Unraveling Appalachia's Rural Economy: The Case of a Flexible Manufacturing Network

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Many households and communities in rural Appalachia engage in diverse economic strategies that often are ignored in analyses of economic restructuring in the region (Gaventa, Smith, and Willingham 1990; Obermiller and Philliber 1994). This paper highlights the complex nature of rural economies and particularly informal activities that intersect with kinship and community-based social networks. Different scales of economic activity are examined as shifts in global capital impact and are influenced by local strategies that include formal as well as informal activities. This analysis uses a case study of a network of home-based machine-knitters to illustrate these social and spatial dimensions of Appalachia's rural economy.1

Many scholars argue that the diversity of livelihoods increases during periods of economic restructuring as secure, well-paid jobs in manufacturing and primary sector activities have been lost, forcing many households to engage in multiple income-generating activities (Jensen, Cornwall, and Findeis 1995; Tickamyer and Latimer 1993). In addition, the effect of recent welfare reform on access to public support contributes to the need for households to employ multiple livelihood strategies (Dilger et al. 2000). These economic and political shifts impact the role of community support systems and household gender relations as more women enter the workforce. This discussion reveals how a rural economic network, Appalachian By Design (ABD),2 provides potentially viable
income-generating activities that operate at multiple scales within dynamic social networks.

The paper is organized into six sections. Following the introduction, the conceptual framework situates the analysis within literature on the informal sector and rural studies. The discussion draws from international perspectives, but focuses on literature from Appalachia that analyzes the importance of informal sector activities to household and community economic strategies. The third section examines how women's economic activities in this region are embedded in socioeconomic conditions that marginalize many women in low-status jobs. The research methodology outlined in the fourth section uses feminist perspectives to understand how rural women draw from community-based networks to help support their families. Specifically, intensive interviews, focus groups, and analyses of descriptive data on economic activities provide the research methods for this project.

Section five examines the impact of a rural economic network on household income generating strategies of its mostly female members. The case study of Appalachian By Design highlights how women's lives are grounded in the multiple and complex nature of rural economic strategies. The conclusion addresses the multiple strategies that characterize rural areas and particularly their intersection with complex social networks at the local and household scales.

**Rural Restructuring and Informal Economic Strategies: A Review of the Literature**

The formal economy, or economic activity that involves reported, regulated, or waged labor, dominates scholarly understandings of the Appalachian economy. Such interpretations often eclipse the multiple economic strategies used by households and communities within this predominately rural region. Moreover, much of the literature on the informal economy primarily focuses on experiences within urban areas in developing countries (e.g., Portes, Castells, and Benton 1989; Teltscher 1993); therefore, rural ones, like Appalachia, are often neglected. This analysis draws from Appalachian scholarship that recognizes the multiple and diverse aspects of informal activities to develop a broad definition of the informal economy (Oberhauser and Turnage 1999; Halperin
Although most scholars express the importance of avoiding specific definitions of the informal economy, they situate their research within standard definitions of the concept. Such standard definitions include the one by Manuel Castells and Alejandro Portes that maintains that the informal economy is a “process of income generation characterized by one central feature: it is unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated” (1989, 12, emphasis theirs). They claim this lack of regulation is key to understanding the informal economy across the globe.

In contrast, this case study argues that the informal economy represents a continuum of strategies from simple subsistence to home-based flexible manufacturing. While the work of the home-based knitters examined here does not fall entirely outside the realm of economic regulation, there are several reasons for embracing such a broad definition of the informal economy. First, the informal sector corresponds to a return to older labor processes, particularly home-based work (Benton 1990; Gringeri 1993). Second, the emphasis on state regulation in defining the informal economy has some scholars asserting that we need not examine forms of economic activity that “we almost expect to escape regulation” (Sassen 1994, 2292). Those, Saskia Sassen asserts, are merely small cracks against the institutions of the formal economy, as opposed to the “informalization of activities generally taking place in [it]” (2292). Thus, it is difficult to understand the informal economy in Appalachia, or any other global region for that matter, without considering economic activities that comprise all those “small cracks.” Residents of the region, particularly women, have long engaged in multiple forms of income generation, and the research must be considered within that reality. The following section synthesizes some of the literature on rural restructuring and the informal economy as a form of alternative economic strategy within rural areas, both globally and in Appalachia.

