

## Gendered inequality regimes and female labour market disadvantage within the New Zealand film industry

---

JOCELYN HANDY and LORRAINE ROWLANDS

### Abstract

This article uses Joan Acker's concept of gendered inequality regimes to analyse women's labour market disadvantage within the Wellington film industry. Interviews with thirteen female, and eleven male, freelance film production workers suggest that structural conditions, industry norms and collective practices within the industry mean that workers need to show total flexibility and commitment. This makes it difficult for workers to successfully combine work with family responsibilities. This issue affects women disproportionately as cultural norms emphasise women's domestic and nurturing responsibilities. In consequence, women, though not men, with young children are perceived as riskier and less desirable employees. Industry prejudices against women with children adversely affect the employment prospects and work/life balance of all women. Childfree women need to prove their reliability and loyalty by dedicating themselves to the industry to a greater degree than their male colleagues. Consequently, women's ability to combine a successful film career with other social roles is more limited than men's and the schism between women with children and childfree women is perpetuated.

### Key words

*film industry, gender inequality, cultural norms, individualism*

### Introduction

This article uses Joan Acker's (1992; 2006; 2009) concept of 'inequality regimes' to examine the ways in which the organisation of work within the New Zealand film industry disadvantages female freelance film production workers. Acker's conceptual framework has become one of the dominant approaches to analysing systemic inequalities within organisations and has been used to study a wide range of organisational contexts (Proctor-Thomson, 2010). However, there is still relatively little research examining gendered inequality regimes within the film industry, despite a growing body of empirical data documenting women's absence from senior positions, lower pay and higher withdrawal rates from the industry (e.g. French, 2014; Lauzen, 2014).

Acker (2006:443) defines inequality regimes as sets of 'loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within particular organisations'. She suggests that many facets of organisational life which appear on the surface to be non-discriminatory working conditions or practices, designed to simply facilitate effective organisational functioning, also have the less apparent effect of privileging some organisational groups and disadvantaging others. Acker's approach to organisational analysis requires researchers to consider not only the structural features of specific institutional and organisational contexts but also the everyday practices and discourses which create, rationalise and hide inequalities. In contrast to some social theorists (e.g. Giddens, 1984) who suggest that structure and agency are so interwoven that they cannot be separated analytically, Acker treats structure and agency as analytically distinct, with structure preceding agency. She suggests that people entering organisations frequently encounter various types of inequality regime and find their choices and actions circumscribed by the organisational context they

inhabit. Women may therefore have full or partial awareness of the structural conditions, opportunities and constraints they face and still be confined by these circumstances into choosing actions which help reproduce gendered inequities within the workplace.

One of the key arguments which Acker makes is that the ostensibly genderless abstraction of the 'ideal worker' is actually embodied, with some organisational roles and behaviours implicitly associated with stereotypically feminine characteristics and others with stereotypically male characteristics. These stereotypes tend to support male occupancy of more prestigious organisational roles and sustain a range of, often unrecognised, biases in organisational structures, cultures and practices.

The main difference between men and women is, of course, reproduction and many feminists have argued that gendered social conventions concerning family responsibilities help frame women as less desirable workers (Kelan, 2009; Spade and Valentine, 2010). Acker argues that traditional models of fatherhood emphasise men's public roles as workers and financial providers. This enables men to prioritise work commitments without compromising their identities and role obligations as fathers. From an organisational perspective, childless male workers and male workers with children both conform to the ideal of the independent worker unfettered by constraints on work availability or commitment. In contrast, normative expectations of motherhood emphasise women's nurturing responsibilities. Acker acknowledges that the strict divisions of labour and care which traditionally characterised male and female roles within the nuclear family have loosened but argues that women are still expected to focus on family more than men and to identify more fully with the parental role. From an organisational perspective, women with children therefore deviate more from the abstraction of the ideal worker than men with offspring. Women without children conform more closely to this ideal, however during their childbearing years there is always the possibility that women will change categories and become mothers. Childless women are therefore potentially more deviant than men simply because of their gender. Consequently, women often need to sacrifice family relationships to a greater degree than males in order to prove their commitment (Wood and Newton, 2006). While this strategy can lead to success, women who prioritise their careers may still experience disadvantage because they cannot fully integrate into male dominated organisational regimes (Ashcraft, 2013).

A large body of empirical research supports Acker's theoretical claims (e.g. Bryant and Jaworski, 2011; DiTomaso, Post and Parks-Yancy, 2007; Eveline and Booth, 2002). Until recently, most of this research had been carried out in traditional organisations with clear organisational and career hierarchies, clear job descriptions and a stable, permanently employed labour force (Britton and Logan, 2008). This set of organisational arrangements has been overturned within the 'new economy' labour market which is increasingly characterised by job insecurity, networking and short-term, project-based labour (Bakker, 2010; Williams Muller and Kilanski, 2012). The effect of these developments on gendered inequality within organisations has been the subject of considerable debate. Advocates of these developments suggest that the demise of long-established organisational forms and emergence of self-created career trajectories within more flexible organisations helps to increase individual agency and choice by liberating people from the constraints of traditional organisational structures (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009; Tam and Arthur, 2010). In contrast, feminist critics of these developments suggest that the shift towards more flexible labour markets may have amplified gender based inequality by creating increasingly precarious and competitive employment and dismantling legal frameworks and forms of collective organising specifically designed to challenge gender based inequality regimes (Castilla, 2012; Christopherson, 2008; Fernandez-Mateo, 2009; Gill, 2002; Murray and Gollmitzer, 2012). For some writers, the increasing prominence of

individualist models of workplace success or failure, which emphasise individual talent and merit, may also contribute to gendered inequality regimes by focussing attention on individual choices and actions and minimising awareness of the structural conditions and collective practices which influence these activities (Dawson, 2012; Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013).

