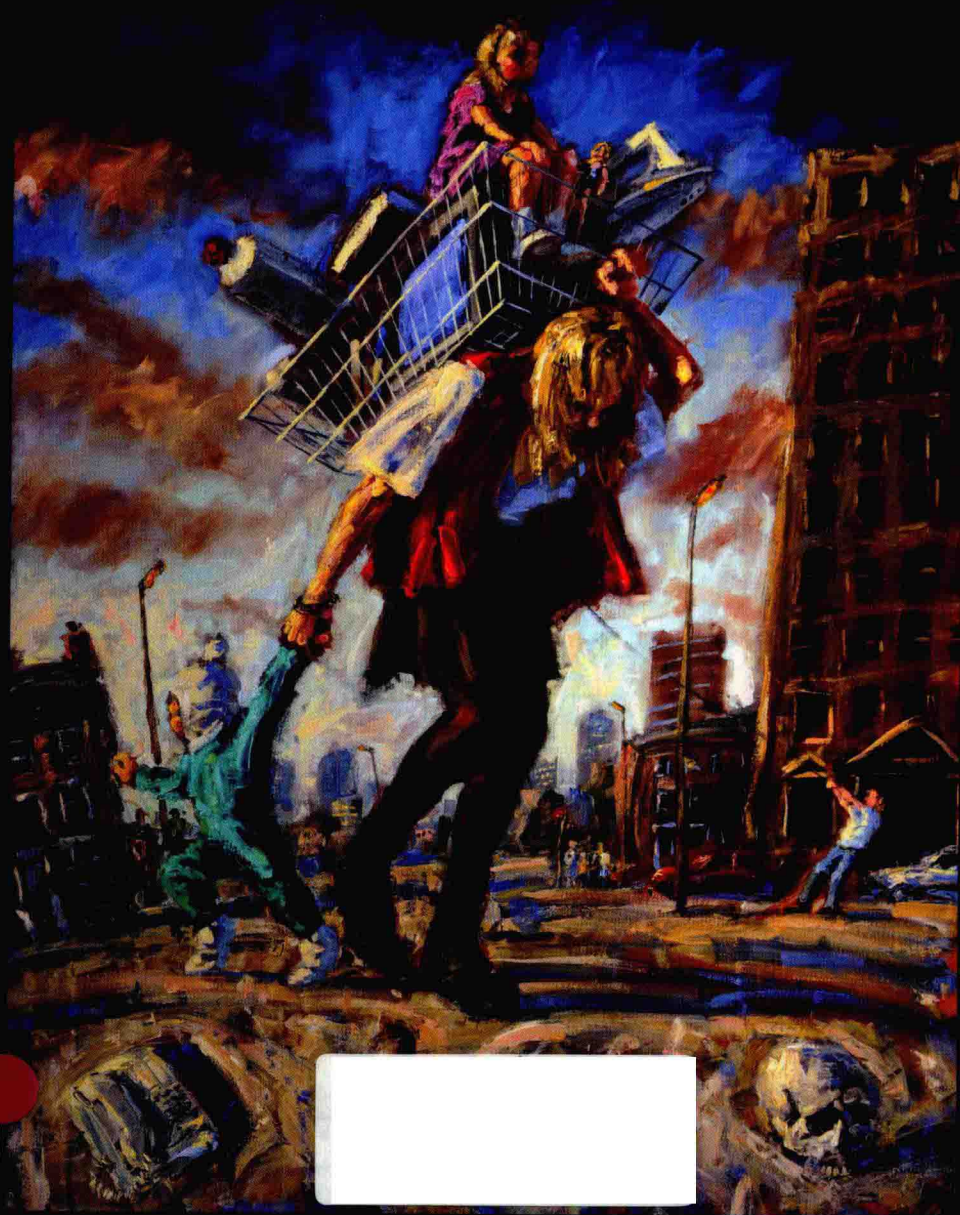


# GENDERING Women

Identity and mental wellbeing  
through the lifecourse



Suzanne Clisby and Julia Holdsworth

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## About the authors

**Suzanne Clisby** is the director of postgraduate studies in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Hull, UK, and an editor of the international *Journal of Gender Studies*. Her research focuses on gender, social policy and development both in British and international contexts and she has published across a range of areas, including gender mainstreaming in Bolivia, environmental relations in Costa Rica, and youth, desire and the carnivalesque at the English seaside. Suzanne is the coordinator of the Joint European Master's Degree in Women's and Gender Studies (GEMMA) at the University of Hull in a European-wide consortium managed through the University of Granada, and is developing a joint European doctorate in women's and gender studies as a pathway beyond the GEMMA programme. As co-coordinator of the Centre for Gender Studies, Suzanne organises the biennial international and interdisciplinary gender research conference held at the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation around November 25th – the international day to mark the elimination of violence against women. For many years she has worked in a voluntary capacity with women's services in the city of Hull.