Informalization of Rural Economies

Much of the literature in rural studies tends to focus on the official or formal market economy and neglects alternative, or informal, forms of work and the social relations that influence these
economic strategies. In contrast, Martin Phillips (1994) argues that our collective, scholarly knowledge of rural places, spaces, and economies is directly linked to those activities that occur within the private sphere of the home and the patriarchal gender relations that surround them. Additionally, Raymond Pahl (1984, 319) reminds us that “[informal economic] strategies will clearly vary enormously between different industrial societies,” but there are two consistent themes throughout analyses of the rural informal economy within the First World. First, informal strategies are common responses to periods of economic change, particularly contemporary global economic restructuring and, second, patterns of participation within informal economic strategies are gendered (see also Lawson 1995 and Hays-Mitchell 1993).

Analyses of the relationship between gender, informal economic strategies, and the restructuring of rural economies are illustrated here through several case studies. Pahl (1984) asserts that global economic restructuring has resulted in the loss of local industries on Britain’s Isle of Sheppey. Moreover, he identifies how households on Sheppey engage in a number of informal strategies to recover wages traditionally earned by men who worked in heavy industry.

In another example of large-scale forms of production that link to informal activities, Christine Gringeri (1993) examines how home-based work has been incorporated into restructuring of the U.S. automobile industry. Parts of the production process have been spatially dispersed from a central urban plant into individual rural Midwestern households. This flexible production of individual automotive parts relies on home-based, low-waged work that requires little formal training and is typically performed by women (Gringeri 1993). Gringeri’s work helps broaden scholarly definitions of the informal economy to recognize a continuum of strategies that include home-based manufacturing, such as those who work for automotive suppliers. This perspective of the informal economy also allows exploration of its various local manifestations.

Although much of this discussion has focused on the household scale and gender in relationship to the informal economy, social class and formal sector jobs also affect participation in informal activities and particularly those such as home-based work (Oberhauser 1993). For example, Margaret Nelson and Joan Smith’s
(1999) research on the informal economy and the restructuring of the economy in rural Vermont demonstrates that individuals who hold “good jobs” and have access to greater resources are more likely to engage in the informal economy than people with “bad jobs” and fewer resources. Appalachian By Design, the knitting network that serves as the case study for this article, provides a somewhat different example where rural women, regardless of social class, can gain access to the financial resources, training, technical assistance, and markets that are necessary to effectively engage in the informal economy.

Echoing Phillips’s statement that rural studies tends to neglect the social dimensions of informal economic strategies, Barbara Ellen Smith (1998) claims that the story of Appalachia and its economy is predominately a story about male workers and formal employment. She argues that nearly three decades of research within Appalachian studies has focused on class struggle and the troubled relationship between the region’s primary industries of coal, timber, and its male workers. That story, however, has begun to change. Within the last ten years, scholars of the region have begun to examine the recent decline in formal sector employment opportunities in the context of the informalization of labor. As mines close and manufacturers flee for further reaches within the U.S. and Global South (Gaventa 1994), residents of the region have developed, or expanded, their reliance on informal strategies, similar to residents within other restructured rural regions across the globe (Benton 1990; Mencken and Maggard 1999; Fitchen 1991).

Many analyses of Appalachia’s informal economy emphasize the significance of market relationships within the region’s informal economy. Rhoda Halperin (1990), for example, argues that informal strategies within the region are intimately linked to a market system that connects rural and urban portions of the region. Moreover, Thomas Lyson, Gilbert Gillespie, and Duncan Hilchey (1995) assert that market systems, such as farmers’ markets, serve as “intermediating structures” between the formal and informal sectors. Others contend that these linkages between rural producers and urban consumers are part of the post-Fordist production processes that define the restructuring of the region’s economy (Oberhauser and Turnage 1999).