The various creative industries have been identified by many writers as sites where the new workplace realities of precarity and individualism have become well established and are seen by some as exemplars of emerging employment patterns within society (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Lindgren, Packendorff and Sergi, 2014; Smith, 2010; Ursell, 2006). Gender inequality within the creative industries is therefore an important issue in its own right but may also be an indicator of future patterns of gender discrimination within a wide variety of other industries which are implementing increasingly precarious and individualistic employment patterns.

Banks and Milestone (2011) suggest that the precarious labour market conditions found within most creative industries and the extreme commitment expected of workers are inimical to family life. They draw upon Beck's (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) analysis of individualisation to argue that the 'ideal' creative industries worker is a single individual, unhindered by obligations to either people or place and totally committed to their work.

Work conditions within the creative industries could, theoretically, be incompatible with family life without creating gendered environments which treat men and women differently. Proponents of individualism such as Giddens (1991) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that traditional gender roles are becoming less distinct as new economic models based on individualism and precarity gain prominence within modern economies. They suggest that the rise of individualism within society has diminished traditional role expectations and norms concerning women's reproductive status and social responsibilities and given both women and men more freedom to choose their social roles. From this perspective, men and women working within the creative industries could accept the primacy of paid labour to an equal degree, have similar expectations concerning work and family roles, be perceived and dealt with in a gender-neutral fashion by organisational powerholders and have similar support systems facilitating or hindering work/family balance. Theoretically at least, working conditions within the individualised workplace could be inimical to the family unit without having gendered inequality regimes in place.

The alternative argument, put forward by various feminist writers, suggests that the ideal of the 'autonomous worker' which dominates most creative labour markets is simply an intensified version of traditional, masculine, representations of the perfect worker (Crump, Logan and McIlroy, 2007; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Eikhoff and Warhurst, 2013). This perspective suggests that traditional cultural norms concerning gender are still enacted within the creative industries, ensuring that men and women within these industries are differentially affected by the highly individualised labour market conditions within them (Adkins, 2004; Fernandez-Mateo and King, 2011; Wee and Brooks, 2012).

Empirical research examining a wide variety of creative industries from a gendered perspective supports this argument, showing that creative workplaces are often highly gendered environments where discourses of self-actualisation, egalitarianism and flexibility help to obscure structural conditions, cultural norms and collective practices which frequently reproduce some quite traditional patterns of gender discrimination and disadvantage (Bielby, 2009; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012; Holgate and McKay, 2009; Perrons, 2003; Taylor, 2011).

The film industry is one of the most intensively researched creative industries. A growing body of research documents the highly insecure and competitive labour market conditions existing within the film industries of most Western countries (Christopherson, 2008; McKinlay

and Smith, 2009). These conditions create problems for all production workers within the industry but seem to impact women more severely than men. Statistical data from a wide range of international surveys reveals entrenched gender disparities within film production. Follows (2014) surveyed the gender distribution of film crew on the 2000 highest grossing Hollywood films produced between 1994 and 2013, examining the top 200 films produced each year. His data show that women comprised just under 23 percent of film crew and were heavily concentrated in the less prestigious and traditionally female areas of costume, wardrobe, makeup and casting. Technical specialities were heavily male dominated, with 95 percent of camera crew and electricians being male and visual effects and post production editing over 80 percent male. Senior creative roles were also male dominated, with women comprising less than five percent of directors, only 11 percent of writers and 20 percent of producers on top films. Follows' research also revealed that women's marginal position within the film industry has changed little in the last 20 years.

Similar results are consistently reported by the annual Celluloid Ceiling report produced by the Centre for the Study of Women in Television and Film (Lauzen, 2014) and by studies of the Canadian (Coles, 2013) and Australian film industries (French, 2014). Census data from Skillset, the British sector skills council for the creative industries, shows that women working in film are less likely than their male colleagues to have children and more likely to abandon their careers after having children. The Skillset data show that 40% of male film production workers in Britain have dependent children living with them compared to only 14% of women. Female film production workers are also more likely to leave the industry around the age of 35, frequently citing the difficulties of combining work and family as a key reason for their decision (Skillset 2009; 2010).

It is unsurprising that women have more difficulty than men combining successful careers in the film industry with family responsibilities. Working conditions within the industry are clearly incompatible with family commitments and have been shown to create continual work/life balance conflicts which tend to impact women more than men (French, 2014). However, many women in the film industry choose to remain childfree in order to avoid the career penalties commonly associated with motherhood (Antcliff, 2005; French, 2014). If the lower success rates and higher dropout rates of women are simply due to the difficulties of combining gendered patterns of family responsibility with working conditions within the industry, childfree women should be perceived by industry colleagues as very similar to male workers in terms of reliability, commitment and employability. If however, the more complex sets of interlocking structural conditions, cultural norms and collective practices underpinning the gendered inequality regimes described by Acker continue to exist in the industry, then women without children will also experience gender based discrimination within the workplace.

