‘My name was mud!’: Women’s experiences of conformity and resistance in post-war Rhondda

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contributes to debates on the changes and continuities affecting women’s lives in mid-twentieth century Britain, examining the factors that shaped what was possible for women coming of age in the immediate post-war years. Within the developed historiography on the coalfields, women’s histories have been limited to broad overviews of women’s social history. This thesis enriches these overviews by offering a close reading of a small cohort of women’s composure of their life narratives. It thus promotes an understanding of a fuller ‘life history’, as affected by changes with the onset of the welfare state and the impact of community on women’s well-being. The thesis contributes to the growing body of literature combatting the silencing of women in the male dominated historiography on industrial working-class communities. Specifically, it does so in the context of the interplay and tensions between a community and its individuals, and the impact of that community on women’s life trajectories. The south Wales community of the Rhondda is utilised as a case study. Culturally and economically significant, the Rhondda has been the focus of much of the historiography on the coalfields. I conclude that the impact of gender ideology and community structures on Rhondda women’s experiences were diverse, complex and contradictory. In composing their life narratives, the cohort negotiated aspects of their lives experienced as poor, unchallenging and unsatisfying. Rhondda’s poverty had a detrimental impact on the women’s lives. Relationships between community values and individuals emerged as structures enabling and constraining the potential of women in the cohort to live their lives freely and satisfactorily. The pressure for respectability within the community was a major constraining force. Early experiences were influential in how they conducted themselves in adulthood. Yet evidence of happiness is present, particularly around experiences of married life, which presents as an antidote to the frequently pessimistic discourses surrounding the debates on companionate marriage. Utilising their own experiences of struggle and disadvantage, many of the cohort emphasised their support for increased opportunities for subsequent generations of Rhondda women.
DECLARATION

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.
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Dedicated to the memory of my mother Edith Jean Price.
Chapter 1 Introduction

Hazel was ambiguous in her description of her home community of the Rhondda. On the one hand, she expressed a deep ‘love’ for the area, vowing that she ‘would never move’ because of its ‘community spirit’, whereby ‘you can go out and there’s someone down the street to have a chat with’. In contrast to this image, Hazel also pointed to its limitations, which she believed had arisen over the course of a generation. The area had changed in that now ‘there’s no job opportunities for people’, meaning that ‘most people go outside [the Rhondda] anyway to work’. In charting her life within the Rhondda from a young woman to the present, Hazel described how her mother had been ‘just a housewife’. Hazel also illustrated her lack of educational success, explaining how her teacher had said ‘you haven’t got a chance of passing [the eleven plus], so I didn’t do it and I didn’t try no’. Pondering on her life as an eleven-year-old child she reflected, ‘I don’t think I bothered… When you’re that age, you’re not really bothered do you I don’t think?’ Furthermore, on her transition into paid work as a young woman she defined herself as having ‘not a lot of ambition I don’t think’.

Hazel’s dismissal of her own past within the context of the community in which she grew up seemed almost fatalistic and was deadpan in its tone. Yet ostensibly there were contradictions in which she alluded to elements of warmth and support. In many ways, Hazel’s story goes to the heart of one of the problems I consider in this thesis—namely, the interplay and tensions between a community and its individuals, and the effect of that community on women’s life trajectories. However, in doing so, it offers new insights into the broader question of what influences shaped the life trajectories of a distinct group of women. This group represented those women who remained working-class despite the social mobility that has been suggested in the historiography of working-class communities in the post-war period. This thesis will focus on the south Wales community of the Rhondda. The area has been culturally and economically significant as an archetypal mining community that has been the focus of much of the historiography on the coalfields. The study will explore how the Rhondda affected the life chances of a cohort of women born and raised in that community between 1929 and 1950. The study also offers a number of insights, particularly around the less public lives of women. As such, it is a useful context in which to examine the relationship between working-class communities and women’s life trajectories.
The concept of ‘community’, in many ways, evades a clear definition; a number of meanings are attached to it. Joanna Bourke argues that, among historians, it is both ‘popular’ but at the same time ‘vague’. Indeed, in one study, there are ninety-four ways of defining what constitutes a community. Millworker Annie Hukin’s reminiscences are an interesting example. Writing about her life, she describes an idyllic childhood in 1890s Bolton. Yet, as Bourke argues, a ‘postscript’ ‘added’ by a ‘neighbour and friend’ testifies to a very different childhood. At a very young age, instead of enjoying the carefree childhood to which she alluded, Annie ‘worked within the home, rearing her siblings and doing the housework’. As Annie’s story illustrates, recollecting memories of family life from years previous can be fraught with pitfalls; nostalgia can mask the reality.