In addition to arguments that address issues at the international,
regional, and local scales of analysis, scholars of Appalachia’s informal economy assert the significance of the more intimate scale of the household and gender relations (Fitchen 1991; Halperin 1990; Oberhauser 1995a). Although employment in the Central Appalachian coalfields includes a history of job segregation based on gender, scholarship on the history of women in the region confirms that they were actively involved in many spheres of economic activity, including waged work (Pudup 1990; Greene 1990). Moreover, their engagement in informal strategies, such as domestic work for wealthier families, raising livestock, gardening, taking in boarders, baking in communal ovens, and bartering, proved vital in a region where employment was based on the boom and bust cycles of extractive industries. This history underscores the importance of multiple income-generating strategies in households across the region.

Several rural sociologists argue that participation in informal economic activities is widespread and directly related to the region’s rurality as well as the restructuring of its economy (Tickamyer and Wood 1998; Jensen, Cornwall, and Findeis 1995; Mencken and Maggard 1999). In particular, Leif Jensen, Gretchen Cornwall, and Jill Findeis (1995) claim that access to uniquely rural resources, such as land and outbuildings, shapes one’s ability to engage in the informal economy. Therefore, the poorest are not always the ones who can rely on informal work, but, instead, the near poor. Others argue that informal strategies allow households to replace lost wages within mining and manufacturing as well as to supplement the relatively low wages earned within the region’s rising service sector economy (Mencken and Maggard 1999).

This overview indicates that recent scholarship on rural economic strategies increasingly recognizes the importance of informal sector activities to household and community livelihoods. International and national examples provide interesting comparisons to analyses of Appalachia’s rural economy and especially the relationship between gender, social class, informal strategies, and contemporary economic restructuring. The case study of a flexible manufacturing network in this article serves to further expand our understanding of what defines informal economic activities in the Appalachian region, as well as the types of rural residents who engage in them.
Gender and Economic Strategies in Rural Appalachia

Many women in rural Appalachia weave together a variety of both formal and informal economic resources to help support their households. Appalachian literature, however, has largely ignored the complex and diverse nature of women’s economic activities and how alternative economic strategies are embedded in local contexts. This analysis illustrates how homework and network participation in rural Appalachia are gendered economic activities that intersect with social networks in both communities and households. These activities provide income for a portion of the region’s rural population and enable many women to overcome physical isolation and lack of sustainable employment, while balancing work and family needs and responsibilities (Oberhauser, Weiss, and Waugh 1996). Alternative means of income generation also represent important forms of resistance to women’s exclusion from many forms of formal employment and often foster financial independence and self-empowerment.

Labor exploitation and rural isolation have contributed significantly to the economic marginalization of many rural Appalachian women (Greene 1990; Oberhauser 1995a). Parts of this region have been historically dependent on extractive industries and other related economic sectors, as well as a variety of informal activities. Employment in the formal sector has been clearly divided along gender lines (with some important exceptions), with men working in the mines, mills, and factories, and women largely involved in related service sector employment or household reproductive labor. The impact of gender relations and divisions of labor on livelihood strategies has shaped the economic history and development of rural Appalachia.

Since the 1970s, employment shifts associated with economic restructuring in this region have contributed to the further economic marginalization of many rural households and communities (Couto 1995). The economic recession of the 1980s was particularly difficult for workers in the coal mining industry as layoffs and shutdowns produced high unemployment rates. In addition, the service-oriented shifts in the Appalachian economy have created more low-wage, part-time employment and female-dominated jobs (Oberhauser 1995b).

Data on employment by major industry group in West Virginia
and the United States reflects the impact of restructuring at these two different scales (see Figure 1). West Virginia has a greater dependence on mining (3 percent of employment) than at the national level (1 percent) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2000a; West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1999). In addition, West Virginia has a lower percent of employment in the oftentimes higher-waged, full-time, and union-organized manufacturing sector (12 percent versus 15 percent). While service sector employment in West Virginia remains consistent with the national annual average, it is largely made up of retail trade employment which includes lower paid, part-time jobs in eating and drinking establishments and food and general merchandise stores. Figure 1 also illustrates the higher concentration of employment (20 percent) in government jobs in West Virginia as opposed to 16 percent at the national level. These jobs are particularly located within the local government sub-sector and are lower paid (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1999).