**Julia Holdsworth** has a background in social anthropology and sociology and holds a lectureship in social science in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Hull. She has worked in both academic and applied contexts with particular focus on social change, development, migration and gender. She has experience working in the field as a practitioner in community development, especially in Central and Eastern Europe which complements her academic interests in social change in Ukraine. In recent years her academic work has explored issues of gender in adult and higher education, gender and mentoring in professional contexts and barriers to women's aspirations and achievements. Julia has for many years been an active member of a women's community group working to address disadvantage and social inequality in Hull.



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We would also like to thank John Keane who kindly gave us permission to use his artwork for the cover of this book. John Keane achieved success and notoriety in 1990 when he was chosen as the official artist to document the Gulf War. Keane's work, which often deals with social and political issues, gains much of its impact through his use of ironic humour. We chose this painting in part because she has become something of an old friend, as she hangs in the Ferens Art Gallery in Hull, and mainly because it seemed an appropriate choice. In this powerful image from a series John painted called *Fairy Tales of London* (1992) a young woman battles her way through a threatening urban landscape, burdened by the weight of the shopping and her children. In the distance her husband holds her on a lead in a comment on the constraints and controls many women feel they deal with through their lives in our society. Thus it seemed an appropriate choice both for the subject matter and because it is a popular and familiar painting for many of the women who participated in this study. Dating from 1992, it also has something of a retro feel to it, and as our research encountered many similar themes to those raised by women during the feminist Second Wave and since, for us it reflects the commonality of threads of experience across time.

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# Gendering, inequalities, and the limits of policy

## Introduction

We begin this book with a statement that should come as no surprise to the reader, but which remains no less significant for its lack of novelty: despite several decades of equality legislation and positive and affirmative action, it remains the case that women in the UK, as a group, continue to experience greater inequality when compared to men, as a group. We also know that deeply rooted socio-cultural factors in contemporary British society continue to act to create significantly different life chances and experiences for men and women. So if we know this already what is the point of this book? The answer lies in the key word in the statements above: *continue*. Gender-based inequalities continue and while they do so, it remains imperative that we also continue to analyse, debate and challenge these realities.

In doing so we tend to focus throughout this book more on commonality than difference. This is not to dismiss the critical importance of difference, a concern that has been key within feminist theory and epistemology for many decades and has more recently come to be referred to as intersectionality. Understanding the impacts of diverse identities for people's lived experiences is of course extremely important, and much work has been done in this field to explore how intersections of identities such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, ability and age intertwine and affect women's experiences (see, for example, Stanley, 1990; Lennon and Whitford, 1994a; Franken et al, 2009; McCann and Seung-Kyung, 2013 to cite but a few of many). Nevertheless our concern here is to recover some of the possible commonalities of experience for many women *qua* women. We do this because we recognise there can be a danger within academic debates about gender of leaving real women and men behind which risks losing sight of the materiality of women's and men's embodied realities. The real risk of this is that we fail to acknowledge the actual *lack* of transformation at many levels for many women, and in the rush to recognise diversity, a danger that the continued commonalities in the material conditions of many women's lives both locally and globally are overlooked.

Thus we argue that ‘woman’ and ‘man’, while not being the only gendered spaces available to us, continue to be necessary and valid categories not least because they continue to be significant material and perceptual categories in our highly gendered worlds. Threads of common gendered experiences continue to link and weave together ‘women’ as they do ‘men’. To see commonality, however, does not render difference invisible: commonality and diversity are not necessarily dichotomous and ‘differentiation does not depend on opposition’ (Whitbeck, 1989, 51). Moreover, as Stanley and Wise (1990) argue, to talk about commonalities of experience does not infer the *same* experiences. Our individual ways of experiencing our genders are nuanced, infinitely diverse and ever shifting over time and space. As Lennon and Whitford state:

Women as a group are not homogeneous. They have very different experiences, perspectives and problematics, depending on variables such as class, country, age, colour or sexuality. Their positions in power relationships also vary considerably. In addition to this lack of unity within the category of the female subject, there is...a lack of unity *within* each individual female subject. (1994b, 4, emphasis in original)

Nevertheless, at the same time as our gendered experiences are diverse we also experience commonalities, but these shared gendered experiences

derive, not causally from supposed ‘biological facts’... ‘woman’ is a socially and politically constructed category, the ontological basis of which lies in a set of experiences rooted in the material world. [Moreover] the experience of ‘women’ is ontologically fractured and complex because we do not all share one single and unseamed material reality. (Stanley and Wise, 1990, 21–2)

Iris Young has provided a similar understanding of femaleness, stating that,

I take ‘femininity’ to designate not a mysterious quality or essence that all women have by virtue of their being biologically female. It is, rather, a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical *situation* of being a



woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way which this situation is lived by the women themselves. (1990, 143–4)

The same can of course be said about the category ‘male’ and masculinities. We begin this book, then, with an understanding that gender is socially, culturally and politically as well as materially constituted; that we are complex gendered beings who continue to share many experiences through our gendered identities; and that these shared experiences are simultaneously nuanced and uniquely understood and experienced at the individual level.

The first aim of this book is to facilitate, through gender analysis, a greater understanding of underlying factors which contribute to the continued existence of gender-based inequality in the UK. We explain more fully what we mean by gender analysis later in this chapter but suffice to say at this point that to talk about gender analysis can be seen as another way of talking about feminist praxis: a concern both with the underlying causes of gender-based inequities and a desire to achieve positive change for women. As Liz Stanley has eloquently explained, feminist praxis is ‘a political position in which “knowledge” is not simply defined as “knowledge *what*” but as “knowledge *for*” (Stanley, 1990, 12, emphases in original). We also start from a feminist standpoint that understands that ‘feminism’ is not merely a ‘perspective’, a way of seeing; nor even this plus an epistemology, a way of knowing; it is also ‘an ontology, or a way of being in the world’ (Stanley, 1990, 14). We are, however, neither suggesting that there is some essentialist way of being or knowing for women *qua* women nor for feminists *qua* feminists. As Stanley points out,

an ontological state comes into existence, not in relation to something essentially female, but rather the facts of the present social construction of ‘women’ as this is seen, understood and acted upon (however imperfectly, and with whatever backsliding) by those who call themselves feminist; *and* who name this present social construction of women as *oppressive*. (1990, 14, emphasis in original)

A key component of both gender analysis and feminist praxis is that we continue to talk to women, that their voices are heard and listened to, and that our research is ‘not only located in’ but proceeds from ‘the grounded analysis of women’s material realities’ (Stanley and Wise, 1990, 25). This book is based on long-term empirical research in the

Yorkshire and Humber region of England and driven by women's voices. Through listening to women we can see that women are reflexive and situated knowers who are able to coherently articulate how processes of gendering can and do have an impact on their sense of self, and on the lived realities of their everyday lives.

This concept of situated knowledge is important to feminist epistemology. Feminist epistemology understands gendered beings as knowers situated in relation to what is known and experienced by both themselves and in relation to other knowers. What is known, and the way that it is known, thereby reflects the situation or perspective of the knower. This itself is legitimate knowledge. As Hawkesworth has explained, 'feminist standpoint theories reject the notion of an "unmediated truth", arguing that knowledge is always mediated by a host of factors related to an individual's particular position in a determinate socio-political formation at a specific point in history' (1989, 536). For feminist analysis and feminist epistemology this means that while malestream understandings and knowledge constructions may well be hegemonic, all knowledge is partial and subjective and other ways of knowing and understanding based on different class, ethnic, or gendered positions are of equal validity (Smith, 1979; Fricker, 1994). It is, therefore, important to recognise that in this book we are not claiming that all women (or indeed men) occupy the same position, instead we are exploring points where women are able to offer both alternative accounts of their social and material conditions and where these accounts share some common ground.

Haraway (1988), in her renowned article argues that '[f]eminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*' (1988, 581, emphasis in original). Indeed, when we talk about women as situated knowers in this volume, we are drawing on Haraway's work in which she states that we,

seek not the knowledges ruled by phallogocentrism (nostalgia for the presence of the one true Word) and disembodied vision. We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice – not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. Situated knowledges are about communities, not isolated individuals... Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never as slave to the master that closes off

the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of 'objective' knowledge (1988, 590–2).

