A rich body of literature highlights the contributions of women of the Appalachian region. Women such as author Harriet Arnow, social justice advocate and songwriter Hazel Dickens, healthcare professional Mary Breckenridge, reformer Katherine Pettit, and environmental activist Judy Bonds, have shaped the political, economic, and social landscape of the region. Although the contributions of these well-known names within the field of Appalachian Studies have been significant, an equal number of women’s lives and stories have yet to be documented. The work of Peggy Kemner and Irma Gall of the Lend-A-Hand Center fit into this category. Their experiences illustrate the gendered nature of service provision and ongoing struggle for equality and justice in Appalachian Kentucky.

This paper argues that gender is central to the story of economic and social justice in Appalachia, presenting an overview of the history of the Lend-A-Hand Center, analyzing the organization through the lens of gender, and situating it within the larger context of women’s activism in the region. Based on oral history interviews and participant observation, this project highlights the contributions of this important and little-known rural community service organization.

The Lend-A-Hand Center, located in central Appalachia, provides an interesting case study in the role of women and feminism in service provision in the mountains. Social movements in Appalachia have demonstrated the importance of women’s leadership in initiating change, fostering empowerment, and organizing communities in promoting social justice. Addressing a variety of issues through various means, resistance in Appalachia has often been led by women and the Lend-A-Hand Center is yet another example of this strong tradition.

Building upon previous work of women reformers the Center evidences the central role of women within the organization’s structure and programs. The strength and leadership of Gall and Kemner; their gender-role defying activities and occupations; the prevalence and influence of women volunteers; the programs that addressed women’s issues including midwifery services, Planned Parenthood, and 4-H activities for girls; and the organization’s work towards women’s empowerment all show an embedded awareness of women’s issues and potentials. The founders’ recollection of gendered experiences show the importance of a gendered analysis in order to capture the full nature of organizations in Appalachia.

Gender has become an important tool for analyses of social and economic justice movements in the region as scholars have examined individuals, organizations, and communities in Appalachia. Gender has been a central component of organizing, service work, and a rallying call for mobilizing resistance, fostering community cohesion, and improving the lives of and meeting the needs of Appalachians.

Exploring women’s roles in social and economic justice efforts may be categorized into a number of arenas including women reformers, healthcare issues, workplace and labor issues, coalfield issues, environmental justice, community-based development, and the arts.

Much has been written about women reformers in the mountains from educational pioneers and settlement school workers (Blackwell 1998; Messinger 2010, 2015; Shapiro 1978; Stone and Pettit 1997; Whisnant 1982) to healthcare professionals (Barney 2000; Bartlett 2008;
Breckinridge 1981) women made important early contributions to communities throughout the region. Beginning in the late 1800s, missionaries, social workers, teachers, and nurses came to the region seeking to address social problems while promoting Progressive-Era traditions and ideologies.

**Health** is another venue in which women have worked toward justice in the region. From health services, to clinics, to granny midwives, to community-based initiatives, gender has been an important component in caring for the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Organizations such as the Frontier Nursing Service and the Mud Creek Clinic evidence the importance of women’s healthcare work in the region (Bhatraju 2013; Cockerham and Keeling 2012; Hall 2000).

The role of women in **work** settings and in **labor** activism has also been relatively well documented. Researchers have highlighted the gendered tactics used in hospital strikes, textile factory strikes, the fast-food industry, and mica plants, showing how gender is negotiated in changing economic situations (Anglin 2002; Hall 1986; Maggard 1999).

Women’s roles in the **coalfields**, including organizing, unionization, working in coalmining, and influence in communities have been highlighted by several scholars seeking to incorporate a gendered analysis of coalfield life. Women’s coalfield activism, gendered tactics, and contestations of authority have been explored by writers seeking a deeper analysis of labor movements (Beckwith 1998; Bingman 1993; Bush 2015; Maggard 1987; Tallichet 1995, 2006).

Scholars studying women’s presence and leadership in **environmental justice** movements in Appalachia have also used the lens of gender to explore complex questions about resistance efforts and challenges (Barry 2012, 2015; Bell 2013; Bell and Braun 2010; Loeb 2007; Smith 2015). Heroes like Widow Combs, Judy Bonds, and Marie Gunnoe evidence the continuing struggle by women to protect their communities and land.

A strong tradition of **women’s community development** efforts and organizations has become a vibrant thread within Appalachian studies scholarship. The exemplary work of individuals like Helen Lewis and Marie Cirillo and programs like the New Opportunity School for Women have made lasting impressions on communities (Cirillo 1993; Hinsdale, Lewis, and Waller 1995; Knight et al. 2002; Lewis 2012; Stephenson 1995, 2012).