Likewise, data on women’s employment in major industry groups in West Virginia and the United States demonstrates their lack of viable employment opportunities and concentration in lower status jobs. Women in West Virginia comprise only 5 percent of mining employment compared to 14 percent at the national level (see Figure 2). In addition, West Virginia women are less represented in manufacturing and transportation and public utility sectors (TCPU) than their national counterparts. While the concentration of women employed in the major trade sector in West Virginia and the United States is comparable at 48 percent, women constitute 60 percent of workers employed in the dominant retail trade sub-sectors in the state (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1999). These sub-sectors include employment in eating and drinking establishments and food and general merchandise stores with average annual wages of $11,782 for 1998 (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1999). Moreover, this work is largely part-time and offers few employee benefits.

Finally, women in West Virginia are highly concentrated in the financial, insurance, and real estate (FIRE), service, and government sectors. Within the service sector in particular, women constitute 82 percent of the employment in health services, such as nursing, personal care, and hospital work, and also are largely rep-
Figure 1

Percentage of Workers in Major Industry Groups, United States and West Virginia, 1998

*Transportation and Public Utilities
**Financial, Insurance, and Real Estate

Figure 2

Percent of Women Workers in Major Industry Groups, United States and West Virginia, 1998

*Transportation and Public Utilities
**Financial, Insurance, and Real Estate
resented in business and social services employment. In West Virginia, employment within the service sector, of which 65 percent is female, had an average annual wage of $22,260 in 1998 (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1999).

Wage differentials between men and women in these various sectors contribute to lower incomes for women in West Virginia. In 1990, women workers, including those in part-time employment, earned an average of forty-five cents for every dollar earned by men. Translated to median annual incomes, West Virginia women earned $7,287 compared to men's annual income of $16,030 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990).

Despite the growth in certain female-dominated sectors, such as services, labor force participation among West Virginia women remains relatively low. For example, the labor force participation rate in 1998 was 47 percent (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1998a). Comparatively, this figure is well below the national rate of 60 percent for women in the same year (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1999). Differences in state and national unemployment figures for 1998 should also be mentioned here, with women in West Virginia at 6 percent and women in the United States at only 4 percent (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1999). Data on labor force participation and unemployment rates at the county level, particularly where many of the knitters in this study reside (see Figure 3), reveals the relatively poor economic opportunities in these areas. Labor force participation rates for women in Barbour, Calhoun, Gilmer, Monroe, and Summers Counties range from 31 to 43 percent (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1999). Additionally, unemployment remains high in these areas, ranging from 9 percent in Pocahontas County to 16 percent in Calhoun County (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1999).

One consequence of the relatively low labor force participation rates and high unemployment for West Virginia women is poverty; 21 percent of women live in poverty, compared to 15 percent at the national level (Hannah 1995). Low rates of economic activity are also related to the fact that for many rural women, formal employment outside the home is not a feasible income-generating strategy. This may be due to transportation barriers, domestic responsibilities, or inadequate training or work experience, as well as low pay
Figure 3

Location of Appalachian By Design Knitters

[Map showing the location of Appalachian By Design Knitters with a source credit: Appalachian By Design (1999).]
and few benefits (Oberhauser, Weiss, and Waugh 1996). Participation in a network such as ABD, however, allows women to overcome these barriers and foster social connections and community relationships. For many women, alternative economic strategies oftentimes provide the support and resources to care for children or elderly people and maintain other aspects of the household. This discussion demonstrates how rural Appalachian women have adopted diverse livelihood strategies to support households and communities in the context of the various challenges they face in the formal sector.

Overall, contemporary research on gender in Appalachia has expanded our understanding of rural economies, household strategies, and particularly how gender plays a role in unequal access to viable employment opportunities and resources (Sachs 1996; Tickamyer and Latimer 1993; Oberhauser 1997). This project highlights how Appalachian By Design, a knitting network that links home-based individual contractors, is embedded in the socioeconomic context of rural Appalachia and contributes to analyses of gender and economic restructuring in the region.

**Researching Women and a Rural Economic Network**

The methodological approach to this research shapes our understanding of the region and its people as they engage in multiple livelihood strategies. First, both researchers and subjects are seen as active agents in the research process. This is consistent with feminist research in that it highlights the importance of reflexivity, or the continual assessment of the researcher’s position in the field, and it attempts to overcome hierarchical relations between the researcher and the researched (Dyck 1993; McDowell 1992). In this project, the researchers related to the subjects in multiple ways, depending on the context. Additionally, qualitative methods such as intensive interviews enabled the researchers to uncover diverse aspects of women’s economic activities and provide more comprehensive records of their experiences and attitudes.

