possible to access overt statements of intention regarding employment policies and practices. Each development corporation produced a vast record of reports, minutes, letters, and photographs. This abundant but underused archival material allows us to interrogate official understandings of women's work, which was framed as integral to the development of the new towns but simultaneously threatening to male jobs. Oral history interviews with female workers offer a counterpoint to the 'top-down' perspective of the official archive, indicating that women had diverse experiences and understandings of paid work. Using oral interviews, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson argue that working-class women asserted their autonomy and individuality from the 1950s onwards, constructing a 'vernacular discourse of gender equality' which was enabled by structural change but also by the 'creative use individual women made of the ideas and frameworks they

Avram Taylor, eds., *Twentieth-century Britain: economic, cultural, and social change* (London, 2022), pp. 188–201.

[19] Helen McCarthy, *Double lives: a history of working motherhood* (London, 2020); Dolly Smith Wilson, 'A new look at the affluent worker: the good working mother in post-war Britain', *Twentieth-Century British History*, 17 (2006), pp. 206–29; Angela Davis, *Modern motherhood: women and family in England, 1945–2000* (Manchester, 2012).

[20] Laura Paterson, '"I didn't feel like my own person": paid work in women's narratives of self and working motherhood, 1950–1980', *Contemporary British History*, 33 (2019), pp. 405–26.

[21] On childcare, see Jane Lewis, 'The failure to expand childcare provision and to develop a comprehensive childcare policy in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24 (2013), pp. 249–74. On parenting, see Angela Davis and Laura King, 'Gendered perspectives on men's changing familial roles in postwar England, c.1950–1990', *Gender & History*, 30 (2018), pp. 70–92.

[22] Helen McCarthy, '"I don't know how she does it!" Feminism, family and work in "neoliberal" Britain', in Davies, Jackson, and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, eds., *The neoliberal age?*, pp. 135–54; Eve Worth and Laura Paterson, '"How is she going to manage with the children?" Organizational labour, working, and mothering in Britain, c.1960–1990', *Past & Present*, 246 (2020), pp. 318–43.

[23] Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: unmarried motherhood in twentieth-century England* (Oxford, 2012).

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found in the culture around them to make sense of their lives'.[24] Oral testimonies help us understand the meanings that women attached to paid work and the identities they constructed in the process, and this article draws on life history interviews conducted by the author between 2022 and 2023 with women who worked in Skelmersdale, Runcorn, and Central Lancashire during the late twentieth century. It focuses particularly on the experiences of two women who resumed part-time work after having children, informed by Stephanie Spencer's assertion that 'for women a coherent career could incorporate time spent in caring and domesticity'.[25] To understand the diversity and contingency of women's work histories, it is essential to move beyond a masculine definition of a career as a lifetime of continuous employment, towards one which could include several paid jobs and periods of unemployment.

The first section of the article argues that the development corporations promoted women's employment in a way that did not disrupt normative gender roles. They constructed a narrow definition of women's work in the hopes of persuading employers to set up businesses and tenants to rent houses in the new towns, and they failed to address how women should combine paid work with motherhood without affordable childcare provision. The second section argues that despite pervasive male unemployment, women's jobs did not replace men's because the latter continued to be understood as breadwinners. It explores the controversy surrounding gendered employment in Skelmersdale during the 1970s, when women's work became contentious after several factories closed. The last section uses oral history interviews to argue that although the new towns provided employment for women, these part-time jobs were often poorly paid and reinforced traditional gender roles. Nonetheless, the interviewees conceptualized themselves as workers as well as mothers and homemakers, framing their jobs as integral to their life narratives. State-led urban development projects were fraught with gendered tensions, and an analysis of the north-west new towns suggests that although deindustrialization expanded women's employment opportunities, gender relations were not fundamentally reshaped.

II

Women's employment informed the planning and management of the new towns, but it was not conceptualized in the same way as men's. Skelmersdale Development Corporation (SDC) estimated that 31 per cent of the workforce would be female during the initial stages of the new town's development.[26] During the 1960s and 1970s, they produced numerous colour photographs showing women operating machinery and working on assembly lines in light-manufacturing industries. These promotional images would have been reproduced in brochures and presentations advertising the town

[24] Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, 'Vernacular discourses of gender equality in the post-war British working class', *Past & Present*, 254 (2022), pp. 277–313, at p. 311.

[25] Stephanie Spencer, *Gender, work, and education in Britain in the 1950s* (Basingstoke, 2005), p. 4.

[26] SDC, *Skelmersdale new town planning proposals*, I, p. 13.

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to industrialists. Female factory operatives were usually depicted as anonymous workers, photographed in groups wearing matching uniforms and directing their gaze away from the camera.[27] One photograph that deviated from this formula showed a woman working at a circuit board factory (Figure 1). The subject was not a worker dressed in factory attire but an alluring woman with blow-dried hair, immaculate makeup, and a sheer shirt revealing her underwear. Unlike the production line operatives, she was photographed alone, interacting with her audience by looking at the camera and flashing a tantalizing smile.

The glamorous style and manner of the woman in SDC's photograph contradicted the norms of women's factory work. Social historian Carol Dyhouse suggests that glamour allowed women to challenge expectations of working-class femininity, but this image was likely produced by a male photographer to appeal to male planners and employers.[28] The coloured spots on the woman's shirt perfectly match the circuit boards arranged geometrically behind her, indicating that the scene was staged. As Dyhouse argues, glamour was 'linked with artifice and with performance' and represented 'a form of aspiration, a fiction of female becoming'.[29] The photograph was performative, aspirational, and fictional because it was produced to promote Skelmersdale's modern factories, new technologies, and female workforce to industrialists. Whether glamorous or anonymous, SDC depicted female workers as plentiful, cheap, and sexualized. They constructed this cultural imaginary to entice businessmen to establish factories in Skelmersdale, in the hopes of providing new jobs and stemming industrial decline.