The second fundamental point of this book is to make the critical links between continued gender-based inequalities, normative processes of gendering and the consequences of these processes for women through the lifecourse. In particular, we consider one significant negative consequence of normative processes of gendering for women in the UK: their experiences of mental wellbeing, self-esteem and confidence. Here we are taking a different and explicitly feminist approach to the gendering of mental wellbeing to much of the literature on mental health. Focusing on feminist theories and debates that have emerged over the past four decades we explore the relationships between ill health, constructions of femininities and the socio-cultural conditions of women's lives. As we demonstrate, there continues to be a strong connection between contemporary cultural constructions of femininity and negative experiences of mental wellbeing. The term *mental wellbeing* is used here to include a broad range of mental health issues, such as low self-esteem, lack of confidence, feelings of low self-worth, anxiety and depression. These symptoms and experiences may not be medicalised or identified as *mental health* problems by women themselves, and medical treatment may not have been sought, nevertheless such feelings have a significant impact on women's health and wellbeing as well as upon more material aspects of their lives such as their aspirations, achievements and professional lives.

We frame this argument through the concept of violence which takes three key forms: 'symbolic', 'structural' and 'visceral' and much of this book shows how these forms of violence are played out across different arenas of women's lives. In our use of the concept of symbolic violence we draw on Bourdieu (2001) where he refers to the ways in which:

the established order, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily, apart from a few historical accidents, [to the extent that] the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural. And I have also seen masculine domination, and the way it is imposed and suffered, as the prime example of this paradoxical submission, an effect of what I call symbolic violence, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more



precisely misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling.  
(Bourdieu, 2001, 1–2)

Further, we frame these processes of gendering by thinking about structural violence, as Farmer (2004) does, to refer to violence exerted systematically yet indirectly against people within a given social order. Like Bourdieu, and as we argue here, he is not talking simply about visceral violence, rather about the violence of

‘sinful’ structures characterized by poverty and steep grades of social inequality, including racism and gender inequality...In short, the concept of structural violence is intended to inform the study of the social machinery of oppression. Oppression is a result of many conditions, not least of which reside in the consciousness. (Farmer, 2004, 307)

These, combined with the impacts of physical harm through visceral gender-based violence, create a powerful triad – the symbolic, the structural and the visceral – that has profound impacts on people’s gendered identities. We are not arguing that *all* aspects of our gendered beings are negative or that *all* processes of gendering do violence unto us, but we are arguing that more processes of gendering than we perhaps realise can in fact be understood in this way. Moreover, it is worth emphasising that while this volume focuses deliberately and specifically on women’s lives as gendered beings, we would argue that processes of gendering as experienced by men can also be framed in this way, as potential forms of symbolic, structural and visceral violence.

Here we are using the term ‘violence’ as a broad concept played out along a very long continuum. Through this framework of gendering as forms of violence, from the gentle to the visceral, we can understand how women’s experiences of becoming and being a woman can be damaging to mental wellbeing. Poor wellbeing in turn has a major impact on women’s opportunities and aspirations and is itself a driver of inequality. Because, however, these issues are deeply embedded within everyday gendered practices and experiences, and as such are complex, amorphous and difficult to quantify, they often remain under-acknowledged in mainstream policy making. Drawing on women’s narratives, we explore the links between processes of gendering and women’s self-esteem, and the profound impacts these can have on their experiences and opportunities through the lifecourse. The lifecourse approach has informed the structure of the book, leading us through



women's lives and focusing on pivotal points and significant gendered experiences including: women's childhood experiences and early identity formation; impacts of gender-based violence; experiences of education and training; motherhood; employment and career development.

## Conceptualising the embodiment of infrastructure

Finally, and what is equally important, in this book we demonstrate how women themselves are able to reflect on their normative conditioning and are working through women's services and spaces to effect change in their own and others' lives. Here we argue that women and women's services act as forms of *embodied infrastructure*. By this we refer to the ways that women's bodies and material actions themselves become the vehicles, the catalysts, the embodied infrastructure, facilitating access to services and enabling change and support through women's networks. This infrastructure is created through a range of encounters, from those women who act as mentors to other women within their working lives, to the services and formal and informal networks women have established that serve to provide a framework, an infrastructure of support for women. As Luce Irigaray has said: 'Women's bodies through their use, consumption, and circulation provide for the condition making social life and culture possible, although they remain an unknown infrastructure of the elaboration of that social life and culture' (Irigaray, 1977, 171).