The film industry utilises a production system of project based network organisation in which diverse teams of highly skilled freelancers are assembled for limited time periods and disbanded when their part in a production is completed. The network organisation producing a film therefore consists of a range of different companies, sub-contractors and freelancers who interact for brief, highly intensive, periods of work. The smooth functioning of this system depends on clear and well-established status hierarchies and organisational roles and strong social networks between workers (Antcliff, Saundry, and Stuart, 2007; Bechky, 2006; Daskalaki, 2010). This facilitates the formation of flexible work groups comprised of people who have collaborated on a range of projects and share collective memories, skills and group norms. Collectively these groups form 'latent organisations' which can reassemble into smoothly functioning units at short notice (Ebbers and Winjberg, 2009). Once contracted, workers in these teams are expected, by both employers and colleagues, to be totally committed to projects and to accept

long, unpredictable and antisocial working hours and substantial travel as normal aspects of their work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010; Lee, 2012; Randle, Leung and Kurian 2007).

From a purely economic perspective, a project-based production system using a freelance workforce is well suited to the uncertainties of film making since it enables teams to be assembled and dismantled quickly and flexibly and limits entrepreneurs' fiscal responsibilities towards the labour force. The entirely project-based structure of the contemporary film industry does, however, tend to entrench gender inequalities within the industry. Eikhoff and Warhurst (2013) point out that the short-term character of project employment creates a 'revolving door' work environment which amplifies the effects of gendered advantage and disadvantage. Decisions about hiring are made more rapidly, more informally and more frequently than in more bureaucratic organisations, and people in positions of power tend to rely heavily on reputation, personal recommendation, or their past experiences working with someone when assembling project teams. Social networks and their associated social capital are the key mechanisms through which these informal hiring processes operate and are crucial to both learning about work opportunities and being chosen for work. While women generally develop work-related networks which are as large as men's they tend to acquire less prestigious networks. This occurs for a variety of reasons such as women's exclusion by members of higher status groups, feeling uncomfortable within these groups, or having limited time to socialise with and cultivate influential networks. One effect of having less prestigious networks is that women are often disadvantaged at the hiring stage of projects (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012). The cumulative effect of this is that women may eventually become objectively less skilled candidates because they have been unable to build up the range of contracts necessary to create a sought after portfolio of expertise and experience.

The New Zealand film industry utilises the freelance, project-based production system found throughout the western film world. Research findings from other countries are therefore relevant to our understanding of gendered inequality regimes within the New Zealand film industry. Conversely, the findings of New Zealand research will help illuminate issues affecting the film industry elsewhere. The aim of this research was to explore male and female freelance film production workers' understandings of, and responses to, working conditions within the New Zealand industry, focussing specifically on the ways in which cultural norms concerning motherhood and family responsibility affect women's careers within the Wellington film industry.

## **Research design**

### **Structural characteristics of the Wellington film industry**

The Wellington film industry is small by global standards and is heavily dependent on overseas funding. This creates large fluctuations in the amount of available work and the industry can move rapidly from a situation where experienced freelancers find work relatively easy to obtain to one where workers are competing for scarce employment. The industry is non-unionised with strong resistance to unionisation coming from international film studios, local film producers and the New Zealand government. Current legislation means that benefits such as holiday and sick pay, parental leave, workplace superannuation and the right to bargain collectively over pay and conditions are unavailable to film workers who are classified as self-employed contractors rather than employees.

The industry is dominated by a few key individuals with established reputations and proven ability to secure international financing. The small size of the industry ensures that social networks and 'latent organisations' within the industry are tight knit and limited in number. The

maintenance of strong networks and a good professional reputation is therefore essential to securing repeat employment.

Although women comprise around 40 percent of Wellington's freelance film production workers they have made limited inroads into technical areas such as sound, lighting and camera or post-production engineering and are predominately employed in traditionally female occupations such as hair, make-up and administration (Statistics New Zealand, 2012). While women occupy some quite powerful administrative and creative positions within the industry the highest echelons remain male dominated.

While the Wellington film industry differs from the film industry in some other countries in terms of size and the particulars of New Zealand employment law the core model of insecure, competitive, project-based labour is essentially similar to the model of film production within most Western countries. The findings of this study are therefore relevant to our understanding of both the specifics of the New Zealand film industry and gender issues within the film industry in other countries.

### **Participants**

Participants were accessed through the authors' personal connections with industry insiders. These contacts then facilitated access to a wider group through their personal and professional networks. The 13 female and 11 male participants were selected to provide a gender balanced and diverse mix of film production workers within the Wellington film industry. Nine production workers who had recently left the industry were included to provide insights into their reasons for leaving the industry (see Table One for participant details). In order to safeguard participants' anonymity, all participants are referred to by pseudonyms and details which could identify specific individuals have been omitted from the transcripts.

Participants were interviewed individually in non-work locations. All interviews lasted over an hour with several exceeding two hours. Interviews were loosely structured and were designed to explore participants' subjective experiences of working within the Wellington film industry. Twenty-one interviews were carried out as part of a more general study of film production workers' experiences (Rowlands and Handy, 2012). These interviews covered a range of topics including entry into the industry, working conditions, cultural norms, networking and social relationships, intrinsic rewards of film-making, work-life balance, training and career development, gender issues and exit from the industry.