The concept of community is complex. It also encompasses divergence in terms of culture, rituals, language and traditions within individual geographical areas. Rosser and Harris’s fieldwork in Swansea revealed that each community within it had its own characteristics and identity. They noted, ‘individual families do not live in Swansea but rather one of the many neighbourhoods or communities within Swansea. My study defines community as one that includes shared geographic boundaries and a taken-for-granted sense of shared attitudes, values, interests, and characteristics. However, with all the possible constructions of a community taken into account, I would also argue that communities present barriers and limitations as well as opportunities, an issue at the centre of this study.

I will examine the factors that shaped what was possible for women in the post-war years. Throughout the thesis, I use the term ‘self-fulfilment’ and ‘potential’ to describe this field of possibility. The idea is a complex one, given that many factors in a person’s life can either enable or prevent flourishing. But a number of definitions suggest fruitful lines of analysis. According to moral philosopher Alan Gewirth, ‘self-fulfilment’ is about ‘carrying to fruition one’s deepest desires or one’s worthiest capacities’. Don Ambrose also describes it as ‘the

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3 Mrs Annie Hukin, ‘Some Memories of the Early 1900s’ (1974) in Alice Foley Collection, Bolton City Library Archives.
4 Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, 137.
attainment of a satisfying and worthwhile life well lived’. Maslow’s famous ‘hierarchy of needs’ includes the suggestion that ‘self-actualisation’ relates to the declamation that ‘what a man can be, he must be’. Notwithstanding Maslow’s apparent omission of women, the definition, like the others, is a useful one with which to probe what was possible for the cohort and what prevented or enabled their flourishing.

I will evaluate the extent to which the Rhondda limited or offered possibilities of fulfilment for women. Specifically, the study will focus on a small cohort of Rhondda women who came of age in the post-war years but did not experience the social mobility promised by the architects of the welfare state. These women’s educational opportunities were limited, as were their careers, and they represent a group which has been neglected in the historiography of working-class communities. Whilst the Rhondda is a backdrop for the thesis, it is not specifically about that community in its widest sense but about gender, class and opportunity more broadly. The cohort of women is a group of ten whose experiences I do not claim are typical, because, like Melman, I would ‘reject any sense of homogenous female identities’. Yet, the testimonies of their lives are richly expansive and illustrate both collusion with and resistance to views on ‘how society wanted them [women] to be’.

When I began this research, I was conscious of the life of my own mother. She had a great influence on me and was the starting point for the subject of the thesis. Reflecting on my own life, I was very aware of the tensions that sometimes break out between generations. When I was growing up I was often curious as to what lay behind such tensions and the frequent, very polarised perceptions about women’s roles. To understand these issues better, I embarked on this doctoral research. My mother’s life, in many ways, mirrors the lives of the cohort I studied, and themes I discovered from her experiences of life are considered and reflected upon in the thesis. Her life trajectory also includes, in some respects, the choices and compromises the cohort had to make.