When we think about infrastructure we usually think of the physical buildings and highways, of concrete and steel rather than of flesh and blood, if we give it any thought at all. However the significance and nature of infrastructure has been developed and understood in different ways by several authors in recent years. Leigh Star (1999) has called for an ethnography of infrastructure, noting the importance of what is so often taken for granted. She talks of infrastructure as both relational and ecological by which she means that infrastructure is context dependent and how one relates to it depends on one's situatedness. For example 'within a given cultural context, the cook considers the water system as working infrastructure integral to making dinner. For the city planner or the plumber, it is a variable in a complex planning process or as a target of repair' (Leigh Star, 1999, 380). While she does not extend her concept of infrastructure to people themselves *being* a form of infrastructure, she does talk about infrastructure as 'part of human organisation, and as problematic as any other' (1999, 380) with a range of properties including: embeddedness, 'sunk into and inside

of other structures' (1999, 381); transparency, 'it is transparent to use, in the sense that it does not have to be reinvented each time or assembled for each task' (1999, 381); learned as part of the membership of a community of practice; and something that both shapes and is shaped by the conventions of that community of practice. Similarly, Graham and Thrift have produced an 'urban phenomenology' (2007, 2) through looking closely at the significance of infrastructures, specifically the importance of the mundane maintenance and repair of our urban infrastructures:

Think only of some of the familiar sounds of the city as an instance: from the sirens denoting accidents, to the noises of pneumatic drills denoting constant upkeep of roads, through the echoing clanks and hisses of the tyre and clutch replacement workshop, denoting the constant work needed just to keep cars going. (Graham and Thrift, 2007, 2)

Again, while Graham and Thrift (2007) do not extend the concept to include embodied infrastructure, they do highlight the importance of the maintenance of our mundane and embedded infrastructures for our social and interpersonal relations and understandings of our habitus. More recently the journal *Ethnography* published a special issue on 'infrastructural violence' in which infrastructure is considered as an 'ethnographically graspable manifestation' through which 'broader processes of marginalization, abjection and disconnection often become operational and sustainable in contemporary cities' (Rodgers and O'Neill, 2012, 401). In their introduction to the journal, Rodgers and O'Neill argue that:

infrastructure emerges as an ideal ethnographic site for theorizing how broad and abstract social orderings such as the state, citizenship, criminality, ethnicity and class play out concretely at the level of everyday practices, revealing how such relationships of power and hierarchy translate into palpable forms of physical and emotional harm. (2012, 402)

Here various authors consider the ways in which uses and abuses of infrastructure, lacking or decaying infrastructures can affect the people who inhabit them. They argue that infrastructure 'is not just a material embodiment of violence (structural or otherwise), but often its instrumental medium, insofar as the material organisation and form of a landscape not only reflect but also reinforce social

orders, thereby becoming a contributing factor to reoccurring forms of harm' (Rodgers and O'Neill, 2012, 404). So here we see that the concept of infrastructure is being developed and extended beyond the material and technological to consider its moral, political and socio-cultural relations. Indeed, the notion of infrastructures of violence adds a further important dimension to the forms of violence we have set out earlier in this chapter: the structural, symbolic and visceral. While the violence of infrastructures is not something we specifically develop further in this volume we feel that it is something worthy of further consideration elsewhere. What is important here is that these are all useful and interesting ways of extending our understandings of infrastructures – as moving beyond the purely logistical and as having both positive and negative impacts for people who live in and around these landscapes. This leads us to a critical conceptualisation for our purposes, the work of AbdouMalik Simone (2004) which explores far more positive infrastructural engagements. Most significantly Simone (2004) makes the leap from the infrastructures of steel and concrete to those of flesh and blood. He developed the idea of *people as infrastructure* in the context of the urban landscapes of Johannesburg, emphasising the economic collaboration among marginalised urban residents, stating that;

I wish to extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people's activities in the city. African cities are characterized by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used. These intersections, particularly in the last two decades, have depended on the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become an infrastructure – a platform for providing for and reproducing life in the city. (2004, 407)