Like SDC, Runcorn Development Corporation (RDC) depicted women's employment in their promotional material. They advertised Runcorn's job opportunities to prospective residents in a glossy brochure published in the late 1960s or early 1970s.[30] It featured a photograph of a female shop assistant demonstrating a lipstick sample to a customer (Figure 2), with a caption explaining that 'Carol is a cosmetics supervisor in a chemists shop in old Runcorn. Soon this famous firm will be opening new premises at the Town Centre.' This was a feminine, sexualized portrayal of women's employment, indicated by Carol's makeup and jewellery, the customer's summer dress and tanned skin, their parted lips, and the photograph of the partially clothed man in the background. It echoed advertisements from the period which used semi-nude bodies to sell beauty products to women.[31] This image was not intended to appeal to male industrialists, but to encourage young women to move to Runcorn by depicting female workers as glamorous and

[27] For example, see 'Industry – Peter Blond (int)', n.d., Preston, Lancashire Archives (LA), NTSK/27/1/77; and 'Industry – Gillibrands – Distillers Co. Ltd (int)', n.d., LA, NTSK/27/1/81.

[28] Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: history, women, feminism* (London, 2010), p. 3.

[29] Ibid., pp. 1, 3.

[30] 'Work in Runcorn', n.d., CALS, NTW 65/13.

[31] Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The body and consumer culture', in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, ed., *Women in twentieth-century Britain* (London, 2001), pp. 183–97; Daisy Payling and Tracey Loughran, 'Nude bodies in British women's magazines at the turn of the 1970s: agency, spectatorship, and the sexual revolution', *Social History of Medicine*, 35 (2022), pp. 1356–85.

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Figure 1. Woman working at the Delta Printed Circuits factory in Skelmersdale. 'Industry – Gillibrands – Delta Painted [sic] Circuits Ltd (int)', n.d., Preston, Lancashire Archives (LA), NTSK/27/1/79. Reproduced with kind permission of Lancashire Archives.

professional. Glamour, argues sociologist Beverley Skeggs, is a form of respectable sexuality that working-class women can use to convey their cultural and economic value.[32] RDC's photograph combined female sexuality with professional respectability: Carol was a 'supervisor' who wore a smart uniform and worked at a 'famous' company which was soon to relocate to Shopping City, Runcorn's enclosed town centre that opened in 1971. This vision of women's employment was fun and flirtatious yet professional and prestigious, intended to appeal to younger women seeking social and financial autonomy.

Other photographs produced by RDC portrayed women's work as domestic rather than glamorous. The brochure included an image of a woman stirring a mixing bowl in a kitchen (Figure 3) and another of the same woman examining fabric samples in a textiles factory (Figure 4). Together, the photographs

[32] Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of class and gender: becoming respectable* (London, 1997), pp. 110–17.

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Figure 2. Shop assistant demonstrating a lipstick sample to a customer at a chemist in Runcorn. 'Work in Runcorn' brochure, n.d., Chester, Cheshire Archives and Local Studies (CALS), NTW/65/13. Reproduced with kind permission of Cheshire Archives and Local Studies.

Figure 3. Woman stirring a mixing bowl in a kitchen in Runcorn. 'Work in Runcorn' brochure, n.d., CALS, NTW 65/13. Reproduced with kind permission of Cheshire Archives and Local Studies.

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Figure 4. Woman looking at fabric samples in a textiles factory in Runcorn. 'Work in Runcorn' brochure, n.d., CALS, NTW/65/13. Reproduced with kind permission of Cheshire Archives and Local Studies.

juxtaposed her practical overalls with her feminine blouse and skirt, the spools of thread and fabric samples with the branded food and mixing bowl, and production with consumption. 'Mary finds housework easy in her beautiful new home with its well-equipped kitchen and labour-saving gadgets', the caption explained, 'she has plenty of time for her job in this modern factory, only just over a mile from her home'. The brochure implied that women's paid work was an extension of unpaid housework, enabled by well-planned housing and factories. It also emphasized the availability of part-time jobs, which by

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the late 1970s comprised over 40 per cent of women's employment nationally.[33] Part-time work did not disrupt the female homemaker and male breadwinner ideal because women's earnings were conceptualized as 'extras' for the family.[34] By framing female employment as compatible with traditional gender roles, RDC advertised Runcorn to prospective residents, particularly couples who desired the affluence and security of two wage earners.

As shown by these examples, all the workers in the development corporations' promotional photographs were white. Most of Skelmersdale and Runcorn's new residents came from Liverpool, and although this city has a long-established Black community, the vast majority of people who moved to the new towns were white.[35] In the 1991 census – the first to collect data on ethnicity – just 1 per cent of Skelmersdale's residents and 0.9 per cent of Runcorn's were recorded as belonging to Black, South Asian, Chinese, or 'other' ethnic groups, compared with 3.8 per cent in Liverpool.[36] Social geographer Alistair Bonnett suggests that British working-class identity became synonymous with whiteness because white people were framed as the beneficiaries of the welfare state.[37] This process occurred in the new towns, partly because the development corporations' photography constructed whiteness as the norm. According to a 1980 Commission for Racial Equality report on the London new towns, their promotional activities 'reinforced the image that New...Towns are for "whites"' and 'are not multi-racial communities', meaning that they 'naturally attract few minority families'.[38] Another social study, commissioned by Harlow District Council in 1990, included interviews with Black and Asian people who lived in the new town and had experienced institutional and interpersonal racism in the workplace and when applying for jobs.[39] SDC's and RDC's photographs offer a partial and exclusive depiction of women's employment which obliterates the experiences of the small minority of Black and Asian people who lived and worked in Skelmersdale and Runcorn.[40] Through their promotional photography, the development corporations found businesses to use their industrial and commercial buildings and

[33] McCarthy, *Double lives*, p. 325.

[34] Smith Wilson, 'A new look at the affluent worker', p. 225.

[35] On Black Liverpool, see Jaqueline Nassy Brown, *Dropping anchor, setting sail: geographies of race in Black Liverpool* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); Diane Frost, Gemma Catney, and Leona Vaughn, '"We are not separatist because so many of us are mixed": resisting negative stereotypes of neighbourhood ethnic residential concentration', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48 (2022), pp. 1573–90.