Finally, participatory methods were utilized to involve people in identifying the socioeconomic and political processes that affect them, thus encouraging them to develop solutions that are appropriate for their needs. While some critics of participatory methods claim they are a form of manipulation or intervention, the tech-
Techniques used in this approach can act as a catalyst for empowerment "through which individuals, as well as local groups and communities, identify and shape their lives and the kind of society in which they live" (Slocum et al. 1995, 4). This project was unique in that it included the knitters, ABD staff, and the researchers in most stages of the project, from its development to its implementation, analysis, and finally, disseminating the results. Overall, the research methodology and methods employed in this project support the conceptual approach by analyzing the complexity and culturally-embedded nature of gendered economic strategies through the experiences of individual subjects.

Of the nearly sixty members in ABD, twenty-four participated directly in the study through intensive interviews or focus groups. Results were also analyzed from the annual survey administered to all of the network members. Most of the interviews took place in the participants’ homes, except for three telephone interviews and one in a local restaurant. The interviews addressed household demographics and the socioeconomic background of the homeworkers as well as the motivation for, and implications of, involvement in these economic activities. In addition, three focus groups with a total of fifteen homeworkers provided a means of obtaining information about the network and the members, and encouraged participation and interaction among the members. Overall, the methods used in this research examined the effectiveness of this network to provide goods for rapidly changing markets as well as to develop viable income-generating strategies for women in an impoverished rural area.

This project entails a close relationship and communication between the network and the researchers, continually developing to meet the goals of ABD as well as those of academic research. Although agendas sometimes differ, the researchers maintain open communication with the directors of the network. Consequently, involvement with ABD has evolved significantly over the past seven years from casual interaction to collaborative research and cooperation with the organization, often requiring extensive effort and time. Initially, the researchers were regarded with some ambivalence as outsiders, but over time the members and staff of ABD have gained an increased understanding of how the research complements some of their goals. For example, they have been able to
use some of the research results for evaluation of their network and in grantwriting efforts. Overall, these participatory approaches address broader questions relating to the integration of academic research and activism, and the utilization of collaborative relationships to empower participants.

**Linking Households and Communities: Case Study of a Rural Economic Network**

Having examined the growing importance of multiple income strategies in the context of a changing rural Appalachian economy, the following discussion draws from the case study of Appalachian By Design to illustrate how household income generation intersects with gender and social networks in a regional economic network. The gendered aspects of members’ involvement in home-based work, from the types of activity to expenditure patterns are examined. This section also analyzes how this form of income generation fits into the overall picture of informal activities and household strategies of the knitters as well as the financial contribution and spatio-temporal dimensions that make home and work converge.

**Appalachian By Design as a Regional Economic Network**

The informal nature of the network is evident in its production and marketing activities that lie outside the formal workplace and their intersections with household relations and community networks. One of the most important aspects of the knitters’ involvement in ABD is the access it provides to national and international markets. As one knitter commented, “there is a market out there . . . people will spend one hundred to two hundred dollars for a handmade sweater from Appalachia . . . it fills a niche.” ABD seeks to fill this niche by linking the knitters and their products to diverse and sustainable markets. The organization has contracts with design companies in addition to their own wholesale line of home products, hand-loomed textiles, and children’s knitwear. In 1998, the knitters produced more than 8,000 items for seven companies and ABD’s wholesale line (Appalachian By Design 1999). The development of ABD’s own wholesale line, a more recent expansion of the organization, was a strategy adopted in order to provide more steady work for the knitters.
Work that is done by knitters through the ABD network is considered here as informal activity because it is one of the many economic strategies outside the formal waged sector that contributes to household income in periods of restructuring and economic hardship. ABD also operates very differently from formal sector businesses in several aspects. First, social networks are an important part of ABD’s recruitment and training process. Several knitters joined the network as a result of their contact with friends or family members who are involved in or know about the organization. These networks are also important to knitters who share advice about and provide support for various aspects of their involvement in ABD.\(^7\) One knitter got into the network through her neighbor and benefited from her assistance on several occasions.