This leap from people *and* infrastructure to people *as* infrastructure is highly significant for our analysis. More significant for the development of our analysis, however, has been the work of Mark Johnson (2013). Taking Simone's (2004) concept of *people as infrastructure*, his work on 'migration infrastructures' and 'in particular the way that forms of lateral surveillance features in migrant practices of care, an overlooked but vital part of the way that migrants create 'platforms for living', as well as enact social control and normative conformity, in sometimes precarious situations' (Johnson, 2013, 1) has been key to our own theoretical



development here. Indeed it was through personal conversations with Mark Johnson at the University of Hull that we first came to make the link between people and infrastructure. This dialogue led us to think about women's roles as mentors, women's networks and services as forms of embodied infrastructure and this dialogue in turn contributed to Johnson's own analysis. The importance of his analysis for the development of ours and *vice versa* becomes clearer in the extract below:

adopting a people as infrastructure approach that is, I suggest, a corollary of the infrastructural violence people in majority worlds live with daily, discloses the ways that migrants themselves fill in the gaps and missing links, recycle, repair or reengineer social and material technologies that are broken, obsolete or, just as often, designed by and for others and quite literally through their bodies, as well as their creative labours, become their own 'platforms for living'. Infrastructure, so we are told, is invisible normally. That may be partially true for a privileged minority. For many others, perhaps the majority, the backstage is more often than not the condition of existence. If, as feminist observers contend, many women face not just a double but triple burden of paid, domestic and care work, the latter two, as we know, increasingly contracted out and fulfilled partially in minority worlds by migrant women and men from the majority world, we might say that some, perhaps many, women and men, face a fourth and even less visible burden, that of filling in the cracks of and becoming the infrastructure of their own lives. That is the situation for many migrants who not only wo/man the backstage infrastructural operations of the minority world's front stage, but who also must create the offstage infrastructures that enables them to travel to, live in and work in those backstage operations. (Johnson, 2013, 18–19)

From this extract then, we can see how closely our analysis of infrastructures links to that of Johnson (2013). We are both concerned with the often hidden work of non-hegemonic social groups – women, migrants, migrant women – that forms what Johnson describes as a 'platform for living' and what we suggest becomes an 'embodied infrastructure'. Thus, drawing on Simone's idea of *people as infrastructure* and Johnson's work on *migration infrastructures* we argue that we can see forms of infrastructure that are *embodied*, and that these embodied



infrastructures are highly gendered constructs. Here, as previously discussed, we are thinking about the roles women often play in acting as role models and mentors to other women, and women's work in women's services and networks. Thus women's bodies play a critically important role in 'making social life and culture possible' (Irigaray, 1977, 171), although as Irigaray highlighted over three decades ago, it is still too often the case that these infrastructures and networks that comprise the fabric of social life remain under-acknowledged as 'an unknown infrastructure of the elaboration of that social life and culture' (Irigaray, 1977, 171).

The idea of women as embodied infrastructure also links to the understanding of the gendered terrain of community management work, a concept usefully highlighted within gendered analyses of development but again one often overlooked or taken for granted (see, for example, Clisby, 2005; Momsen, 2010). As we discuss further towards the end of this chapter, community management work forms the third element of the triad of gendered labour, the other two spokes being work conceptualised as reproductive and/or productive (see Momsen, 2010 for a fuller discussion of these forms of labour). Community management work is the usually informal, unpaid and often invisible but nonetheless critically important labour that is performed at the community level that also acts as a form of embodied infrastructure to facilitate and support families and communities. As with reproductive labour (referring both to the nurturing of kin and maintenance of households), this is a highly gendered form of labour inasmuch as it tends to be performed overwhelmingly by women and is often perceived as an extension of women's biologically essentialised but socially constructed caring and nurturing roles. As such it confers the concomitant low status and undervaluation of this labour one associates with much of these gendered social roles.

Some examples of community management work can include visits made and support offered to elderly or otherwise vulnerable neighbours, developing voluntary community-based groups to provide services for young or elderly people in the area, establishing and maintaining friendship networks with neighbours, maintaining family networks with both biological and non-biological kin through social care networks, for example, sending gifts and cards at birthdays and religious festivals or hosting friends and family in one's home to celebrate significant events. All this work that goes into the creation and maintenance of these embodied infrastructures, is expensive in terms of time and emotional labour as well as more directly financial costs. It demands persistence and long-term commitment and it is of