[36] John Wrench, Harbhajan Brar, and Paul Martin, *Invisible minorities: racism in new towns and new contexts* (Coventry, 1993); Philip Rees and Deborah Phillips, 'Geographical spread: the national picture', in Peter Ratcliffe, ed., *Ethnicity in the 1991 census*, III: *Social geography and ethnicity in Britain: geographical spread, spatial concentration and internal migration* (London, 1996), pp. 23–110, at p. 87.

[37] Alistair Bonnett, *White identities: historical and international perspectives* (London, 2014), pp. 38–44.

[38] Commission for Racial Equality, *Ethnic minorities and new or expanding towns* (London, 1980), pp. 8–9.

[39] Wrench, Brar, and Martin, *Invisible minorities*, pp. 71–82.

[40] I am exploring race in new towns through oral history interviews. See '"I've become somebody who lives in a place like this": gendered narratives of public housing and home in late twentieth-century Britain', forthcoming.

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tenants to rent their houses. In the process, they shaped modern capitalism, maintaining polarizations of class, wealth, gender, and race.

The development corporations had a limited understanding of women's work, one which did not address how mothers of young children should combine employment with childcare. In their 1967 plan for Runcorn, RDC assumed that 'women with young children will not generally seek work in the earlier years of their residence', meaning that building nurseries was of 'no priority'.[41] Nursery provision across Britain was inadequate throughout the twentieth century. Costs were prohibitive, hours were part-time, and local authority nurseries were reserved for children in greatest need.[42] At a board meeting in 1970, SDC acknowledged Skelmersdale's 'limited accommodation' for preschoolers, explaining that 'government policy simply did not allow day nurseries to be built to enable mothers to go to work' and 'the firms were not prepared to provide them'.[43] Accordingly, Skelmersdale's first day nursery was opened by Lancashire County Council in 1971 for 'special need only'.[44] Nationally, only 1 per cent of preschoolers attended a local authority day nursery by the end of the decade.[45] Women who wanted or needed to pursue paid employment could not rely on the state to provide childcare. Instead, they did part-time work, depended on family and friends, and used preschool playgroups, some of which were advertised in Skelmersdale's community newsletters.[46] However, playgroups were precarious and limited in scope because they were operated by volunteers.[47] The development corporations' photographs did not depict female workers with their children, instead showing them alone or with colleagues. They framed women as either unpaid caregivers or paid workers, rather than both, avoiding the contentious issue of working motherhood and deflecting responsibility away from themselves.

III

In Skelmersdale, working motherhood was particularly contentious due to the town's male unemployment rate, which increased from 5.5 per cent in 1971 to 15.3 per cent in 1981.[48] In the 1970 *TV Times* article discussed in the introduction, a mother who worked full time in a stationery factory in Skelmersdale was cast as a figure of pity: 'soft-skinned, gentle-eyed, would like to be

[41] CALS, 125466, pp. 33–4, 40.

[42] McCarthy, *Double lives*, p. 336; Celia Briar, *Working for women? gendered work and welfare policies in twentieth-century Britain* (London, 1997), p. 105.

[43] Minutes of SDC board meeting, 12 May 1970, LA, NTSK/2/1/4, p. 3.

[44] SDC's eighth annual report, 31 Mar. 1970, LA, NTSK/2/7/1, p. 5.

[45] Briar, *Working for women*, p. 129.

[46] SDC social development department, 'About Skem' newsletter, Dec. 1979, p. 7; Tanhouse Residents' Association, 'Tanhouse newsletter', May 1981, p. 2. From an interviewee's personal collection of documents relating to Skelmersdale new town.

[47] Janet Finch, 'The deceit of self-help: preschool playgroups and working-class mothers', *Journal of Social Policy*, 13 (1984), pp. 1–20.

[48] Census data taken from 'Skelmersdale table 4.1' in Commission for New Towns, *New towns record* (Glasgow, 2002).

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home with her children'.[49] Simultaneously, the article implied that she was neglecting her family, since her children were 'very independent' and her two-year-old begged her to 'stay at home, Mum, don't go to work'. This contradictory portrayal supports McCarthy's argument that the working mother was a 'cultural figure' who conveyed anxieties about marriage, the family, and affluence.[50] Yet in Skelmersdale, these anxieties were also linked to male unemployment. The *TV Times* featured an interview with an unemployed husband who 'baths the baby, washes nappies, goes shopping, gets the tea, does the ironing', leaving him 'painfully conscientious and cast down'.[51] Housework and childcare were framed as emasculating and emblematic of a lost breadwinner identity, suggesting that the post-war emergence of the 'family man' and 'home-based masculinity' was more complex than historians have allowed for.[52] Unpaid domestic labour was presented as inferior to paid manual work, a situation which the *TV Times* concluded 'must create emotional pressures...it calls for an adjustment, a kind of give-and-take [that families] could hardly have had in mind when they moved'.[53] Working mothers and unemployed fathers were depicted as a destabilizing force which undermined traditional gender roles, the nuclear family, and the social stability of Skelmersdale as a whole.

The *TV Times* article incensed local factory managers and state officials because it named firms in Skelmersdale that 'mostly require women', implying that this was because they were cheaper to employ. The general manager of Alacra, a stationery manufacturer that was criticized in the article, wrote to Skelmersdale's Urban District Council to insist that although 'we shall indeed require a small nucleus of women workers, our greatest need will be for skilled men who will be suitably trained for the very specialized work'.[54] Women would comprise just 10 per cent of the workforce, he claimed, because 'my company is now becoming an integral part of the new town, and we are therefore expecting to make a worthwhile contribution to employment'. SDC's general manager agreed that the article was a 'very good example of biased sensational reporting' and 'few of the facts in it are accurate or even true'.[55] These exchanges echo debates about female factory operatives in Victorian Britain, in which working women came to symbolize wider concerns about the changing form of industrial capitalism.[56] Keen to avoid negative publicity,

[49] Coleman, 'When father plays mother', p. 44.

[50] McCarthy, *Double lives*, p. 32.

[51] Coleman, 'When father plays mother', p. 44.

