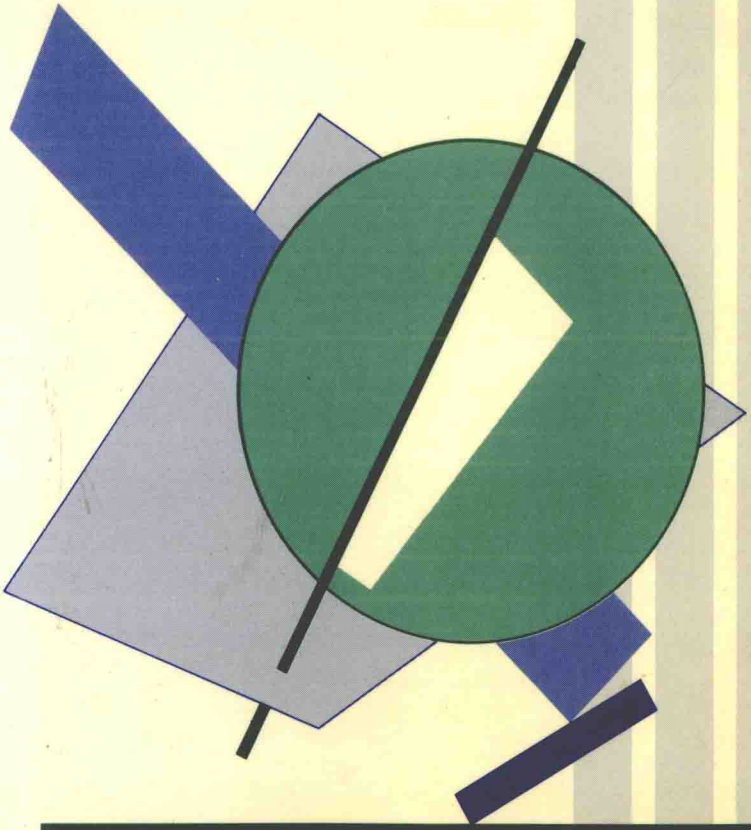
HARDSHIP AND HEALTH *in* WOMEN'S LIVES



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CONTENTS

FIGURES

TABLES

INTRODUCTION

There are around 16 million women in Britain aged 16 to 59. A total of 6 400 000 live in households with children under 16, representing 40 per cent of all women under retirement age (*Employment Gazette*, 1990). Among these 6.4 million women are stepmothers, foster mothers and women living with children within some more informal caring arrangement. The vast majority of women living in households with children, however, are mothers looking after their own offspring.

Hardship and Health in Women's Lives explores the lives of these 6 million women. It is particularly concerned with their domestic lives, and with the responsibilities and routines that structure what they do at home. For most women, what they do at home revolves around caring for children. Their caring responsibilities typically include the welfare of male partners as well; for some it extends to the care of other family members. Caring is associated, too, with a broad range of domestic duties, such as housework, laundry and food preparation.

This cluster of domestic routines shapes the experience of motherhood in ways which seem to transcend differences in women's social position and cultural background. Women who occupy very different class positions share a common domestic position as the person who cares for children and the families they live in. Similarly, White mothers, like Asian and African–Caribbean mothers, find their domestic lives bounded by cultural prescriptions which define them as responsible for childcare and household tasks. Mothers can, and frequently do, challenge these prescriptions. However, while some negotiate more help, few achieve an equal partnership. Most of the 6.4 million women living with children under the age of 16 not only live in

households with children, they also labour in them, working to look after the home and the health of those who live there.

In exploring their experiences, the book pays particular attention to mothers whose domestic lives are framed by hardship. The chapters which follow are concerned with the struggle to reunite families separated by immigration laws, with the search for housing and the experience of homelessness. They describe the patterns of paid work and the trends in low income and indebtedness. They look, particularly, at what it means to look after children when money is short; where motherhood is structured around a conflict between caring and economising, between trying to protect individual health and trying to ensure the financial survival of the household.

The book focuses on hardship because of social policies and social trends which are making hardship an increasingly common experience for mothers. The regulations governing immigration from the New Commonwealth and non-European Community countries have become increasingly restrictive in recent decades. The housing market is changing in ways which are pushing more women with children into temporary accommodation, and is turning council housing into a residual housing sector where poor mothers live. The labour market is changing, too, increasing the economic pressures on mothers to work but restricting their job opportunities. Reflecting these trends, families with children are increasingly found among the poorest households in Britain. An increasing number depend on means-tested benefits and on loans and credit for the money they need to survive.

In Britain, the concept of poverty is often used to convey a sense of what it means to be barely surviving. The concept is built around the recognition that people need a minimum of material resources if they are to keep themselves going and protect the health of those in their care. This minimum level of resources can be narrowly defined in terms of providing the basic necessities of food, warmth and shelter. However, although aware that poverty often brings hunger, cold and homelessness with it, most people in Britain take a broader view of what poverty is about. They recognise that social and cultural needs, as well as physical needs, are important components of an individual's welfare. They adopt a relative view of poverty, seeing it in terms of how people live and not just whether they survive. In this relative view, living

above the poverty line means being able to take part in activities and experiences that others take for granted.

