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## Book Review: Complex Inequality and 'Working Mothers'

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***Complex Inequality and 'Working Mothers'* Clare O'Hagan  
Cork University Press, Cork: 2015, 273 pages.  
Appendix and Index included.**

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For years, historians, feminists, politicians, and other social groups have engaged in conversations and vigorous debates concerning gender inequality in society. Because gender inequality is a multi-faceted issue, many scholars have devoted countless hours of research in hopes of eradicating the problem. Scholars have focused on sociological perspectives of gender inequity including historical traditions, individual rights, equal opportunity as a basis for social justice, socialization of women, fixed societal roles, stereotypes, power inequities, among many others. Of the many areas of study devoted to gender inequality, perhaps the most widely known is that of equal pay for equal work; or, gender equity in the work place. Much research exists to help explain this problem, and some scholars approach the topic from the point of view of the “working mother”. *Complex Inequality and 'Working Mothers'* by Clare O'Hagan incorporates the challenges working mothers face to help explain how Irish society “uses maternity to divide women in the public and private spheres” perpetuating the problem of gender inequity.<sup>1</sup> O'Hagan's case study uses qualitative research methods including group discussions and individual interviews to explain the operation of power, and its effects on women who engage in paid work outside the home.<sup>2</sup>

The first section of *Complex Inequality* engages the reader in a discussion of the different economic, feminist, and sociological theories historically used by scholars to understand the gender problem. She discusses the effects of Ireland's newly adopted neo-liberalistic ideals on Irish women, particularly mothers, and the burdens of balancing the desire to make economic contributions to the state while also providing care to their children. Because of the lack of state support for childcare, working mothers face difficult decisions when it comes to balancing both work and motherhood.<sup>3</sup> O'Hagan also discusses the opposing roles that individualism and feminism play in the matter of choice and autonomy in the work place. While individualism suggests women can choose their lifestyle, the author notes that in Ireland a working mother's choice is actually limited due to stereotypical gender roles in family and society.<sup>4</sup> Finally, while feminism encourages women to exercise independence, gender inequities not only exist, but are pervasive throughout Ireland, making it difficult for women to break out of the roles society expects them to play. In *Complex Inequality*, O'Hagan utilizes an intersectional approach as her theoretical framework for interpreting the results of her case study to help explain how gender

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<sup>1</sup> Clare O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality and 'Working Mothers'* (Cork: Cork University Press), xii.

<sup>2</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, xvii.

<sup>3</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

intersects with other identities and categories creating unique experiences of oppression and privilege in modern Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

Following an in-depth description of her theoretical framework, O'Hagan describes in detail the methodology used to conduct her analysis of working mothers in Ireland. She predominately utilizes various qualitative methods to collect data for her case study analysis. She focuses on thirty women, each working either full time, part-time, reduced hours, or job shared.<sup>6</sup> She conducted her research during the census year of 2006 in a middle class suburb of a provincial city in Ireland.<sup>7</sup> Each of the thirty women completed a biographical questionnaire which provided data on their family and family history. Each of the women also participated in focus groups which were structured in a public forum format to allow the women to share and explore each other's experiences combining work and motherhood. Finally, O'Hagan conducted individual interviews with twenty-four of the thirty women to obtain more detailed, in-depth information of how each individual woman balanced the competing influences of work and motherhood in their own household.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the remainder of her text, O'Hagan discusses her findings and highlights several important contributing factors behind the complex system of gender inequality in Ireland including choice, moral obligations, childcare, relationships with childminders, social capital, and time.

Her analysis of the data collected during interviews revealed the complex nature and reality of "choice" for mothers who engage in paid work outside of the home. While each woman in the study had a different set of experiences influencing her decision to work, each woman also had to navigate a complex set of variables which greatly affected her decision. These variables included but were not limited to family circumstances, the affordability of childcare, time, social and educational capital, among many others. These issues created a reality of very limited choice for many women. Additionally, each woman felt pressures in both private and working sectors. This pressure stemmed from polarizing constructs of what Irish culture viewed as "an ideal worker" and "an ideal mother".<sup>9</sup> O'Hagan posited from data collected during interviews that each women felt pressure not only to excel in the work place, but also to excel in the home. By limiting one's work hours to excel as a mother, women limited their earning power, career prospects, and independence in most cases. However, reducing time spent caring for children resulted in practical and emotional difficulties when mothers left their children in the care of others. The author noted that while the rhetoric of choice is central to the Irish neo-liberal agenda, it was made clear by the participants in the study that "choice" for working mothers equates to constraints on the freedom to make choices, especially concerning the combination of paid work with motherhood. Furthermore, when women chose to be both a full time worker and a full time mother, they not only experienced restrictions on their autonomy and freedom, but also experienced a great deal of stress balancing the roles.<sup>10</sup>

This study also demonstrated how working mothers view morality in terms of their commitment to paid work in relation to their obligations as mothers. In her research, many of the women felt a sense of "moral obligation" to make an economic contribution to the state and also to the household. Additionally, they discussed the cost of investing in a career; and, even after

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<sup>5</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 40.