[52] Laura King, *Family men: fatherhood and masculinity in Britain, 1914–1960* (Oxford, 2015); Pat Ayres, 'Work, culture, and gender: the making of masculinities in post-war Liverpool', *Labour History Review*, 69 (2004), pp. 153–67; Hilary Young, 'Hard man, new man: re/composing masculinities in Glasgow, c.1950–2000', *Oral History*, 35 (2007), pp. 71–81.

[53] Coleman, 'When father plays mother', p. 45.

[54] Richard Sergeant to T. L. Baxter, 25 June 1970, LA, NTSK/4/1/819.

[55] Richard Phelps to Richard Sergeant, 29 June 1970, LA, NTSK/4/1/819.

[56] Seth Koven, *The match girl and the heiress* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 77–134; Jan Lambertz, 'Sexual harassment in the nineteenth-century English cotton industry', *History Workshop Journal*, 19 (1985), pp. 29–61.

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neither factory managers nor SDC wanted to be seen to encourage women's employment at the expense of male jobs. Although SDC's promotional photographs depicted women in the workplace, their dismissal of the *TV Times* article indicates that they understood women's employment as less socially and economically valuable than men's. In the minds of Skelmersdale's planners and managers, women could work to supplement their husbands' wages, but men should be the primary earners.

Although SDC's general manager downplayed the issues raised by the *TV Times*, his colleagues were deeply concerned about male unemployment and factory closures because this could weaken confidence in the town. In 1972, SDC's chairman noted the 'shortfall of male jobs' compared to new houses, admitting that this 'caused great concern not least because of its effect on young families moving to the town in search of a new life with stability of employment'.[57] New and expanding companies had provided 500 new jobs that year, but unemployment had nearly doubled, three factories had closed, and fresh inquiries from industrialists were low.[58] In 1976, the closure of Thorn and Courtaulds – two of Skelmersdale's biggest employers – left 3,000 workers unemployed by the end of the year.[59] These closures were symptomatic of global shifts in the manufacturing sector, but SDC worried that they reflected poorly on their planning and management. The chairman remarked that the resulting negative publicity 'presented an unfortunate and underserved image of Skelmersdale which is of considerable concern to the Corporation and to all who live and work in the town'.[60] Indeed, an ITV News feature reported that former Courtaulds employees were going 'home to a jobless future…in a new town where unemployment's already 20 per cent'.[61] The reporter asked a former employee about his Christmas plans, who replied, 'well it's gonna be a good one, I'm gonna make sure they have a good one this time and then, God knows what'll happen next year'.[62] Since the late Victorian period, a father's ability to provide for his children had been invested with emotional value.[63] The former employee understood himself as a provider, but this identity was rendered uncertain by his 'jobless future'. Unemployment was articulated as a male problem, one that was said to afflict the emotional and financial well-being of nuclear families and taint the new town's reputation.

IV

Having analysed the gendered constructions of employment that were produced by the development corporations, journalists, and employers, the article

[57] SDC's tenth annual report, 31 Mar. 1972, LA, NTSK/2/7/1, p. 2.
[58] Ibid., pp. 6–7.
[59] SDC's fifteenth annual report, 31 Mar. 1977, LA, NTSK/2/7/1, p. 5.
[60] Ibid., p. 1.
[61] ITV News, *Courtaulds closure* (1976), 00:00:29–00:00:48.
[62] Ibid., 00:00:53–00:01:02.
[63] Julie Marie Strange, 'Fatherhood, providing, and attachment in late Victorian and Edwardian working-class families', *Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), pp. 1007–27; King, *Family men*, pp. 16–50.

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now examines women's experiences and memories of paid work. As the development corporations predicted, many women did not have jobs when they moved to the new towns, especially if they had young children. Sue (b.1947) came from Liverpool and started work at a local florist shop when she left school at fifteen.[64] When she became pregnant at twenty-three years old, she married her husband, moved out of her parents' house, and left her job. She framed this as an exciting new beginning and a logical progression into adulthood. 'I left, 'cause...I got pregnant', she explained, 'it was fun at the time 'cause we'd just, you know, started out life'.[65] In 1972, now with two children, Sue and her husband moved to a newly built estate in Skelmersdale. To be eligible for development corporation housing, one member of the household generally had to have a job.[66] Sue's husband was a bus conductor in and around Merseyside. 'Some of his trips were going into Skem', she explained, 'we went to see the development corporation, and they gave us a couple of houses to look at'.[67] Other interviewees also obtained new town housing because of their husbands' jobs. Margret's (b.1947) husband was a scrap dealer in Liverpool, and they moved to Skelmersdale with their three children in 1976. 'There was some query about my husband as if [pause] they thought he didn't really exist...maybe they thought, y'know I was tryna get in the town and I didn't have a job', she remembered, so 'he came up with me and it was all alright then and we just signed for it and got the house'.[68] New town housing policies did not explicitly prioritize male workers, but they reflected and reinforced the male breadwinner norm, constructing women as dependants who relied on their husbands' earnings.

Some women qualified for new town housing based on their own jobs. Maude (b.1957) got a clerical job at a factory in Runcorn in 1977. She lived in Liverpool with her mother and younger brothers, and the whole family were eligible to rent a house in the new town because of her employment: 'I got a job, and because of that job, we got the house, and then we...moved out to Runcorn.'[69] 'It wasn't actually in my name, it was in my mum's name, so that's a bit strange isn't it?' she laughed, 'I suppose it was like I was me mum's partner in a way, y'know if you were husband or wife, they'd let you have the house.'[70] Maude described her experience as 'a bit strange' because, as a young single woman living with her mother and brothers, her employment status and household structure did not align with the nuclear family norm. She took advantage of the employment opportunities in Runcorn, using her clerical job to obtain housing without the support of a male breadwinner. However, her narrative was exceptional, since women's eligibility for

[64] All names are pseudonyms. Three-point ellipses ... are used to indicate omitted words. They do not indicate pauses in speech, which are instead indicated by [pause].

[65] Interview with Sue Wilson, 16 Nov. 2022, 00:05:00–00:10:00, 00:15:00–00:20:00.