The **arts** has also been an important area of Appalachian women’s studies. Many researchers have highlighted the contributions of women writers and analyzed the arts as a venue for gendered political expression (Ackley 2015; Dickens and Malone 2008; Dyer 2000; Engelhardt 2001, 2003; Jentsch and Miller 2005; Romalis 1999; Sharp 1992; Yurchenco 1991). Novels, poetry, visual art, music, and theater have been explored as platforms for social change in the region.

It is within the context of these movements, individuals, institutions, and ideologies that the Lend-A-Hand Center has evolved. An understanding of previous Appalachian studies discourse on the importance of gender and previous work by women reformers provides perspective for the work and contribution of Lend-A-Hand. This project seeks to bring further insights to women’s activism in Appalachia. In following Elizabeth Engelhardt’s (2005:23) suggestion that “perhaps our definition of activism needs to change” this account seeks to go beyond stereotypical portrayals of Appalachian activism to critically examine more subtle forms of resistance to patriarchy and injustice. As Barbara Ellen Smith (1999:8) noted, “Gender subversions, negotiations, and rebellions have often been covert, indirect, and unrecorded.”

The Lend-A-Hand Center, a nondenominational non-profit community service organization in Knox County, Kentucky, has served the Stinking Creek watershed since 1958.
The dream of two women from the North, Irma Gall and Peggy Kemner, the Center has provided a range of services to the community and has greatly impacted many individuals and families in Knox County and beyond. Lend-A-Hand has not only provided much needed help, but has also inspired and empowered people, teaching life skills and presenting opportunities in a poor, underserved area. Through providing health services and other outreach and community activities, the Lend-A-Hand Center has focused on women’s issues while pushing for social justice.

With a 56-year history of health programs including nurse midwife services, a clinic, and home health services; youth programs; adult programs; agricultural programs; education programs; home improvement programs; 4H; volunteer opportunities; and Sunday School, the Center has played a key role in the history and evolution of the Center from its beginnings. Working in a rural, traditionally male-dominated community, the Center has been largely led and staffed by women and has used a variety of tactics to help and empower women in Knox County. Through engaging in and teaching traditionally masculine occupations and skills, providing women’s health services, providing other services for women including childcare and housing, and the organization’s work towards women’s empowerment the Center serves as an example of a different kind of women’s activism in the region. In the face of prejudice, misconceptions, and even violence, the Center has worked to overcome barriers and has witnessed changes in attitude and culture in its 56-year history.

This presentation is part of a larger project documenting the history and work of the Center. This presentation will briefly summarize some of the main ways in which gender can be used to understand the activist work of the organization, especially during the early years of its history.

In the spring of 1958, nurse midwife Peggy Kemner was facing a decision, having finished her schooling and work obligations at the Frontier Nursing Service in Leslie County, Kentucky. She knew her calling was to deliver babies in the home. Irma Gall a schoolteacher and friend from Indiana also working in eastern Kentucky formed the idea to start their own organization where Kemner could deliver babies and provide health services and she could teach school. Gall who had been working for several years with a Church of the Brethren mission thought, Why don’t we set up our own …community center, in which she could be a midwife and do home deliveries, I teach school and support us. (personal communication, January 14, 2012)

The mission of the Center would be to “lend a hand” (I. Gall, personal communication, January 15, 2012). After purchasing a farm on Patterson Branch, and building a bridge over the creek in order to get to the old farmhouse, the women set out to see their dream become a reality.

From then on, Kemner and Gall have served as co-directors of the Center, planning, implementing, and directing different community service programs and living and working in the Stinking Creek watershed. Their work as service providers, educators, and encouragers went against many of the traditional roles for women at the time and helped individuals and families making a profound impact on the day-to-day life of women in the community.

Two women in their mid-20s starting a community service center was not a normal occurrence on Stinking Creek. Gall and Kemner met culture different than their own, that stressed many traditional values and ways of life, especially regarding gender roles. Kemner
noted, “We were women who were doing something different than they did in this community” (personal communication, February 15, 2013). Gall recalled,

One of our biggest drawbacks was that we were two women and there was not much understanding in this community about two women trying to work,…—live by themselves in a house without a man around was completely anti-culture. …. This was not understood, one, that we would do that, the other, that we were self-sufficient, that we cut our own wood and built our own buildings and did our own carpentry work. (personal communication, January 15, 2012)

Gall and Kemner recalled that many women in the area thought they were there to steal their husbands. As a farmer, traditionally a man’s occupation on the Creek, Gall had to deal with some unwanted advances from men she worked with.