My mother was born in the Rhondda in 1926. She was one of five children. Her father was a miner and her mother worked in the munitions factory in the Second World War. In this

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way, her life was very typical of Rhondda people. Clearly intelligent, she had been one of the pupils who had passed the scholarship examination and entered Porth County school but she was one of that lost generation of girls whose education was cut short due to the economic downturn that affected Rhondda before the war. When she married my father in 1949 they lived with my grandparents, as many others of her generation did, until they could afford to buy their own house, where I was born in 1956. Before and after marriage she worked in a series of office jobs in the Rhondda. Like many women of her generation, she enjoyed the close camaraderie of the friends and workmates within the various businesses in which she worked. That enjoyment of paid work was always tinged with guilt over the choices she had to make. She also experienced the conflict between being a good mother (and what that role presumably entailed) and a woman undertaking paid employment. That tension also encompassed often tortuous worries about how women should behave and the need for vigilance relating to avoiding transgressing sexual conventions. A similar sense of angst was often apparent in some of the cohort’s accounts. While very modest and unassuming, my mother nevertheless had a strong sense of social justice and would speak out and stand at the side of those who were being victimised and disadvantaged. I believe that she instilled in me an ambition to do my best in life—to make amends for what her life did not make available to her.

My mother’s experiences, and those of others like her, must be seen within the context of historical changes affecting the mid-twentieth century. The transition from the war years to the post-war years had changed the way women were defined. In the years 1939–1945 women were mobilised into war work on a large scale, serving in the national interest. Once the war ended, expectations of women changed. As Juliet Mitchell argues, these changes meant a redefinition of women’s roles: ‘instead of national workers, they were to be private wives’. As wives and mothers they had a key position in nurturing the new generation after the war.

I will examine the question in the context of the post-war period, a period some historians have identified, albeit with provisos, as one of new beginnings. As Arthur Marwick argues ‘the war itself cracked many of the conventions of British society, so that idealists could

genuinely welcome the peace as heralding a new dawn’. In exploring the personal life histories of a cohort of working-class Rhondda women and the way in which their recollections are ‘shaped into meaningful accounts’, the thesis will make an original contribution to the growing series of debates emerging from Welsh women’s oral history projects. Furthermore, the thesis will also add to the cultural and social historiography of the period, which, as Pat Thane argues, ‘remains unexplored, slower to emerge than political and economic histories’. In addition, it will challenge and add to the ‘series of comfortable and familiar images of the period which are instantly recognisable, both to practising historians and to a wider general audience’.

Women in working-class communities

There are a growing number of studies that focus on women’s life narratives within working-class communities in mid-twentieth century British history. In these, consideration is given as to what changes affected women in this period. Equally though, these studies note a sense of continuity. That women experienced both is one of the main conclusions Elizabeth Roberts came to in her significant study carried out in the late 1980s of 98 men and women in three Northern towns, which focussed on their lives during the period 1940 to 1970. She argued that while there were changes during the mid-twentieth century to the perception of women’s role as being primarily within the domestic sphere, ‘home and family nevertheless remained the dominant concerns in women’s lives’.

Other studies such as the classic text by sociologists Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter, Coal is Our Life, examined the polarisation between the masculine culture of the mine and women’s domestic role in the post-war period in a Yorkshire mining community. Up until the 1842 Coal Mines Regulation Act, women had worked alongside men in the coalfields.

13 Arthur Marwick, British Society since 1945, 4th edition (London: Penguin, 2003), 3. In contrast though, one needs to be aware of the revisionist historians who have challenged the notion of political consensus in this period during a time of reconstruction. See for example Harriet Jones and Michael Kandiah (eds), The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945-64 (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).
The Act meant women were prohibited from undertaking this work. Mining work became almost exclusively a male occupation that forged a legacy in which ‘communities were therefore more divided along gender lines than any other communities’.19

The historiography on the private lives of mid-twentieth century women in Wales, which is the subject of this study, is rather sparse. However, Deirdre Beddoe’s work is an exception. Her study of twentieth-century women in Wales covers developments during the years 1945 to 1970.20 Beddoe utilises a rich seam of Welsh sources to create a narrative about the lives of women in twentieth-century Wales, both in the public and private spheres. The post-war years stand accused by Beddoe as being an ‘oppressive’ time in the history of women’s lives in Britain, mainly as a consequence of unrealistic expectations on women to be perfect housewives.21 Beddoe’s work was a very useful starting point for me. However, my study has gone further, offering a deeper and more nuanced exploration into the more private lives of women in their work, education and home life.