[66] Although see Meryl Aldridge, *The British new towns: a programme without a policy* (London, 2017), p. 112.

[67] Interview with Sue Wilson, 16 Nov. 2022, 00:15:00–00:20:00.

[68] Interview with Margret Yearn, 3 Mar. 2022, 00:10:00–00:15:05.

[69] Interview with Maude Smith, 26 Apr. 2023, 00:10:01–00:15:08.

[70] Ibid., 00:15:08–00:20:03.

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development corporation housing more often depended on their husbands' employment.

As was the case elsewhere, women who worked in the new towns often left their jobs when they became pregnant. Jenny (b.1956) moved to Runcorn in 1976 because her partner was offered a job in a factory. She quickly found employment as a shorthand typist at the development corporation, but left soon afterwards: 'I worked there until the summer, when [pause] I stopped work because I was pregnant, and then I had my daughter.'[71] Maternity leave and pay was made compulsory in 1975, but Jenny was ineligible because it only covered women with at least two years of full-time service.[72] Even when women were eligible, sometimes they did not return to work. Maude had a son in 1983 and left her clerical job in Runcorn after her maternity pay ended. 'I was just adamant I wasn't gonna go back', she explained, 'I think I wanted look after my son myself...why have him and let somebody else look after him?'[73] Lily (b.1955), who refused maternity pay when she became pregnant in 1979, told a similar narrative about leaving the civil service because she 'didn't really want to go back to work and leave my child with other people'.[74] 'It was on the cusp of when women were only just starting to go back to work', she reflected, but 'people didn't do it, they just didn't do it'.[75] She narrated herself as the product of a transitional period, articulating an important tension between the new opportunities available to women and the social expectations and constraints that shaped their decisions.

Some mothers returned to work after an extended break when their children were older, part of the 'dual role' model that had been common since the 1950s.[76] Maude found part-time work as a food server in a school in Runcorn when her son reached school age, and she suggested that other mothers did the same. 'It was probably a bit of, erm, peer pressure', she reflected, because 'everyone seemed to be going back to work' and 'it sort of made me feel as if I was being a bit lazy'.[77] Increasingly, women resumed paid employment before their children started school, and often in between having them.[78] A year after Jenny had her first child, she found a part-time job working in the office and kitchen of a factory in Runcorn. 'I won't say that I decided 'cause I don't remember the decision', she remembered, 'but it *was* decided that I would go back to work, because we needed the money'.[79] By using the passive voice, she implied that she returned to work out of financial necessity rather than choice. Sue also resumed paid work when her youngest child was a toddler. Soon after moving to Skelmersdale in 1972, she met another mother at a local playgroup who 'said "oh I'm

[71] Interview with Jenny Donaldson, 12 July 2022, 00:00:00–00:05:12.
[72] McCarthy, *Double lives*, p. 331.
[73] Interview with Maude Smith, 26 Apr. 2023, 01:00:09–01:05:00.
[74] Interview with Lily Cowell, 5 Oct. 2022, 00:25:10–00:30:03.
[75] Ibid.
[76] McCarthy, *Double lives*, p. 231.
[77] Interview with Maude Smith, 26 Apr. 2023, 01:05:00–01:10:20.
[78] McCarthy, *Double lives*, p. 324.
[79] Interview with Jenny Donaldson, 12 July 2022, 00:25:03–00:30:14.

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opening up a florist", and I said "are you? I'm a florist", so she said "oh, God that– isn't that weird, you know", and...I said "oh are you looking for anyone?" she said "ooh I might be"'.[80] By stating that 'I'm a florist', Sue referenced the job she had done before having children and asserted her right to return to paid employment.

However, Sue's new job was not just a continuation of her former work, since it was part of recent developments in retail that were enabled by the new town context. The florist was located in the market hall of the Concourse, the multi-storey shopping centre that was opened in 1973 as part of Skelmersdale's town centre. Colloquially known as 'the Conny', the shopping centre was entirely undercover and pedestrianized, unlike the retail districts of older towns and cities. Within a few years of its opening, SDC boasted that 75 per cent of Skelmersdale's population shopped in the Conny, the market hall being one of its most 'popular and successful features'.[81] By building a shopping centre instead of a traditional town centre, SDC responded to new patterns of retail and consumption, including increased automobility, the growth of supermarkets and multiple traders, and the decline of independent and specialist traders.[82] The Concourse was one of several large shopping complexes built in British towns and cities during the late 1960s and early 1970s.[83] Sue's job reflected these shifts in the retail sector, and is an example of how Skelmersdale opened up employment opportunities for women who were returning to paid work after having children.

Central Lancashire New Town, which covered Preston, Leyland, and Chorley, also provided new types of jobs for mothers. Central Lancashire was planned around thirteen 'district centres', each with commercial, educational, and social facilities for 20,000 residents.[84] Clayton Green district centre, near Chorley, was initially envisaged as a group of small buildings divided into zones for education, entertainment, and recreation, with only a few basic shops selling everyday goods.[85] Yet during the 1970s, the priorities of retailers and the preferences of consumers shifted in favour of large, cheap, out-of-town supermarkets that were accessible by car.[86] The development corporation reasoned that one large retail facility would attract people to the other amenities that were planned for the district centre.[87] Accordingly, Asda opened a 35,000 square foot superstore at Clayton Green in March 1978.[88] Lily, who had worked

[80] Interview with Sue Wilson, 16 Nov. 2022, 00:35:03–00:40:00.

[81] SDC's fourteenth annual report, 31 Mar. 1976, LA, NTSK/2/7/1, p. 4.

[82] SDC, *Skelmersdale new town planning proposals*, I, p. 18.

[83] Alistair Kefford, *The life and death of the shopping city: public planning and private redevelopment in Britain since 1945* (Cambridge, 2022), p. 138.

[84] CLDC, *Central Lancashire Development Corporation outline plan*, p. 107.

[85] Department of Education and Science, district centre study – preliminary report, Feb. 1973, LA, NTC/20/1/12.

[86] Kefford, *The life and death of the shopping city*, p. 283.