The women’s fearlessness and persistence ensured they would be successful in their mission to lend a hand in the face of obstacles. Gall recalled there were “people who thought that if two women were down there [living by themselves] they surely needed men to come and see them at certain times of night” (personal communication, December 29, 2011). The women dealt with intoxicated visitors, people who came to entertain them, a stint of threatening and barn burning, and people constantly coming and asking for help. Gall remembered,

We were all up and down this creek…all hours of the night, walking to deliver babies. Maybe a man would come and get us and if we’d take the Jeep as far as we could go and then we’d have to walk…All hours of the night and day all by ourselves. (personal communication, December 29, 2011)

According to Gall, the pair would “stay all night in a home [with people] we never met in order to deliver a baby” (I. Gall, personal communication, December 29, 2011). This confidence and boldness won over many men and women in the community and showed the ability of “the nurses” to perform their duties and handle difficult situations.

Often working in traditionally men’s roles, Kemner and Gall were outliers who through their actions and attitudes challenged the patriarchal structure of the area. By participating in activities including healthcare, agriculture, veterinary medicine, building, electrical work, stonemasonry, carpentry, and sports, Kemner and Gall defied traditional gender roles on the Creek. They confronted oppressive structures in the community which subjugated women to second-class status as was the case for many communities in Appalachia and the US at the time.

Teaching women volunteers and community members, the pair passed on their skills, knowledge, and do-it-yourself attitude. Many volunteers who have worked at the Center over the decades have been women, especially the long-term, volunteers. Women’s leadership within the organization has been a driving factor as Kemner and Gall have encouraged young women volunteers and community members to defy gender stereotypes, take leadership roles, and live up to their potential.

Gall recalled how women and girls under their tutelage finished high school, went to college, learned how to change tires, change oil, work with their animals, and work together on canning or gardening (personal communication, December 29, 2011). Gall and Kemner’s independent examples of strong, self-sufficient women challenged volunteers and community members. Kemner recalled of people in the community,

They couldn’t understand why we would—two single women—would come and do this kind of thing especially when Irma drove a tractor and all the things that she did. And the women just mainly they were either pregnant or carrying a baby…very few of them drove in those days. They had to wait for their husbands to take them. And they were
pretty much homebodys....They [were] expected to keep the house clean and cook the meals. (personal communication, February 15, 2013)

The women confronted stereotypes, cultural constraints, and sexism on a regular basis. Gall and Kemner worked to overcome these issues as they interacted with women and girls in the community, providing services and promoting women’s empowerment. The nurses saw changes in gender roles over the years with women moving from what Gall has labeled a “servitude role,” to increasingly working outside the home and more fully participating in public life. The women tried to facilitate that transition, serving as examples of strong women’s leadership and giving help and encouragement. Gall related of the 1960s on Stinking Creek,

A lot of women had never been anywhere except to church and the post office…No man…would allow his woman to sit in a car with another man unless there were other people with her. (personal communication, December 29, 2011)

Kemner recalled that women “didn’t have much chance to get out and do anything else” (personal communication, February 15, 2013) besides stay home, keep house, and have babies.

Much has been written about the idea of Appalachian isolation and the so-called culture of poverty during the 1960s. As evidenced from Gall and Kemner’s experiences many of these conditions were realities for women up Stinking Creek. Rather than directly challenging injustices within the patriarchal system, the nurses focused on helping individual women, changing the individual’s behaviors and circumstances. Gall summed up the gender dynamics of the community saying “women did all the work and the men did all the ruling” (personal communication, April 1, 2013). Kemner and Gall set out to change these roles by example, education, and empowerment. Gall noted that she and Kemner, “Just kind of broke open the stereotype that women were supposed to stay home and cook and have baby after baby… and look after the man” (Gall, personal communication, April 2011). The women did not lead any marches or consciousness raising groups, but worked within their own framework to promote change on the Creek.

Due to the fact that providing health services was the cornerstone of the Lend-A-Hand Center during its early years, many of its programs targeted women, addressing women’s health issues, as well as their roles in the community. Nurse midwifery, a clinic, Planned Parenthood program, health services in the home, emergency services, and working in the local schools addressed a range of health issues on the Creek and delivered much needed care.

The programs of the Center directly addressed women’s reproductive health and options. One of the focal points for the health work of Kemner and the Center was addressing pregnancies through health care and education. At the clinic and with women in the community, Kemner and Gall advocated family planning. Kemner promoted birth control and women’s reproductive health through pre- and post-natal care as well as midwifery and general checkup services.

Kemner and Gall worked through the Planned Parenthood program and focused on educating girls and young women about reproductive health. They partnered with the Mountain Maternal Health League, an organization that promoted birth control and women’s reproductive health headquartered at nearby Berea College. They advocated a variety of methods for birth control including vaginal foam, sponges, pills, intrauterine devices (IUDs), adoption, even sterilization and abortions.

The attitudes in the community toward birth control were mixed. According to Kemner, “Some of [the women] were very glad for it…Some of them it was just the opposite. I couldn’t talk about it when their husbands were in the room because… in the mountains, however many
children you have, that’s how big a man you are” (personal communication, February 15, 2013). Large families were common on the Creek in the early days of the organization. The pair battled reservations in a variety of ways. Sometimes, rather than being forthright, Gall and Kemner would talk to each other about family planning in front of women in the community, piquing interest and leading to questions and health services.