<sup>6</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 46.

<sup>7</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 48.

<sup>8</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 51.

<sup>9</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 65.

<sup>10</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 68.

having children, still felt obligated to seek a return on their investment. They also felt morally obligated to provide material needs (and wants) for their children. Despite these feelings of moral obligation, O'Hagan noted that when women worked to fulfill them, they commented that by deciding to working outside of the home, they felt as though they were putting their own needs before the needs of their children.<sup>11</sup> O'Hagan concluded that "while women exercise in agency when contributing to both, they are also contributing to the dominant discourses which reinforce the polarization of working and caring for children".<sup>12</sup> She also noted that in combination with feelings of moral obligation, women also experienced inequity because of the gendered obligations promoted in the "myth of motherhood". The idea that children, even older children, always need their mothers available to them made women feel guilty for not fulfilling the need to have their mothers near.<sup>13</sup> These pressures resulted in many of the women in the study drastically reducing the hours they spent engaged in paid work.<sup>14</sup>

When women considered engaging in paid work, childcare became another significant variable influencing a woman's decision on the number of hours to work. O'Hagan detailed the complications associated with childcare and managing relationships with childminders. The author noted that Irish society continues to have an ambivalent attitude toward women's roles which drastically reduces childcare financing<sup>15</sup>. According to O'Hagan, this had "a direct, negative impact on women's participation in the workforce".<sup>16</sup> Additionally, this study indicated that most women maintain the sole responsibility of choosing, arranging, and paying for their children's care.<sup>17</sup> Finally, if a woman decides to hire a childminder, the author noted that the relationship between the childminder and mother was tricky to navigate. She concluded that the relationship was "clearly hierarchical and emotionally competitive".<sup>18</sup> The women in this study indicated that while a woman ultimately wants her children to be well-cared for in her absence, the mother can feel usurped when and if the child becomes too attached to the childminder.<sup>19</sup> O'Hagan discussed how issues involved with childcare and women's decision to work have created "a new complex pattern of inequality" involving working mothers and those who do "caring work".<sup>20</sup>

O'Hagan cites social capital and education capital as additional factors contributing to women reducing or disengaging from the workforce. In Ireland, national trends indicate that schools (and society) expect that there is a full-time mother in the home which reinforces high expectations of parental involvement.<sup>21</sup> These expectations are often gendered, putting pressure on the mothers to be present at parent-teacher conferences, parent-teacher association meetings, and other school events.<sup>22</sup> The added high expectations of a mother's presence in the school results in a decision by the mother to reduce her hours at work.<sup>23</sup> In addition to education pressures, there is an added pressure that parents should spend "copious amounts of time

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<sup>11</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 85.

<sup>12</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 90.

<sup>13</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 103.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 111.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 123.

<sup>18</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 132.

<sup>19</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 134.

<sup>20</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 142.

<sup>21</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 151.

<sup>22</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 153.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

cultivating their child's development".<sup>24</sup> Many women feel they are solely responsible for developing their child's social, educational, physical, and psychological development. In order to be successful in this regard, many women feel they need to invest significant amounts of time engaged in this task.<sup>25</sup> Because of the combination of issues O'Hagan discusses that all women in the research experienced degrees of time pressure and high amounts of stress.<sup>26</sup>

O'Hagan concludes her research by arguing that while gender inequality is a "system of oppression in its own right, gender relations are intertwined in complex ways with other forms of social inequality".<sup>27</sup> In this particular piece, O'Hagan focuses on 'working mothers', their representations of themselves as workers and mothers, and the dilemmas these women experience. Her case study illuminates the complexities involved in the lives of mothers who work and demonstrates the inequality which results from the various social and work pressures placed on these women.<sup>28</sup> *Complex Inequality and 'Working Mothers'* is a well-researched, finely written book which exemplifies Irish working mothers as a silent majority in need of social policy changes in order to facilitate a better balance between men, women, child-rearing, and employment.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 156.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 159.

<sup>27</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 180.

<sup>28</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 181.

<sup>29</sup> O'Hagan, *Complex Inequality*, 193.