When Gloria and I did the class, it was six weeks till I got my first order with ABD. And they got my friend Diane, who doesn’t live very far from me, who had been knitting I think since ABD had started. And she would come to my house and I would set my machine up and she kind of coached me through my first sweater. ... It really helps, you don’t get discouraged.

Second, ABD uses social networks to provide leadership training and governance that involve directors, staff, knitters, and board members (Appalachian By Design 1999). For example, ABD encourages knitters to serve on its steering committee where decisions are made concerning training and operational issues, as well as to take part in peer training and support. This process contributes to the participatory nature of the organization because the steering committee informs knitters of pertinent issues and also seeks feedback. As a result, knitters feel like they are a part of the network despite the geographical barriers and widely dispersed nature of the network.

Finally, ABD is continually assessing its goal of creating a viable industry with quality jobs and evaluates its commitments and responsibilities to the knitters through both formal and informal means. Annual surveys are conducted with the knitters and feedback is regularly sought via the newsletter and toll-free number. Periodically, the organization also brings in outside expertise to help review and improve processes. ABD is connected to numerous community organizations in the Central Appalachian region that share the mission of rural job creation.
ABD as an Economic Strategy

This discussion offers a brief socioeconomic profile of the homeworkers and the economic aspects of their participation in the network. The economic aspects of ABD remain vital to its operation and are a major reason why members join the network. Of those members who responded to the annual survey, 46 percent have household incomes below $28,000, which is 168 percent of the poverty level for a family of four in West Virginia (Appalachian By Design 2000). Figure 4 indicates a somewhat bimodal distribution of members by income category in which 13 percent earn less than $10,800 and 13 percent earn above $38,000. Although there is a disparate distribution of incomes among the members of the network, the majority are above the poverty level. Additionally, earnings from participation in ABD vary among the members. Forty-two percent of those who responded to the survey earned less than $5,000 and 76 percent earned less than $10,000 in 1999. Only 17 percent, or four members, earned more than $10,000 from their homework. While most of the members do not provide the majority of their household incomes, their earnings are important supplemental incomes. One of the reasons for this is that most of the knitters work part-time at this activity, with two-thirds working twenty-five hours or less in 1999. Seventy-nine percent of the knitters indicated that two or more people contribute to household income and only 17 percent indicated they represented the sole source of income. Approximately one-third of the households receive social security or worker’s compensation, while 4 percent reported receiving food stamps and 8 percent have a medical card (Appalachian By Design 2000).

Many of the members’ economic activities are limited by domestic responsibilities such as child or elder care. Although a minority of the members are of childbearing age, nearly two-thirds have at least one child under eighteen years old. Besides caring for young children, some of the knitters have ill or disabled family members. For example, one of the members chose this type of work because she needs to stay home with her son who has cerebral palsy and her mother-in-law who cannot care for herself.

In addition to training, access to markets, and support for networking, ABD attempts to provide adequate payment for the knitters. Knitters are compensated on a piece rate that is generally...
Figure 4

Household Income of ABD Knitters, 2000

Source: Appalachian By Design Annual Surveys (2000)
above minimum wage, depending on speed, proficiency, and quality of their work. According to ABD (1999), most knitters earn seven to ten dollars per hour. Some knitters have expressed dissatisfaction with this system because of the amount of time, practice, and discipline it takes to become accomplished in knitting work. Earnings are often low during this period and many knitters become frustrated with the quality standards of ABD. In discussing one of her first knitting assignments, a child’s sweater, one knitter stated: “[T]hey [ABD] were paying me something like seven or eight dollars for the sweater. And I think it took me like three weeks to get the first sweater off . . . it was like the nerves and the stress and the, you know . . . but it finally just clicked.”

This situation resulted from the system set up by the network that depends on knitters who can produce quality items. A knitter located in southern West Virginia stated that, “when I calculated the few times that I’ve set down and took a whole piece through, I make around nine dollars an hour . . . that’s when everything is running smooth.” When asked about earnings another knitter from southwest Virginia responded that “when I first started out it was around $250 a month. Then it worked up to around five hundred dollars a month. And at this point I’m about at nine hundred dollars a month . . . I like it there.” The piece rate is a topic of considerable discussion within the network and adjustments are being made to the way in which it is calculated.