Three additional interviews with female participants were carried out after the first set of interviews had been transcribed. These interviews focussed entirely on gender issues and were designed to clarify themes which had emerged during the earlier interviews. Gender related issues covered in these interviews included working conditions and motherhood, work-life balance, childcare, and industry attitudes towards hiring and working with women. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the authors.

A three-stage thematic analysis of the data was carried out for this study. In the first stage each transcript was examined individually to identify key gender related themes for that respondent. In the second stage the key themes from all female participants were compared and contrasted with key themes from all male respondents to identify commonalities or discrepancies between female and male accounts. Finally, the emergent themes from the entire data set were analysed to interpret the ways in which structural conditions within the industry, gendered cultural norms concerning parental responsibility, and individual practices designed to minimise risk interacted to create and maintain gendered inequality regimes.

## Findings

### **Structural conditions, cultural norms and collective practices**

All participants acknowledged that working conditions within the Wellington film industry are inimical to family life. However, most male participants saw the industry as gender-neutral. The comments of Ned, a freelance model maker in his early fifties, are typical of male participants' views:

I think the film industry is a genderless industry – everybody is screwed equally. You don't have to be a woman to get a harder time than a man. The way we run the industry you can't have family life – there is no work-life balance. Everybody is contract so you're either working 150 percent or you're not working at all, that's the balance.

For men, the perception of the industry as gender neutral was often justified by citing their own difficulties combining work and family life. All male participants with children acknowledged that their partners took primary responsibility for childcare and running the household. Despite this, all gave graphic examples of the work-life balance problems they experienced and the detrimental impact which prioritising work could have on their family life. For male participants the problems they recounted related primarily to the financial insecurity of contract work and psychological difficulties shifting from work-related to family oriented modes of functioning. Surprisingly, male participants' clear recognition of the relationship between the working conditions within the industry and their own work-life balance problems tended to obscure their awareness that women often made different and more difficult choices, frequently leaving the industry because they could not combine work and family or remaining childless in order to succeed.

Female participants were more likely to see the industry as gendered, however the examples they gave all centred on work related issues such as networking, pay bargaining or male dominated power structures. While all female participants were cognisant of the difficulties of combining film work and motherhood, the dilemma was framed as an issue of individual choice rather than a consequence of gendered inequality regimes within the film industry. The analysis supplied by Juliet, a senior producer in her early 40s who had left the industry around eighteen months earlier when pregnant with her first child, typifies the rationale many women gave:

It's a slightly sexist industry. Power in the industry is definitely held by men at the top and women may have to work a bit harder to gain authority. But I don't think the industry discriminates against women themselves – if you're willing to give up on family you can potentially make it. A lot of the roles are very organisational and women do them really well – but what you see is that most of them drop out if they have children because it's not a family friendly industry.

Juliet's response, like that of most other female participants, identifies the problems within the industry but rejects the idea of gendered inequality and frames the solution as an individual choice between family and career. This preserves the normative ideal of the autonomous film worker while obscuring the essentially masculine model of work and family relationships underpinning it.

Framing the ideal film worker as unencumbered by family responsibilities ensured that women with children were categorised as less desirable workers. The preference for child-free workers was clearly gendered, with mothers regarded as less reliable workers because they were presumed to be more likely than men to undertake caring roles which were incompatible with total work availability. Many organisational practices, including crucial hiring decisions, tended to favour male workers. Melissa, a child-free producer in her early forties explained:

There are three genders in this industry, men, women without children, and women with children. A male without children and a male with children and a female who is definitely without children are probably equivalent. A female with children is different and is definitely seen as more of a risk.

The practical implications of this perspective were highlighted by Patrick, an art department head, when explaining his reluctance to employ women with children:

I've had situations where there's been a woman and she's got young children and you've got a nanny or child-care ... but its 'can I come in at 8 rather than seven because I've got to take the child to ...' and you say 'fine as long as it doesn't interfere with your work'. But sometimes you have to say 'look sort it or I'll have to let you go and get someone who can be here'. Being a mother usually means more than being a father so it creates more problems.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Juliet, describing past hiring decisions she had made:

I think female workers with children are potentially less reliable – that's the reality. I think most employers – having been in that position myself – are more likely to employ the male because you've cut a high risk factor out. When I'm trying to think of people for roles I'll say 'well they've got the skills for this role but they've got children and their husband's doing this so they're probably not workable'. You've got to remember it's your reputation on the line as well as theirs.

The accuracy of participants' assertions concerning the unreliability of mothers is a disputable point. The exigencies of parenting may well conflict with the demands of filming at times but this is not necessarily a gendered issue. However, in these exemplars the assertion of parental unreliability is not applied to fathers but has generalised to all women with young children. This creates a context where women with dependent offspring automatically become categorised as deviant and risky workers, unable to conform to the requirements of a work environment demanding total commitment.