Colin Rosser and Christopher Harris’ study of family and kinship networks in Swansea, south Wales, over a four-year period beginning from 1959, also examined the lives of women. Its findings make some significant points about the pivotal role women played. As they argue: ‘in relation to the organization of the extended family the evidence on proximity indicates that though there has been a marked loosening of the patterns of propinquity this has occurred to a lesser degree with married daughters than it has with sons’.22 Women, it appeared, were more influential than men in maintaining the viability of community life.

Equally, Martin Johnes’ detailed study of Welsh life after 1939 offers some extremely useful insights about women’s experiences. He partially fills a gap in the current historiography on Wales, which has been ‘rather marginalised within wider British history or sometimes ignored completely’.23 Johnes’ work also manages to provide a wider exploration of the everyday lives of working-class people in Wales in the post-war period. As he convincingly argues, ‘if Welsh history is to come closer to the lived realities of the lives of its subjects it needs to look not just at the world of political parties and institutions but at more mundane

21 Ibid., 157.
22 Rosser and Harris, *The Family and Social Change*, 218.
Isabel Emmett’s analysis of fieldwork carried out in the fictional ‘Llan’ in 1958 to 1962 is another example of a way in which to better understand a single community and its motivations. She contends that: ‘Welshness is the primary value; deacon and drunkard are friends, old schisms become unimportant’. Unlike that of Johnes, Emmett’s study foregrounds to a greater extent the unique role of Welsh identity.

The thesis will also problematize and interrogate what is meant by ‘community’. Using the Rhondda as a case study is an obvious and useful way to raise questions and insights about a particular area. A number of other studies on communities in the 1950s and 1960s highlight experiences of family life and social change on individuals.

Due to the contested nature of the term community, it is useful, as David Kynaston argues in his excellent analysis of community studies in the post-war period, to ‘go back to contemporary sources’ for insights. Michael Young and Peter Willmott make a strong case for the strength of familial and kinship ties within communities. In their fieldwork carried out in Bethnal Green and a new housing estate ‘Greenleigh’ in Essex in 1953, they sought to chart changes on family life. In doing so they analysed the more abstract attributes of community life, concluding that:

there is surely more to a community than that [new buildings] The sense of loyalty to each other amongst the inhabitants of a place like Bethnal Green is not due to buildings. It is due far more to ties of kinship and friendship which connect the people of one household to the people of another. In such a district community spirit does not have to be fostered, it is already there.

Young and Willmott’s study also reflects the growing sense of intimacy and companionate relationships among spouses. This had been a feature of middle-class family life but was now, in a climate of post-war change and growing affluence, transposed to working-class people, the subject of which has been discussed by Josephine Klein. But according to the historiography on community life, other themes also developed. The preponderance of female influence in family life is a factor in sustaining a sense of belonging, which is one aspect explored in my thesis. This is exemplified in Madeline Kerr’s 1958 study of ‘Ship Street’ in Liverpool, which demonstrates the presence of a strong ‘matrilocal tendency’, with married

24 Ibid., 5.
27 Josephine Klein, Samples from English Cultures Part 1 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).
daughters living either with their mothers or close by. In communities such as ‘Ship Street’, so great is its matriarchal nature, that: ‘the married daughters acquiesce to this domination. Outside the radius they are helpless. Their husbands accept their often uncomfortable fate as this is what has always happened and change is suspect.’