In a region where women are historically less likely to work outside the home and the number of families living in poverty is relatively high, women have not contributed significantly to household income. Membership in networks such as ABD can overcome some of the consequences of women’s economic marginalization. One knitter described her involvement in the knitting network as both economically and emotionally empowering.

I hadn’t worked and contributed to the family household since ’91 when I quit and had my kids. My husband had maintained it before he lost his job and everything. It was really nice to be able to have my money. I was contributing to the family in a way I could sneak some money out without feeling guilty. ‘Cause it was money I had earned and I could go out and buy something and I didn’t feel like I had to justify it in the budget . . . So, that’s been kinda nice.
Thus, ABD’s attempts to establish women-owned and -operated businesses and foster feelings of financial independence and self-sufficiency is having an effect on some women as they contribute to their household economic strategies.

**Social and Spatial Dimensions of Home-Based Work**

Members’ participation in the network reflects the importance of social networks and the complex nature of combining home and work. As discussed above, members get involved in ABD through various social networks, and for the opportunity to interact with others and connect to a group outside the household. As one woman stated: “I make friendships. And, you know, it’s not so much like you’re just working . . . it’s sort of like we have a small family type of thing.”

These activities often extend into household economic strategies that involve complicated combinations of formal and informal activities and reinforce the need for multiple income generating strategies. Numerous knitters are involved in informal arrangements for childcare, eldercare, and other services, in addition to their machine knitting. The fluctuation in women’s income generation is especially evident among this group as they juggle domestic work with paid labor. Sue’s story reveals the flexibility required to combine household economic strategies and domestic responsibilities. Her husband quit work to go to school a few years ago. When his unemployment insurance ran out, she found part-time work at a fast food restaurant in addition to working the midnight shift on weekends at a birthing center. This schedule had negative effects on their family life, so she began to explore the possibility of knitting with the network, allowing her to continue to home-school their three children. Her husband contributes a small amount of household income from odd jobs in construction or farming. Her story illustrates how the insecurity that results from part-time and temporary jobs makes this type of activity beneficial for many of the knitters.

The flexibility of homework is also evident in the spatial and temporal dimensions of this informal income generation. The work is often done in living space, such as the dining room, living room, or the bedroom. Some of the knitters took over a separate room or building after a period of time, but this often came with increased
financial support. Their schedules are also often flexible to accommodate household demands, especially among women who are primarily responsible for domestic work. For example, Rachel talks about the intersection of her domestic work with knitting. "It seems to be all meshed together for some reason. . . . Because I can go throw a load of wash in and while that's in the washer I can knit for a while and when that needs to go in the dryer, I can take five minutes and throw it in the dryer. I'm back and forth and seems like it's all one job." Her experience demonstrates the simultaneous nature of home and work in this type of activity.

Finally, the rural nature of the region is a major consideration for home-based work and demonstrates the importance of an informal economic strategy such as home-based work. The fact that nearly two-thirds of the knitters live in rural areas leads to problems finding employment. Women are especially disadvantaged due to lack of access to transportation and affordable childcare. While temporary or part-time jobs in the service sector are relatively common, they also pose problems. One woman described the problems she had finding work in her area as follows:

I did look at going up to Snowshoe [ski resort] to work, and that was probably a good hour drive, and not a very pleasant one. . . . [It] would have entailed a new vehicle, or another vehicle. Even financially it doesn't work out . . . for example, if I went up to Snowshoe you know, just the gas and oil to get up there I'd be lucky if I made twenty dollars a week.

Thus, the rural and isolated nature of many areas in this region and particularly the difficulties it poses in finding viable waged employment is an important aspect of people's employment decisions.