Eikhof and Warhurst (2013) suggest that the high pressure, short-term and project-based model of production underpinning the film industry amplifies the risks of hiring decisions for both organisational power-holders and job applicants. Within this research senior freelancers were well aware that they needed to engage high calibre, reliable subordinates in order to safeguard their own reputations and therefore tend to choose known freelancers who they had worked with previously. This subtly disadvantaged all women because they were less centrally established in these, primarily male, social networks and were therefore more likely to be overlooked or perceived as a more marginal appointment. This problem was exacerbated when women had children as they were even more likely to be excluded from key social networks and also had family responsibilities which were perceived as impacting negatively on their job performance. This perception is clearly highly anxiety provoking for more senior freelancers who are faced with the possibility of damaging their own careers by hiring or recommending women who they fear may turn out to be unreliable workers. Given these circumstances it is unsurprising that both men and women in positions of power within the industry tended to choose the option which they perceived as less risky and hire males or childfree women in preference to women with young children.

### **Women's choices**

The individualised, precarious and highly competitive nature of employment within film production created an organisational context which both male and female respondents saw little opportunity of changing. Women's options were therefore limited to two main alternatives. One was to opt out of the industry in order to have and raise children. A second strategy was to conform to organisational norms concerning the primacy of work by remaining childfree or, less frequently, by hiding the effects of family life on work commitments. For many participants, these choices were ones which, while deeply personal, were heavily influenced by

structural conditions and practices within the industry. Framing these decisions as their private choices gave women a sense of agency and control but also ensured that they took personal responsibility for their actions and that they were seen by others as having made their choices freely. This reinforced the stereotype that many women naturally prioritise family over careers and diverted attention from the need to organise the work environment differently.

Within this research several female participants had left because of the difficulties of combining work and family. Susan, a childless art department assistant in her mid-thirties, had recently decided to leave the industry because she perceived many other women having problems combining film work and family life. While she clearly recognised the gendered nature of the industry and the subordinate position of women her reply also emphasises women's agency, highlighting their freedom to choose whether or not to remain within the industry:

It's a male run industry and it is hard. Most females will be in production and they become known as the production spinsters. First in every morning, last out every night. They are very good at their job (but) it replaces all those relationships that they have to give up on ... 'I'm not going to have kids, I'm not going to bother having a partner' and that's why they bury themselves in work. Well that's an individual choice but it's not my cup of tea....

Other participants left the industry after having children, sometimes because they recognised the difficulties of combining parenting and film work and made a conscious decision to leave, sometimes because work opportunities dried up after they became mothers. Several female participants noted that senior women who worked in organisational roles where they needed to co-ordinate staff and activities had more problems remaining in the industry than women working in less prestigious, female domains like make-up or hairdressing where people could substitute for each other more easily. Women in these more senior roles are often highly educated and skilled and are faced, in their mid-thirties or early forties, with finding new careers. As Juliet explained:

I did think about going back into producing because that's my background. But the people that (X) surrounds himself with work absolutely horrendous hours and I don't know that I want to make that sacrifice – you wouldn't see your family grow up or spend time with your children. So no – I can't see myself going back. But that raises the problem of what to do next. I'm faced with retraining and starting near the bottom again in another industry and that's not really something I want to do.

Juliet also identifies the long hours and high commitment culture of the industry as a significant work/life balance issue but again frames her decision to leave as a personal choice, although she would clearly have preferred to remain within the industry if working conditions were different.

Women with children who remained within the industry needed to conform to the industry ideal of the autonomous worker in order to be successful. As Melissa observed:

The females who are high up in X's empire don't have children – with the exception of one who has two children and two full-time nannies.

Women with less financial resources often experienced considerable problems arranging suitable childcare. Several female participants pointed out that long hours, possible location shooting and the intermittent availability of work made it difficult to use conventional day care or after school facilities or to employ nannies on a regular basis. This problem was exacerbated because many workers had partners who also worked in the industry and had equally problematic work schedules. Some participants had tried shared parenting systems where only one parent worked at a time but such systems inevitably meant that the ability of both partners to work simultaneously on prestigious, long-term, productions such as *The Hobbit*, was compromised. Consequently, couples often decided to prioritise one career and women's careers were

frequently subordinated to their partners. Emma, a sculptor with one child, who was married to another film production worker, explained:

I was working 13 hours a day and really missed my daughter. I don't really do work for films anymore because I choose to work from home. Working for (x) I can work as few hours or as many hours as I can manage as long as I meet the deadline for the project. It's important to keep in touch to get referred for a new project though and I'm not very good at that so the work is drying up a bit.

In contrast to male participants, who did not perceive themselves as having to make a choice between their careers and having a family, several female participants felt that they needed to remain childfree in order to succeed in the industry. Women who remained childfree could succeed but rarely attained the top echelons of power or the same acceptance as their male colleagues. Once successful, these women tended to conform to dominant practices within the industry and joined their male colleagues in treating women with children as less reliable workers. The strategies these women used to defend their own positions thus tended to reinforce, rather than challenge, gendered inequality regimes within the industry.

Childfree women also framed their decision to focus primarily on their careers as a personal choice, although several women highlighted the industry pressures influencing their decision and the emotional costs of this strategy. Hilary, a production manager in her mid-thirties, explained:

At this point I have ruled out having children as an option and what's interesting to notice is the other women in the industry who have made the same choices. I call them film widows. They're married to their work; they have very little else ... the other term for it is Brides of (x) – yeah, you know we're all Brides of (x) and to be honest with you I fit in the genre and it is really scary.