Similarly, Raymond Firth and Judith Djamour’s 1947 study in South Borough shows how women were pivotal in maintaining familial ties in the community, by means of their ‘emotional relationship, communication, and services’. But notwithstanding the usefulness of contemporary sources, other more recent studies have offered fresh insights into meanings around community. Drawing on two studies of Birmingham in the 1950s, Mark Clapson shows how there was a keenness for younger families particularly to better themselves by moving from the slums of the city centre to the suburbs. Robert Colls offers another, more recent study of community life. Taking as a starting point the work of Joanna Bourke, he critiques her view that such perspectives have largely been ‘retrospective’, based ‘on the historical experience of people who had never actually lived it’. Colls draws on his own upbringing in the working-class area of South Shields and in so doing describes the makeup of the community in which he lived. His reflection, among other aspects, includes the strong presence of women ‘holding the street as if they owned it’. In contrast to that of Bourke, Colls’ view of post-war communities in Britain celebrates their greater sense of collective values.

**Post-war changes and women**

William Beveridge’s 1942 blueprint for how Britain could be rebuilt after the ravages of the war, targeted the ‘Five Giants’ of Want, Disease, Idleness, Ignorance and Squalor. From 1944 onwards, a series of policies started to transform the lives of British people. These included national insurance benefits, a free national health service, decent housing and family

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28 Madeline Kerr, *The People of Ship Street* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 14
29 Ibid, 22.
allowances.\textsuperscript{33} In addition, the 1944 Butler Education Act was ‘regarded as a bold, egalitarian measure’, intended to give ‘a new priority to public education’.\textsuperscript{34} Such massive changes heralded a new relationship between the individual and the state. As Jose Harris notes, ‘the rhetorical hallmarks of the early years of the welfare state were the replacement of “charity”, “dependency”, “moralism”, and bureaucratic surveillance of private lives by a new ethic of social “citizenship”’.\textsuperscript{35} However, the welfare changes were, as Sue Bruley argues, ‘flawed by a fundamentally conservative view of women’.\textsuperscript{36} In addition, the notion of ‘citizenship’, which Jose Harris discusses, tended to be applied to men as breadwinners and heads of households, rather than to women who were still defined as wives and mothers. Such a traditional definition of women, as Jane Lewis notes, has been ‘both strong and long-lived in Britain’\textsuperscript{37} This, as Gaby Weiner argues, can be largely attributed to the efforts of ‘broadly social democratic governments between 1945 and 1979 who created and developed the British welfare state according to conventional gender stereotypes.\textsuperscript{38}

The role of motherhood was very important after the war. Indeed, in the interests of rebuilding the country after the traumas suffered by communities, women’s contributions as mothers would help to restore stability. Allied to this were concerns about a falling birth rate. Subsequently, a Royal Commission was established in 1945 to examine the population question.\textsuperscript{39} One of the recommendations put forward, when the Commission reported in 1949, was that married couples should have three or four children in the interests of the nation.\textsuperscript{40} Strong messages about what women should do were reinforced by a series of influential ‘experts’. These experts, which included professionals and politicians, saw effective mothering as the means of rebuilding strong family life after the social upheavals of the Second World War.\textsuperscript{41} One of the most influential of these experts was John Bowlby who wrote the 1951 report for the World Health Organisation, \textit{Maternal Care and Mental}


\textsuperscript{36} Sue Bruley, \textit{Women in Britain since 1900} (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999), 118.


\textsuperscript{40} Jane Lewis, \textit{Women in Britain since 1945} (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 16.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 1.
Health. In this highly acclaimed report, working mothers who left their children in the care of others were thought to be the cause of mental illness.