Overall, the geographical context and economic background of rural Appalachia has significant impact on household livelihood strategies. With the increasing decline in primary and secondary sector jobs, the importance of multiple income-generating strategies that include a variety of informal activities is more apparent. This study provides an example of a group of mostly women who generate household income through a rural economic network. Their backgrounds and experiences reveal the socioeconomic dimensions and spatial aspects of this form of economic activity.
Conclusions: (Re)working Gender in Rural Appalachia

This research demonstrates how homework and network participation in rural Appalachia are part of a broader picture of multiple economic strategies situated within both communities and households. The analysis emphasizes the diverse livelihood strategies in rural areas and their intersection with gender and space at multiple scales. As indicated previously, the economic background and geographic context of this region reveal the general patterns of labor exploitation and rural isolation that have contributed to the economic marginalization of many people, especially women. Appalachian’s historical dependence on natural resource industries and manufacturing have limited many women’s access to higher-paid employment opportunities. In addition, many service sector jobs that are increasingly available to women are low paid, part-time, and without benefits. Consequently, there is a greater need for multiple income strategies in households. Gender relations and divisions of labor have thus been important factors in the economic history and development of rural Appalachia and are relevant to both past and present examinations of women’s participation in the region’s economy.

The literature on informalization in diverse international contexts informs this analysis of home-based work in a rural economic network. This analysis also contributes to the literature by critically examining social aspects of informal livelihoods and their intersection with household, community, regional, or international economic strategies. The methodology in this research facilitated the examination of informal networks and the complex social relations, particularly at the household and community level. Specifically, qualitative methods of intensive interviews, focus groups, and participatory methods give significant insight into the dynamics of the homeworkers and the organization of ABD. The researchers positioned themselves as part of the research process, while critically examining and adjusting their relationship to individuals and the organization itself.

Examination of the multiple and diverse nature of livelihoods in rural Appalachia expands our understanding of household economic strategies and the gendered nature of work. The case study of an economic network among self-employed contract knitters reveals the types of activities that work for some people in the rural
areas of Appalachia. Most of the knitters contribute supplemental incomes to their households, revealing the increasing need for additional resources and capital to support families in rural areas. In addition to their earnings, these knitters learn important production and leadership skills that benefit themselves, their households, and communities. This type of network serves as a model for other organizations that offer cooperative entrepreneurial opportunities for rural Appalachian women.

The gendered nature of home-based work is also evident in the knitting network. For example, the flexibility of this type of activity is especially attractive to women who have domestic responsibilities such as childcare. The rural nature of these communities also contributes to the need for alternative types of income generation, especially among women, that does not require traveling long distances on a regular basis. Finally, Appalachian By Design facilitates connections between the informal and formal sectors that have a long history in the region by allowing producers to access national and international markets.

In conclusion, this research probes the complexity of gendered economic strategies in a rural, economically marginalized region by focusing on the connections between households and communities in the context of economic restructuring. The analysis provides a better understanding of the diverse nature of rural economies and attempts to forward a more critical understanding of the Appalachian rural economy that includes innovative and potentially empowering livelihood strategies.

Notes

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2. ABD is a nonprofit training and marketing organization that links individual, self-employed contract knitters throughout the state of West Virginia and areas of western Maryland and southwestern Virginia. ABD was established in 1994 by the Center for Economic Options (Appalachian By Design 1999).
3. This interpretation of the informal economy is distinguishable from analyses that suggest the informal economy is a distinctly Third World phenomenon. Arguments associated with the latter perspective articulate the absence of formal sector activities within the Third World, hence the significance of more informal arrangements such as petty commodity production, family labor, and small-scale enterprises (Santos 1979; Roberts 1994).

4. In 1998, jobs in eating and drinking establishments and food and general merchandise stores in West Virginia constituted 30, 14, and 11 percent of trade employment, respectively. Wal-Mart, an international retail chain, is now the largest employer in the state (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1999).

5. The average annual wage in the major mining sector in West Virginia was $46,963 in 1998 (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1998b).

6. In 1998, manufacturing employment in West Virginia was largely constituted by chemical, lumber and wood, and primary metal production. Women in the state comprised less than 20 percent of those sub-sector and higher-paying manufacturing jobs (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1999). The annual average wage for the major manufacturing sector in West Virginia for 1998 was $34,788 (West Virginia Bureau of Economic Programs 1999).

7. Knitters receive training on the technical, business, and personal aspects of this work from ABD through a training and orientation process, followed by an apprenticeship period. After the initial training, ABD provides ongoing support to and communication with its knitters through order-specific training, a newsletter, a toll-free number, annual meetings, and workshops. The organization also provides loan acquisition assistance to the knitters and facilitates connections between them to create an exchange network of support and problem-solving.

References