The terms 'production spinsters', 'film widows' and 'Brides of (x)' were used by several participants, both male and female, to describe highly skilled women who had risen to key production roles by being totally work focussed. While such women were often admired for their drive and dedication they were also criticised, particularly by male participants, for their intense work involvement, which was perceived as making them difficult colleagues. Michael, an assistant director in his late forties, commented:

Women, for some reason, seem more prone to becoming film widows, where their whole life becomes the job. First in at 6am in the morning and they will still be working away at 12pm at night ... and what happens when you are in a job that is totally consuming is it becomes all your life and you start expressing your emotional life through the job. They become difficult to work with because it's not actually about the job; it's about their emotional state.

Other workers' attitudes towards these women become understandable if conceptualised as a response to job insecurity. In order to succeed, childfree women often embraced the industry ideal of the dedicated and autonomous worker more intensely than other workers. This is clearly threatening to other workers as it may make their own commitment to the industry seem inadequate and jeopardise their occupational security. Within a work environment characterised by collective activities, the extreme work ethic of the dedicated worker may also increase pressure on other workers, ratcheting daily performance demands within an already highly pressured environment. The strategies used by individual women to overcome discrimination may therefore help entrench practices which make competition between workers more intense and help maintain gendered inequality regimes.

In conclusion, the interview data suggests that female freelance production workers are disadvantaged by motherhood regardless of their parental status. Participants' comments show that women who are mothers are regarded, by both males and females, as less reliable workers, unable or unwilling to give the total organisational commitment expected of film industry

workers. In contrast, women who remain childless are criticised for problems created by their perceived over-identification with work and their failure to embrace family life. Ultimately, gendered social conventions continue to define all women as flawed workers unable to successfully enact the film industry ideal of the individualised and committed freelance production worker.

## Discussion

This research explored the psychosocial dynamics contributing to the creation and maintenance of gendered inequality within the Wellington film industry, revealing the ways in which traditional cultural norms concerning parenting impacted on women's careers within the industry. The findings support Acker's earlier research into gendered inequality regimes within organisations and show that patterns of gendered discrimination continue to exist within the New Zealand film industry. Female film production workers in Wellington entered an environment in which the ostensibly gender neutral image of the dedicated and autonomous freelance worker concealed an array of structural arrangements, cultural norms and organisational practices which privileged male workers and disadvantaged women.

Inequality regimes may exist without being consciously or deliberately created and maintained by more powerful groups within organisations. Within this research the highly individualistic culture of film making contributed to the maintenance of inequality regimes by increasing the anxieties which freelancers at all levels had about maintaining job security within a highly precarious labour market. Many writers (Blair, 2001; Lee, 2012) have pointed out that the structure of film making ensures that freelance production workers see themselves as continuously responsible for creating and maintaining their careers through their own actions and choices. The power of individual agency therefore becomes exaggerated within the industry and many problems which have their roots within the wider structural context become redefined as the individual's personal responsibility or choice. This creates high levels of ambivalence and uncertainty within the workforce and leads to risk avoidant behaviour on the part of more senior members of the profession. Once women become defined as either unreliable because they are mothers, or difficult to work with if they are childfree, it becomes logical to avoid employing specific women because of their perceived risk to job security and organisational functioning rather than because of any deliberate and conscious desire to discriminate against women as a category of worker.

The intense individualism of the film industry also means that women's choices, which are heavily influenced by working conditions within the industry, become disconnected from their structural roots. Both male and female respondents emphasised individual agency and choice when describing women's career strategies. While women within the industry clearly do have a considerable amount of agency it is apparent from the data presented here, and from other studies of the film industry, that women's choices are often made as a response to conditions that are definitely not of their own choosing. Female film production workers need to self-regulate their fertility to a greater extent than males in order to succeed within an industry which demands unlimited commitment from the workforce and perceives parenting as a primarily female activity. Conversely, women with children are often faced with practical problems and prejudices which leave them with few alternatives but to self-select out of the industry. The ideology of personal choice obscures the ways in which the structure and culture of the film industry excludes women and ensures that women's lack of career progression is seen as their personal responsibility rather than a consequence of gendered inequality regimes. This has adverse consequences for both men and women as it entrenches organisational practices which exclude all workers who

want to combine their work and personal lives in a more balanced manner.

Lauzen (2014) has accused the Hollywood film production industry of 'gender inertia' and suggested that Hollywood power holders, who are overwhelmingly male, have little genuine interest in improving women's position within the industry. Lauzen (2014) argues that the large proportion of women who quit the film industry in their mid-thirties limits diversity and deprives the industry of a large pool of fresh ideas and highly skilled and experienced workers. While this is undoubtedly true, this pattern of withdrawal also gives the industry a hardworking and committed female labour force who conveniently dispense with themselves when they no longer serve the industry's needs. Similar patterns have been observed in other industries and function to reinforce male dominance of the upper echelons of many organisations (Cahusac and Kanji, 2013). Industry attitudes and practices are therefore unlikely to change simply because large numbers of highly skilled women regularly leave the industry.

Acker (2006) notes that organisational change programmes designed to minimise inequality often fail or achieve limited gains. She suggests that failure often occurs because change programmes only address some aspects of the complex array of loosely interconnected, but deeply entrenched structures, practices, norms and sectional interests which create and maintain inequality regimes. Combating gendered inequality regimes within the film industry is therefore likely to require a range of interventions rather than a single panacea. These need to address both structural features of the industry and the highly individualistic ethos of film work. The findings of this research suggest that gendered inequality regimes within the Wellington film industry were partly created and sustained by attempts to reduce real and perceived risk at both the organisational level and the individual level. Targeting interventions at the minimisation of risk would therefore be one strategy for starting to dismantle gendered inequality regimes within the industry. This could be done in various ways ranging from collective employment conditions which give workers a stronger rationale for seeking common ground to subsidies for films which employ specified percentages of women.