[87] CLDC, district centre study – notes on preliminary report, 15 Feb. 1973, LA, NTC/20/1/13; memorandum from CLDC's general manager to chief officers, 11 Oct. 1973, LA, NTC/20/1/13; CLDC, district centre / community school, 23 Oct. 1973, LA, NTC/20/1/13.

[88] CLDC, Asda Clayton Green – first shopping survey, June 1978, LA, NTC/5/1/87.

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in the civil service in Preston before having children, bought a house in Clayton Green with her husband in 1979. In the mid-1980s, shortly after having her third child, she obtained a part-time evening job filling shelves and pricing stock at the Asda superstore.

Lily situated her employment within the new town context, explaining that 'because there was no other supermarkets in the area…and all these housing estates were going up, the shelves would be empty at night'.[89] Superstores were built on the peripheries of several new towns and growth regions across Britain.[90] Unlike streets, precincts, or malls that contained numerous specialist shops, Clayton Green Asda was a huge building occupied by one retailer selling a diverse range of goods. The superstore boasted 27,000 product lines, including food, clothing, and electrical goods.[91] Prices on branded items were 'permanently reduced' according to a 1978 newspaper advertisement, unlike traditional retailers that offered short-term reductions or cheaper own-brand alternatives.[92] The advertisement emphasized quick, convenient, modern shopping, with wide aisles, a 'colourful and pleasant atmosphere', 'well lit and clear departmental signs', a patented fast checkout system, and electronic cash registers. Asda reframed shopping as a leisure activity for families rather than a necessity for women, the advertisement suggesting that 'while mum is doing the weekly food shopping, dad…can be getting ideas for the home in the do-it-yourself department, [and] there are coin-operated "kiddy rides" in the store foyer'. Like Skelmersdale's Concourse, Clayton Green's Asda responded to and anticipated changes in the ways that traders sold goods and consumers bought them. Both Lily and Sue worked in retail, an industry that had been labelled 'women's work' throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[93] Yet their jobs differed from traditional forms of women's employment because they were located in new built environments that signalled a departure from older commercial practices.

Sue worked part time at the florist, meaning she could organize her work around looking after her children. She did the 'odd morning or afternoon' while her elder two children were at school, and her manager allowed her to bring her youngest child to work. 'I think [my son] was still at that point in…his little pram', she laughed, 'and I could take [him]' cause…y'know it was inside and it wouldn't've been a problem.'[94] This was possible because the market was indoors: 'it was fairly relaxed…we were inside and we were warm'.[95] When planning the new town centre, SDC envisaged that an enclosed shopping centre would boost retail trade because 'the shopper appreciates comfortable conditions in all kinds of weather'.[96] Indeed, in a letter to the

[89] Interview with Lily Cowell, 5 Oct. 2022, 00:35:02–00:40:07.

[90] Kefford, *The life and death of the shopping city*, p. 284.

[91] 'Giant store set for launch', 10 Mar. 1978, LA, NTC/5/1/87; Clayton Green newspaper advertisement, Mar. 1978, LA, NTC/5/1/87.

[92] Clayton Green newspaper advertisement, Mar. 1978, LA, NTC/5/1/87.

[93] McCarthy, *Double lives*, p. 2; Davis, *Modern motherhood*, p. 144.

[94] Interview with Sue Wilson, 16 Nov. 2022, 00:35:03–00:40:00.

[95] Ibid., 00:40:00–00:45:00.

[96] SDC, *Skelmersdale new town planning proposals*, I, pp. 18, 29.

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Skelmersdale Advertiser in 1975, a housewife and mother wrote that the Concourse was 'wonderful...especially on a wet day' because there was 'no straggling from shop to shop trying to control a pram, two children and an umbrella while dodging traffic'.[97] Like other enclosed retail complexes, the Concourse was planned to provide shelter, safety, and convenience for female shoppers.[98] This design also allowed women like Sue to bring their children to work. Although Skelmersdale's planners never addressed how women should balance childcare with paid work, Sue could be both a mother and an employee under the roof of the Conny.

Lily also worked part time, restocking the shelves at Asda for nine hours per week over three evenings. So-called 'twilight shifts' originated in the 1950s and were particularly suitable for mothers whose husbands worked during the day.[99] This shift pattern meant that Lily could 'leave the children with me husband 'cause I used to do six o'clock to nine o'clock. At night.'[100] Few other interviewees suggested that their husbands looked after their children. Maude's husband was 'quite a hands-on dad' and 'we did a lot together', but 'it was quite traditional...I did the childcare, the housework, he'd help, you know, but that was mainly my responsibility, and he went out to work.'[101] She had to organize her paid work around school hours, reflecting that 'it was always to fit in with [my son], which was sometimes difficult'.[102] Jenny similarly remembered that she found a job in the kitchen of a factory ''cause that sort of fit more with the hours that I could work' while looking after her daughter.[103] Mothers interviewed by Paterson and Worth also used the word 'fit' when discussing their jobs, a 'language of convenience' which they argue obscures the organizational strategies that women used to co-ordinate paid work with motherhood.[104] Jenny managed these competing demands with the help of an 'amazing childminder...who, yeah, saved my life at the time and lots of other people's'.[105] Free childcare was very limited, reserved for lone parents like Margret who 'got a place in the nursery' in Skelmersdale during the 1980s: 'they thought it was important because I– I was on my own'.[106] However, most mothers did not have access to state-funded childcare and continued to be the primary caregivers. Gender roles were upheld, and women's employment prospects were limited if they could not afford childcare.

The interviewees used language which devalued their part-time jobs, framing them as casual, unskilled, and poorly paid. Sue described her job at the

[97] 'Championing the new town's GOOD image', *Skelmersdale Advertiser*, 15 May 1975, LA, NTSK/4/1/823.
[98] Kefford, *The life and death of the shopping city*, p. 147.
[99] Pearl Jephcott, *Married women working* (London, 1962), p. 67.
[100] Interview with Lily Cowell, 5 Oct. 2022, 00:25:10–00:30:03.
[101] Interview with Maude Smith, 26 Apr. 2023, 01:00:09–01:05:00.
[102] Ibid., 01:05:00–01:10:20.
[103] Interview with Jenny Donaldson, 12 July 2022, 00:45:20–00:50:12.
[104] Worth and Paterson, '"How is she going to manage with the children?"', p. 325.
[105] Interview with Jenny Donaldson, 12 July 2022, 00:25:03–00:30:14.
[106] Interview with Margret Yearn, 3 Mar. 2022, 00:15:05–00:20:00.