The focus of the book is on mothers who can take very little for granted. However, it describes their lives in terms of *hardship* rather than through the concept of poverty. This is because of the narrow way in which poverty is often represented. It tends to be seen as a question of money, as a minimum level of income below which health is compromised and survival is threatened. Although shortage of money is often the dominant issue in mothers' lives, they are struggling against other kinds of hardship too. Finding ways to live together as a family in Britain is increasingly difficult for many Asian women. It can also be a struggle to find a home and find the energy to look after those who live there. Indeed, working for pay and sorting out childcare in order to do so can be an additional burden. It can be hard, too, to care for your children on less than you need when your own health is poor. It is this sense of the hard times and hard knocks that go with being a mother that is conveyed in the concept of hardship.

The book begins by reviewing the various sources of information on motherhood, noting how these data sources limit as well as enhance our understanding of women's domestic lives (Chapter 1). Mindful of their shortcomings, the book moves on to explore what can be gleaned from surveys and statistics about the conditions in which mothers live and care for children.

Chapter 2 maps out the routes that women take into motherhood; it looks at the increase in lone motherhood and the impact of labour migration from the New Commonwealth on the family lives of Black and White women. Chapter 3 examines the housing circumstances of families against the backcloth of changes in the housing market affecting the availability of tenured accommodation for those on low incomes.

Chapters 4 and 5 are concerned with the everyday care that mothers provide for their families. These chapters look, in particular, at women's responsibilities for the care of young children and the help that they get (and don't get) from others. Chapter 6 describes the increasing involvement of mothers in paid work, setting the current patterns in the context of wider changes in the labour market.

Chapters 7 and 8 are concerned with money. Chapter 7 reviews

the sources of income on which women with children rely for their survival, noting how many families depend on state benefits and how more are turning to various forms of credit for the money they need. Chapter 8 focuses on budgeting on a low income, exploring how mothers work to reconcile their health-keeping and housekeeping responsibilities when money is short.

The final two chapters of the book look more directly at the toll that hardship takes on health. Chapter 9 is concerned with the welfare of mothers. It maps their patterns of health and shows how mothers keep on caring in the face of poor health and deepening hardship. It describes the routines and resources mothers use to keep going and looks, in particular, at the role of cigarette smoking in the lives of White women caring for young children when money is short and housing is poor.

In describing their lives, mothers have offered their own testimony to the health-costs of hardship. However, it is national statistics and not personal accounts that stand as the official record of how hardship and health are linked. Among these statistics, it is those relating to deaths among children that have most commonly been taken as an indicator of the health and living conditions of the population. As a postscript to the book's review of mothers' lives, Chapter 10 maps out the patterns of death among children in Britain.

This synopsis of the chapters will have hopefully conveyed something of the book's focus. It is a focus that illuminates some rather than all aspects of women's domestic lives. For example, the hard times that many women experience around sexuality are noted but not explored. The chapters say relatively little about how abusive relationships, now and in the past, affect how mothers feel about themselves and their children. The hard times they highlight, too, are not ones that involve the loss of children. The book does not describe what it means to face the reception of a child into care or to live through a child dying. It does not record women's experiences of losing the custody of their children to their ex-partner or failing in their struggle to bring their children to Britain. The book points to the web of state services that are involved in these kinds of loss but, again, its coverage is partial. The chapters underline the role of the state in regulating and resourcing the everyday lives of families through its policies on housing and homelessness, immigration and

welfare benefits. However, the chapters provide less information on how the health and personal social services help to keep families going and keep them together.

One final point about the contents should be noted. The chapters detail women's experiences. The contribution that men and children make to housework and childcare is explicitly addressed in Chapter 5. For the most part, however, they remain shadowy figures in a landscape marked out in terms of what women do for their families. There are clearly other books to be written about health and hardship in fathers' lives, and about how growing up through hard times affects how children experience, and remember, their childhood.

The aspects of motherhood explored in this book point to the similarities in women's lives. The chapters describe how their lives, at home and in the labour market, are shaped by a common set of domestic responsibilities. The chapters highlight, too, how similarity is crosscut by difference and diversity. While sharing a common position as mothers, mothers are not all the same. Most mothers are non-disabled; for some, motherhood and disability are experienced together. Many mothers are living with men; some are living alone and some live with women. The majority of mothers live in nuclear households while others live in households where two or three generations of women and men live together.

Patterns of diversity are overlaid by patterns of change. Mothers are directly involved in many of the social and economic trends that are reshaping Britain: the increase in lone parenthood, the growth of women's employment, and the increasing vulnerability of families to poverty and reliance on benefits. These social and economic trends have inequality as their common theme. In their different ways, they are serving to widen the differences in life chances and in the living standards of mothers in Britain.

In introducing the book, the section below looks in more detail at the questions of diversity and inequality in mothers' lives. The final part of the introduction discusses the language that women have developed to describe their different experiences of oppression in their everyday lives. It outlines, too, the terms used in the book to capture these divergent experiences.