Within New Zealand, government policy concerning the film industry is currently framed primarily in economic terms (Prince, 2010). Where creative industries policy does consider film production workers it tends to portray the industry as offering self-actualising and desirable work experiences rather than highly precarious working conditions. This perspective is regrettable as appropriate government intervention through both legislative and policy initiatives could make a considerable difference to working conditions within the industry. A less precarious working environment, which provided both men and women with more security and lessened freelancers' very real anxieties about securing employment would benefit both men and women and diminish the need for the defensive employment practices which contributed so strongly to the reproduction of the gendered inequality regimes observed in this research.

*JOCELYN HANDY is a Senior Lecturer in organisational psychology in the School of Psychology, Massey University. She is interested in qualitative research into precarious labour and has recently been studying the film industry and agency work. Email: j.a.handy@massey.ac.nz*

*LORRAINE ROWLANDS is a registered organisational psychologist with over 10 years' experience working in I/O and related HR roles. She is currently the General Manager, Organisational Development & Strategy, at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.*

## References

- Acker, J. (1992). From sex roles to gendered institutions. *Contemporary Sociology*, 21(5), 565-569.
- Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes: Gender, class and race in organizations. *Gender & Society*, 20(4), 441-464.
- Acker, J. (2009). From glass ceiling to inequality regimes. *Sociologie du Travail*, 51(2), 199-217.
- Adkins, L. (2004). Reflexivity: freedom or habit of gender? *Sociological Review*, 20(6), 21-42.
- Antcliff, V. (2005). Broadcasting in the 1990s: competition, choice and inequality? *Media, Culture and Society*, 27(6), 841-859.
- Antcliff, V., Saundry, R. & Stuart, M. (2007). Networks and social capital in the UK television industry: The weakness of weak ties. *Human Relations*, 6(2), 371-393.
- Ashcraft, K. (2013). The glass slipper: Incorporating occupational identity in management studies. *Academy of Management Review*, 38(1), 6-31.
- Bakker, R. (2010). Taking stock of temporary organizational forms: A systematic review and research agenda. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 12(4), 466-486.
- Banks, M. & Hesmondhalgh, D. (2009). Looking for work in the creative industries. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 15(4), 415-430.
- Banks, M. & Milestone, K. (2011). Individualization, gender and cultural work. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 18(1), 73-89.
- Bechky, B. (2006). Gaffers, gofers and grips: role based coordination in temporary organizations. *Organization Science*, 17(1), 3-21.
- Beck, U. & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization*. London: Sage.
- Bielby, D. (2009). Gender inequality in the culture industries: Women and men writers in film and television. *Sociologie du Travail*, 51, 237-252.
- Blair, H. (2001). You're only as good as your last job: The labour process and labour market in the British film industry. *Work, Employment and Society*, 15(3), 149-694.
- Britton, D. & Logan, L. (2008). Gendered organizations: Progress and prospects. *Sociology Compass*, 2, 107-121.
- Bryant, L. & Jaworski, K. (2011). Gender, embodiment and place: The gendering of skills shortages in the Australian mining and food and beverage processing industries. *Human Relations*, 64(10), 1345-1367.
- Cahusac, E. & Kanji, S. (2014). Giving up: How gendered organizational cultures push mothers out. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 21(1), 57-70.
- Castilla, E. (2012). Gender, race and the new (merit-based) employment relationship. *Industrial Relations*, 51(1), 528-562.
- Christopherson, S. (2008). Beyond the self-expressive creative worker: An industry perspective on the entertainment industry. *Theory Culture and Society*, 25(7-8), 73-95.
- Coles, A. (2013). *Focus on women: A report on gender (in)equality in the Canadian independent screen-based production industry*. Canadian Unions for Equality on Screen: Toronto.
- Crump, B., Logan, K. & McIlroy, A. (2007). Does gender still matter? A study of the views of women in the ICT industry in New Zealand. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 14(4), 349-370.
- Daskalaki, M. (2010). Building 'bonds' and 'bridges': Linking tie evolution and network identity in the creative industries. *Organization Studies*, 31(12), 1649-1666.
- Dawson, M. (2012). Reviewing the critique of individualisation: The disembedded and embedded theses. *Acta Sociologica*, 55(4), 305-319.
- DiTomaso, N., Post, C. & Parks-Yancy, R. (2007). Workforce diversity and inequality: Power, status and numbers. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33, 473-501.
- Ebbers, J. & Winjberg, N. (2009). Latent organizations in the film industry: Contracts, rewards and resources. *Human Relations*, 62(7), 987-1009.
- Eikhof, D. & Warhurst, C. (2013). The promised land? Why social inequalities are systemic in the creative industries. *Employees Relations*, 35(5), 495-508.
- Eveline, J. & Booth, M. (2002). Gender and sexuality in discourses of managerial control: The case of women miners. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 9(5), 556-578.
- Fernandez-Mateo, I. (2009). Cumulative gender disadvantage in contract employment. *American Journal of Sociology*, 114(4), 871-923.
- Follows, S. (2014) Gender within film crews. [http://stephenfollows.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Gender\\_Within\\_Film\\_Crews](http://stephenfollows.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Gender_Within_Film_Crews)
- French, L. (2014). Gender then, gender now: surveying women's participation in Australian film and television industries. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 28(20), 188-200.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.

- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gill, R. (2002). Cool, creative and egalitarian? Exploring gender in project-based new media work. *Information and Communication Studies*, 5(1), 70-89.
- Gill, R. & Pratt, A. (2008). In the social factory? Immaterial labour, precariousness and cultural work. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 25(7), 1-30.
- Grugulis, I. & Stoyanova, D. (2012). Social capital and networks in film and TV: Jobs for the boys? *Organization Studies*, 33(10), 1311-1331.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. & Baker, S. (2010). 'A very complicated version of freedom': Conditions and experiences of creative labour in three cultural industries. *Poetics*, 38(1), 4-10.
- Hesmondhalgh D & Baker, S. (2011). *Creative labour: Media work in three cultural industries*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Healy, G., Bradley, H. & Forson, C. (2011). Intersectional sensibilities in analysing inequality regimes in public sector organizations. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 18(5), 467-487.
- Holgate, J. & McKay, S. (2009). Equal opportunities policies: how effective are they in increasing diversity in the audio-visual industries' freelance labour market? *Media, Culture and Society*, 31(1), 151-163.
- Kelan, E. (2009). *Performing gender at work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lauzen, M. (2014). The celluloid ceiling: Behind the scenes employment of women on the top 250 films of 2013. *Centre for the Study of Women in Television and Film*. San Diego University: San Diego. C.A.
- Lee, D. (2012). The ethics of insecurity: Risk, individualisation and value in British independent television production. *Television and New Media*, 13(6), 480-497.
- Lindgren, M., Packendorff, J. & Sergi, V. (2014). Thrilled by the discourse, suffering through the experience: Emotions in project based work. *Human Relations*, 67(11), 1383-1412. DOI: 10.1177/0018726713520022.
- McKinlay, A. & Smith, C. (2009). *Creative labour: working in the creative industries*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. London: Sage.
- Murray, C. & Gollmitzer, M. (2012). Escaping the precarity trap: A call for creative labour policy. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 18(4), 419-438.
- Perrons, D. (2003). The new economy and work-life balance: Conceptual explorations and a case study of new media. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 10(1), 66-93.
- Prince, R. (2010). Policy transfer as policy assemblage: Making policy for the creative industries in New Zealand. *Environment and Planning*, 42, 169-186.
- Proctor-Thomson, S. (2010). Ethnicity and gender at work. *Management Learning*, 41(3), 366-370.
- Randle, K., Leung, W. & Kurian, J. (2007). *Creating Difference*. Creative Industries Research and Consultancy Unit: University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, U.K.
- Rowlands, L. & Handy, J. (2012). An addictive environment: New Zealand film production workers' subjective experiences of project-based labour. *Human Relations*, 65(5), 657-680.
- Skillset. (2008). *Balancing children and work in the audio visual industries*. London: Skillset.
- Skillset. (2010). *Women in the creative media industries*. London: Skillset.
- Smith, V. (2010). Review article: Enhancing employability: Human, cultural, and social capital in an era of turbulent unpredictability. *Human Relations*, 63(2), 279-303.
- Spade, J. & Valentine, C. (2010). *The Kaleidoscope of gender: Prisms, patterns and possibilities*. London: Sage.
- Sullivan, S. & Baruch, Y. (2009). Advances in career theory and research: A critical review and agenda for future exploration. *Journal of Management*, 35(6), 1542-1571.
- Statistics New Zealand, (2012). Wider lens brings screen employees into focus. [http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/industry\\_sectors/film\\_and\\_television/wider-lens-screen-employees-focus.aspx#top](http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/industry_sectors/film_and_television/wider-lens-screen-employees-focus.aspx#top)
- Tams, S. & Arthur, M. (2010). New directions for boundaryless careers: Agency and interdependence in a changing world. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. 31(5), 629-646.
- Taylor, S. (2011). Negotiating oppositions and uncertainties: Gendered conflicts in creative identity work. *Feminism and Psychology*, 21(3), 354-371.
- Ursell, G. (2006). Working in the media. In Hesmondhalgh, D. (Ed). *Media production*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Wee, L. & Brooks, A. (2012). Negotiating gendered subjectivity in the enterprise culture: metaphor and entrepreneurial discourses. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 19(6), 573-591.
- Williams, C., Muller, C. & Kilanski, K. (2012). Gendered organizations in the new economy. *Gender and Society*, 26(4), 549-573.
- Wood, G. & Newton, J. (2006). Childlessness and women managers: 'Choice', context and discourses. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 1(4), 338-358.

**Table One: Participant details**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Years in industry</b>	<b>Work areas</b>
Male =11	Mid- 30s-50+	8 partnered 3 single 6 with dependent children 3 childless	7-30 years 8 still in industry, 3 left within past year	Model making, special effects, artist dept, dialogue coach, design engineer, assistant director, director
Female =13	Mid- 20s-50	8 partnered 5 single 5 with dependent children 7 childless	3-20 years 7 still in industry, 6 left within past two years	Makeup, sculptor, designer, producer, casting supervisor, production manager, transport co-ordinator