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florist as 'a helping hand' and 'the odd bit' and could not recall her wage, laughing that 'it wasn't that much really...it would've been buttons'.[107] Similarly, Lily referred to her 'lickle [sic] salary' at Asda, insisting she worked only for 'spending money' and 'to get out o' house'.[108] Other interviewees also devalued their part-time jobs. 'I didn't *like* doing it, but it was just a bit of money', Maude remembered.[109] On one level, these women were describing their experiences of performing underpaid, routine jobs. 'I was doing the same thing over and over and over and over again', Jenny remembered, 'the women were the cleaners, or we were the secretaries. We weren't the engineers, we weren't [pause] anybody else.'[110] On another level, by downplaying the significance of their paid work, the interviewees justified their employment by drawing on culturally acceptable discourses of women's work.[111] For married mothers, performing casual, low-paid work could be more culturally acceptable than pursuing a long-term career. By narrating their jobs using dismissive language, they reaffirmed their domestic identities, constructing themselves as dependants who relied on their husbands' earnings. Understating the financial, emotional, and social significance of their part-time jobs was a strategy through which they balanced their identities as paid workers with their ongoing roles as mothers and wives.

Although the interviewees downplayed the importance of their jobs, they simultaneously emphasized their economic, emotional, and social significance. Jenny linked her paid work to her financial independence. After temping for several years, in the late 1980s she found a full-time clerical job at a factory in Runcorn, and realized that 'I didn't have to be [pause] somebody who always had no money and y'know, scraping around...I could actually earn more money.'[112] Her partner 'didn't like that...it was like not quite "who do you think you are" but that was unspoken almost'.[113] By recognizing her right to work full time, Jenny inadvertently challenged his breadwinner identity, and the pair later separated. Other interviewees narrated their paid employment as financially important for their families without challenging the male breadwinner role. During the late 1970s, Maude's husband worked at a power station and she had a clerical job in a factory in Runcorn: 'we were on quite good money both of us'.[114] 'We felt like we were settled, you know, financially', meaning they felt able to buy a house and have a child.[115] Her use of the pronoun 'we' implies that she saw herself as making an equal contribution to her family's savings.

Lily's job at Asda was also financially essential for her family. She stated the exact amount she earned – 'I got twenty-nine pound a week for them nine

[107] Interview with Sue Wilson, 16 Nov. 2022, 00:40:00–00:45:00.
[108] Interview with Lily Cowell, 5 Oct. 2022, 00:25:10–00:30:03.
[109] Interview with Maude Smith, 26 Apr. 2023, 01:05:00–01:10:20.
[110] Interview with Jenny Donaldson, 12 July 2022, 00:50:12–00:55:20.
[111] Smith Wilson, 'A new look at the affluent worker', pp. 225–6.
[112] Interview with Jenny Donaldson, 12 July 2022, 00:25:03–00:30:14.
[113] Ibid., 01:00:40–01:05:14.
[114] Interview with Maude Smith, 26 Apr. 2023, 00:50:04–00:55:17.
[115] Ibid., 00:55:17–01:00:09.

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hours' – implying that her wage was significant enough to be remembered.[116] This money supplemented her husband's earnings, particularly when he participated in a national strike in the engineering industry in October 1989.[117] 'For eighteen weeks, we lived totally different', Lily remembered, 'I had my twenty-nine pound...I think you got a tiny bit of money from t' strike fund. But when we filled all the forms in, we were five pound over being able to claim any benefits.'[118] Faced with a reduced household income, Lily constructed herself as a resourceful household manager, a strategy which Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson argue was also employed by women in the 1984–85 miners' strike.[119] 'If you bought a chicken I'd make it last three meals', she remembered, compared with other wives of striking men who 'were crying when I bumped into them at the supermarket, and they were just shopping as normal'.[120] Her triumphant narrative of stoicism and self-sufficiency drew on older constructions of working-class femininity.[121] In doing so, she fashioned a domestic identity which did not challenge her husband's breadwinner role, even during the industrial action.

Women's work in the new towns was socially significant because it facilitated friendship and independence. Lily remembered that at Asda, 'there was like, twenty women, all my age group, all with a few kids, we had no customers in, we only had one manager in, and it was erm, something for me, away from the house'.[122] At work, Lily understood herself as a mother and wife, but unlike at home she was surrounded by others in similar situations. This fostered a sense of community, because she was 'meeting other ladies' through work, 'going to their houses and their children and my children played'.[123] When Maude first moved to Runcorn, she too made friends in her office. 'How I started my social life really was through work', she explained, 'people'd be saying, erm, "oh we're going out tonight, d'you want to come?"'[124] Although women who moved to new towns could not rely on long-standing kinship networks, historians such as Jon Lawrence have highlighted the emergence of new forms of community based around shared interests and voluntary sociability.[125] The interviewees's experiences indicate that women's employment also helped to create communities and support networks, since workplace friendships facilitated socialization and informal childcare.

Like Maude and Lily, Sue built lasting friendships at work. She worked for the same employer for several decades across different florist shops in and

[116] Interview with Lily Cowell, 5 Oct. 2022, 00:25:10–00:30:03.

[117] Simon Beavis, 'Engineering talks collapse', *Guardian*, 26 Oct. 1989, p. 2; idem, 'Unions call new strikes on hours', *Guardian*, 14 Nov. 1989, p. 2.

[118] Interview with Lily Cowell, 5 Oct. 2022, 00:30:03–00:35:02.

[119] Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson, 'National women against pit closures', pp. 84–5.

[120] Interview with Lily Cowell, 5 Oct. 2022, 00:30:03–00:35:02.