The years of austerity that immediately followed the end of the war gradually gave way to a growing sense of affluence in the country, in which Britons started to experience a higher standard of living. This better quality of life was not shared equally across Britain. Martin Johnes, in his study of Wales after 1939, argued that people’s experiences of affluence, after the privations of the immediate post-war era, were ‘gradual, slow and not universally shared’. He cites examples of conditions in Welsh communities that ‘would not have been out of place in the Victorian age’. Dominic Sandbrook also points to similar working-class communities in Britain in which ‘the affluent society was little more than a mirage’. Yet despite this, the growth in the availability of modern technologies after the Second World War created the opportunity for women to enter the ‘newer consumer industries’, which grew to meet this demand. Furthermore, the arrival of other opportunities as a result of the rolling out of the welfare state meant, as Harriet Jones notes, that such “caring” professions had become a primary source of female employment.

While post-war developments meant change in the form of new jobs for women, inequality also continued. Women were still beset by the problems of low pay, which were inextricably linked to the gender segregation of work. As Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues too, women were still faced with a ‘double burden since modern domestic technology did not eliminate housework and the dramatic rise in female employment was not accompanied by a fundamental reallocation of domestic labour’.

44 See Kynaston, Austerity Britain; Peter Hennessy, Having It So Good (London: Allen Lane, 2006).
45 Johnes, Wales Since 1939, 66.
46 Dominic Sandbrook, Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles (London: Little Brown, 2005), 178.
47 Bruley, Women in Britain since 1900, 121.
49 See Gerry Holloway, Women and Work in Britain Since 1840 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 196.
The Rhondda

The women in this study were all born and largely spent much of their lives in the Rhondda. The Rhondda refers to two valleys: the Rhondda Fawr (the Big Valley) and the Rhondda Fach (the Little Valley), both of which are situated in south east Wales. The population of the Rhondda decreased in the post-war years and its economy was heavily dependent on jobs outside the area.\(^{51}\) In contrast, the Rhondda was a largely rural area until the coalmines opened in the mid-nineteenth century. Up until 1840 the coal industry existed to service the iron industry in south Wales. However, with the decline of the latter, a new phase of the coal industry emerged, which supplied the growing world market demand for steam coal. As Dot Jones notes, ‘[B]y 1894 almost half UK coal exports came from south Wales and at that time south Wales steam coal played a vital role in the context of UK foreign trade because coal was Britain’s only bulk export commodity’.\(^{52}\) The Rhondda Valleys was a central part of this new industry, attracting many new incomers from both within the UK and abroad, the extent of which has been described by Gwyn A. Williams as ‘the Klondyke rush’.\(^{53}\) While the census figures for 1871 for the Rhondda were 16,914, by 1911 the population had grown to 152,000.\(^{54}\)

During the interwar years 1919–1939, there were periods of mass unemployment in south Wales due to the contraction of the coal industry, which had stark consequences for the people of the area.\(^{55}\) Many left south Wales to find jobs in other areas such as south east England and the Midlands. However, as a result of the Special Areas Legislation, 10,000 new jobs were created in south Wales between 1934 and 1939. As part of this, the Treforest Industrial Estate, situated a few miles from the Rhondda, was opened and many people from the area travelled there for work on a daily basis.\(^{56}\) The number of new jobs available to Rhondda people never matched those that existed as a result of the coal industry and this

\(^{51}\) Martin Johnes, *Wales Since 1939*, 124 notes how Rhondda’s population changed from 111,389 in 1951 to 88,972 in 1971. By 1966, of the 35,000 people who had jobs in Cardiff, over 2000 were Rhondda residents.


\(^{56}\) Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams eds., ‘Introduction’ in *Struggle or Starve* (Dinas Powys: Honno 1998), 20.
factor had a profound effect on the future of the area. As E.D Lewis argues, the Rhondda had ‘no diversification in its industrial pattern … [which was] ultimately to be Rhondda’s economic tragedy’. 57

The Rhondda Fawr includes the villages of Blaenrhondda, Blaencwm, Treherbert, Treorchy Pentre, Ystrad, Llwynypia, Tonypandy, Clydach Vale and Penygraig, The Rhondda Fach includes Maerdy, Blaenllechau, Ferndale, Tylorstown, Wattstown, Pontygwaith, and Ynyshir. At the bottom of the two valleys is Porth often called the ‘Gateway to the Rhondda’. 58 The two valleys that make up the area are approximately 12 miles long.