The women saw the relationship between pregnancy and poverty in an area where many women had as many as a dozen pregnancies. Gall recounted, “The old saying ‘keep them barefoot and pregnant’ was a real situation that seemed to keep so many women in bondage” (2008:65). Gall related, “It was easier to understand why young teenage girls quit [school] so early, but that didn’t help them buck the cycle of poverty. Early pregnancies seemed to be one of the roots of poverty” (2008:38)…“It was under Peggy’s leadership that health, self-esteem and poverty were tied together; so, she tackled all three problems (2008:57).

A rural clinic in Knox County, Kentucky, in the 1960s and ’70s is usually not a place thought of at being at forefront of women’s reproductive health activism. The experience of the Center shows the often overlooked role of small nonprofit community service providers in rural areas in addressing women’s health, expanding the scope of what may be considered feminist activism.

The Lend-A-Hand Center further empowered women in the community by serving as a place of shelter for families who were dealing with domestic violence, drug abuse, poverty, legal troubles, or bad luck in a time before there were adequate social services in the area. The Center directors saw there were many broken homes in the community and kids who needed a safe place to stay, encouragement, and help getting to school. The Center became a place of refuge for people and they began taking in kids and women, often pregnant teenagers or young mothers, to live at the Center to provide a stable home environment, help with homework, and easier access to school. Gall and Kemner took in countless individuals and families in time of need, operating a halfway house for people on Stinking Creek. They took a personal interest in many women in the community, working with the same person or family for decades. Serving as examples to residents and the dozens of volunteers that worked at the Center over the years, the pair inspired many people to become nurses, social workers, and teachers. Although Kemner and Gall never married nor had biological children, they served mothering roles and helped raise dozens of kids from the Creek.

Following in the tradition of earlier women reformers working on social and economic justice in Appalachia, Gall and Kemner have made a lasting contribution to service work in the region. From 1958 on the Lend-A-Hand Center continued to focus a large portion of its work on women and women’s empowerment. The Center continues to work with families in the Stinking Creek watershed and its complex history of involvement in the War on Poverty and later services is beyond the scope of this examination. As this brief overview has shown, the work of the Lend-A-Hand Center evidences the central role of women and feminism within the organization’s structure and programs. Throughout their lives and work with women in the community, Kemner and Gall have undermined patriarchal structures and engaged in different forms of protest as service providers in central Appalachia. They endured and overcame hardships and promoted social justice by focusing on the needs of women in the Stinking Creek community leading by example leaving a legacy of women’s empowerment and resistance.

The history of feminist thought often is centered in urban areas, with little attention paid to the work of women activists in peripheral rural areas like Knox County, Kentucky. This account hopes to decenter the metrocentric narrative of feminist praxis, highlighting the diverse
forms of activism and everyday gendered realities of rural places. This experience of the Lend-A-Hand Center helps shed light on the role of feminist organizations in the Appalachian region and changes in gender roles in a rural community. It highlights the different forms that women’s activism can take and the possibilities for community service organizations working towards women’s empowerment.
References


Promoting Justice through Service: A Gendered Analysis of the Lend-A-Hand Center

Kathryn Engle
University of Kentucky
RWSA Conference
February 12-14, 2015
LEND-A-HAND CENTER

- Nonprofit community service organization
- Irma Gall & Peggy Kemner
- Begun in 1958
- Knox County, Kentucky
- Based on participant observation and oral history interviews
- Importance of gender in understanding the organization’s history and programs
- Gendered understandings of social and economic justice in Appalachia

Peggy Kemner and Irma Gall 1958

Irma and Peggy 1967
Women Reformers

Health Activism
Work & Labor Activism

Coalfields Activism

Women, Power, and Dissent in the Hills of Carolina

Mary K. Anglin

Working Peoples' Solidarity Against Hospital Strikes

United Methodist Social Principles or Hospital Profits?

Daughters of the Mountain

Women in the Mines

Stories of Life and Work

Marat Moore
Arts
The Lend-A-Hand Center

• Leadership of Irma Gall and Peggy Kemner
• Gender role-defying activities and occupations
• Led and staffed by women
• Programs that addressed women’s issues
  - Midwifery services
  - Planned Parenthood/reproductive health
  - 4-H activities for girls
• Work towards women’s empowerment/mentoring
Gender roles on the Creek
Women’s Services
Promoting Justice through Service: A Gendered Analysis of the Lend-A-Hand Center

Kathryn Engle
University of Kentucky
kathryn.engle@uky.edu
www.facebook.com/lendahandcenter
http://www.berea.edu/grow-appalachia/