[121] Brooke, 'Gender and working-class identity in Britain during the 1950s', pp. 786–8.

[122] Interview with Lily Cowell, 5 Oct. 2022, 00:35:02–00:40:07.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Interview with Maude Smith, 26 Apr. 2023, 00:20:03–00:25:04.

[125] Lawrence, *Me, me, me?*, pp. 1–2; Clapson, *Invincible green suburbs*, p. 156; Abrams et al., 'Aspiration, agency', pp. 596–8.

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around Skelmersdale: 'I don't even know how long I worked for her 'cause I worked for that...long.'[126] Their friendship facilitated her continued employment in floristry, pointing towards the importance of informal personal networks through which women found and kept paid work. Sue understood this employment trajectory as a life-long career: 'that's all I'd done, floristry, so, I enjoyed it all the time', she laughed, 'yeah, went from one to the other'.[127] Although she left paid work for about four years when she had children, her employment trajectory continued in much the same direction once she returned. Moreover, her career was characterized by professional progression. Around the turn of the millennium, she became the manager of a florist in Ormskirk, a town near Skelmersdale, and she later bought the business. She followed an upwards trajectory from part-time casual worker, to trusted employee, to manager, to owner. This narrative of progression ended with a coda when she sold her business in the 2010s. She thought, '"oh God, got to retire now"', but instead worked part time at another florist until her retirement in 2017, ten years after she reached the state pension age. 'Couldn't stop could I?' she laughed.[128] Sue worked with flowers and plants throughout her whole life. She remembered helping her parents with their garden as a child and planting roses in her own when she moved to Skelmersdale, and she continues to do gardening as a hobby.[129] Her paid work in florist shops in and around Skelmersdale was not just a career, but also part of her identity.

Lily did not initially understand her job at Asda as a 'career', but she retrospectively reflected that it contributed to her professional skills. In the early 1990s, she began a teacher training course because she was 'bored'. Afterwards, she left Asda and completed further qualifications, enabling her to teach English to adults across the north-west until retirement.[130] Lily understood herself as a competent, empathetic, and knowledgeable teacher because of her prior experiences: 'the jobs you have, the places you live, and the social interactions that you have with people...you observe how other people live... and *why* other people can't read and write when it's not their fault'.[131] She explained that teachers who had worked a variety of jobs 'taught different to the ones that'd been taught to teach' because 'we had life skills that they hadn't got'.[132] Lily performed several seemingly unrelated jobs and ceased employment upon maternity, yet she narrated her work history as a coherent career whereby each job developed her 'life skills'. Women's paid work was not only a source of 'spending money', but could be a way of forging communities, leaving the house, developing careers, and achieving self-fulfilment.

[126] Interview with Sue Wilson, 16 Nov. 2022, 00:50:03–00:55:08.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid., 01:10:00–01:15:02.
[129] Ibid., 01:15:02–01:20:04.
[130] Interview with Lily Cowell, 5 Oct. 2022, 00:35:02–00:40:07.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid., 01:15:05–01:25:06.

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Sue and Lily both concluded their employment narratives in the present, reflecting on their current experiences of retirement. When asked what she does while retired, Lily laughed that she was 'working hard' looking after her grandchildren, researching her genealogy, and writing a memoir.[133] Sue exclaimed that 'it was the best thing I did, to retire', because 'you can do your own thing you don't have to get up dead early'.[134] Both women understood retirement as a deserved reward for their paid and unpaid labour, a life stage where they could pursue independent interests and spend time with their growing families. In this way, they framed their career trajectories as coherent narratives with positive conclusions. Other interviewees concluded their employment narratives in more open-ended and less certain terms, usually if they had not yet retired at the time of interview.

Personal testimonies have allowed us to examine the range of narratives that women told about their employment, facilitating an exploration of the multiple identities they fashioned around paid and unpaid work in the new towns. The development corporations had a narrow, albeit contradictory, understanding of gendered employment, but oral history interviews show that women had more complex experiences. In many ways, they adhered to normative gender roles, constructing themselves primarily as mothers who worked part time to supplement their husbands' wages. Simultaneously, their paid employment was an integral part of their life histories and their sense of self, a means of developing life-long skills, lasting friendships, and independence. Their memories of working in the new towns reflect the ambiguous position of women in late twentieth-century Britain, which was characterized by a push and pull between gendered constraints and new opportunities for female self-definition and agency.

The new towns mirrored broader shifts in the pattern and nature of women's employment, providing part-time jobs that women could combine with motherhood and domesticity. These jobs were located in new built environments which reflected the national decline of traditional manufacturing industries and the concurrent rise of the services sector. This process of deindustrialization created new opportunities for women, although their experiences were not straightforward. Mothers remained primarily responsible for caregiving and housework, and their paid work was socially and financially devalued when compared with men's. Women's employment became increasingly common throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, but it did not displace the masculine norm. Although industrial decline led to the loss of male jobs, men continued to be conceptualized as breadwinners. Deindustrialization meant that gender roles were questioned, negotiated, and adapted, but they were not fundamentally reshaped.

Analysing women's employment in the new towns has shown that state-led urban redevelopment projects were underpinned by gendered contradictions.

[133] Ibid., 01:30:00–01:35:03.

[134] Interview with Sue Wilson, 16 Nov. 2022, 01:10:00–01:15:02.

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The new towns attempted to decentralize industrial production and attract skilled male labour, yet many of the part-time jobs they provided in light-manufacturing and services were particularly suitable for female workers. The development corporations used women's employment to respond to shifting economic imperatives, constructing a cultural imaginary of female workers which they hoped would persuade tenants to rent houses and employers to set up businesses in the towns. At the same time, wider concerns about deindustrialization and regional decline were centred around female workers, and the economic and social importance of women's employment was denied because of assumptions that men's jobs must predominate. Female workers were symbols of modernity and economic prosperity, yet they were also representative of social instability and industrial decline. The vast programme of state-led urban development that drastically altered Britain's towns and cities during the twentieth century cannot be understood without attending to gender, both in terms of the gender roles prescribed by the planners and the ways that women used urban space to construct their identities.

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