Unlike neighbouring areas, such as Merthyr, which was ‘sufficiently wide to accommodate a town’, the narrowness of both Rhondda valleys affected the way the community developed. There is evidence to support the notion that the Rhondda was more egalitarian and politically of the left because of its topography. As John Davies describes:

There, chains of villages developed with virtually no sign of an urban centre and with no street more than a few steps away from the open mountain... Because the steam coal companies were, initially at least, much smaller units than the leviathans of the iron industry, the collieries were not overshadowed by mansions such as Dowlais House and Cyfarthfa Castle.59

The coal owners of the Rhondda were ‘local men’, employed and worshipping in ‘the same chapel’ as those who worked for them. As John Davies further argues, this factor meant employers displayed a ‘less paternal attitude’ to the people of the Rhondda, in comparison to those of the neighbouring iron-industrial town of Merthyr. A number of scholars have written about the Rhondda in regards to its professed pride in its strength, and its sense of a community battling against social injustice. Stephanie Ward describes the 1935 protests carried out by Rhondda people against the humiliations of the means test. In order to qualify for financial support when unemployed, the finances of workers’ families were rigorously examined.60 There was also a sense that the topography, twinned with rapid industrialisation, may have contributed to Rhondda’s perception as very close-knit and self-contained, with family life growing up around individual collieries. As K.S Hopkins contends: ‘we are of a village society. The school, the club, the chapel never seem more than just around the next corner’. 61

However, the close-knit nature of the Rhondda had a negative side, the flavour of which is glimpsed in Jack Jones’ 1934 novel Rhondda Roundabout. The novel is set in the Rhondda of the 1930s in the aftermath of the traumas of the General Strike and Great Depression. The story unfolds through the experiences of the new preacher, the Rev. Dan Price, who has taken over the ministry at Beulah Congregational Chapel after obtaining his degree at Cardiff University. During the course of the novel he falls in love with Lucy, who is not a member of Beulah, and who attempts to visit him when he falls ill. In a conversation with his aunt she admonishes him by reminding him of the rules that are laid down in the Rhondda: ‘The women in this row are on their doorsteps half the day and they can tell a stranger in a minute, and if you let that gel in here it would be all over the place before you could look around’ 62

Respectability in the intimate world of the Rhondda came at a price. And in this community

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60 See Stephanie Ward, ‘Sit down to starve or stand up to live’, Llafur 9, no. 2 (2005): 27–44; See also Neil Evans, ‘South Wales has been roused as never before: marching against the means test , 1934-36’ in Crime, Protest and Police in Modern British Society, eds. K. O. Morgan and D. W. Howell (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 176–206; Williams, Democratic Rhondda ,189.
the price was high in terms of an increased sense of claustrophobia, lack of privacy, intolerance and suspicion of strangers and their perceived immorality.

**Women’s lives in the Rhondda**

Debates about women’s private lives in the mid-twentieth century are equally scant in the literature on the Rhondda. For example, if one were to browse old photographs examining Rhondda’s rich choral history, which as Dean Powell argues acted as an ‘escape from the harshness of working-class life’, one would be struck by the overwhelming dominance of men in such traditions.\(^{63}\) Two key works on the history of the Rhondda are that of E.D. Lewis and K. S. Hopkins. Both tell the story of the Rhondda as a political narrative, in which women’s contributions are seemingly absent.\(^{64}\) Given the Rhondda’s role as an important location for the historiography on working-class mining communities, Chris Williams has aptly described it as ‘famous’.\(^{65}\) Yet his extremely comprehensive study of the political history of the Rhondda from the late nineteenth century to the years immediately following the Second World War, is mainly the story of male activists. As Williams further argues, the Rhondda ‘was both a coal society and a man’s world’.\(^{66}\) Admittedly, Williams does acknowledge the marginalisation of women in Rhondda’s political life, and refers to some examples of women’s political activism.\(^{67}\)

Jeffrey Weeks provides a more intimate and personal account of the people of the Rhondda as part of his wider study of the changes in intimate life since 1945 in Britain. In this study, Weeks attempts to counter the often pessimistic and nostalgic view of a life in which strong family life, ‘neighbourliness’ and ‘sexual restraint’ has ostensibly been lost to a world of chaotic lifestyles and society breakdown.\(^{68}\) As part of this thought provoking account, he includes the Rhondda as a case study, charting the changes affecting that community after 1945. While not exclusively focussing on women, Weeks nevertheless succeeds in offering a refreshing overview of the private lives of Rhondda people. He argues that Rhondda

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65 Williams, *Democratic Rhondda*.
66 Ibid., 17.
67 Ibid. Chris Williams highlights the contribution of Elizabeth Andrews, the Labour Party’s Women’s Organiser in Wales in 1919, 16–17; women’s political role before 1910, 71 and the establishment of women’s sections and the Women’s Cooperative Guilds in the Rhondda, 107.
demonstrated different features to that of other parts of Britain in terms of its trend for early marriage, fewer opportunities for women to take on paid employment and a ‘highly gendered division of labour’. Weeks—who, like myself, had left the area many years ago—offers an extremely incisive perspective of the community.

Yet all in all, the lack of detailed study about Rhondda women has not gone unrecognised by women themselves. This is illustrated by a conversation Bella Dicks had with a woman about the Rhondda Heritage Park, a mining museum set up in the 1980s as a memorial to Rhondda’s mining industry:

Bella: What impression do you think the Park gives of the role of women in the Rhondda Valleys?

Ms J1: It doesn’t give any real impression of the role of the female. It’s all centred around the role of the male. They talk about the children going underground, well children were boys and girls, but they certainly only mentioned boys. Then again, girls didn’t work underground after a while… I tell you what they didn’t do is depict how dirty and dusty everything was, because the winding gear is all painted and polished, you know, and it was filthy where my grandmother lived. She’d scrub her front and she’d clean her windows, something up to two or three times a day, because of the dust from the colliery.

Yet, countering this are feminist narratives that go some way to providing a balance to the normative patriarchal picture of Rhondda’s history. Rosemary Crook’s interviews with women in the Rhondda illustrate how a ‘separate female work culture… centred on their domestic experiences’, grew up in parallel with that of the men’s work as miners in the interwar years. Dot Jones’ study of miners’ wives and mothers in the Rhondda before 1914 counters the ‘stereotype’ of the ‘traditional view of the mining community’. Long-established views of such working-class communities portray men as the protagonists working in dangerous conditions with women in a supporting role. By contrast, Dot Jones shows how vital the women’s unpaid work was to the mining industry. In addition, she points out that such was the hardship of women’s lives during this period that their mortality rates were in fact higher than men’s. Mari Williams’ study of female munitions workers in Wales in the Second World War succeeds in shining a welcome light on the previously understated but essential area of women’s contribution to the war effort. Of the twenty-two women

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69 Ibid, 24.
interviewed about their experiences, four were born in the Rhondda. Carol White’s and Sian Rhiannon Williams’ anthology of autobiographical accounts of women, who lived between the wars, also includes a number of recollections of life in the Rhondda. One example is that of Elizabeth Andrews, who campaigned for improved conditions in maternal and child welfare. As the editors note, ‘To date, the portrayal of the South Wales mining communities in literature has depended largely on the writings of male authors with the result that a one-sided picture has emerged.’

However, in seeking to understand and make sense of the experiences of women’s lives in the Rhondda, it is equally important to delve deeper and to realise the differences among women. Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams note this in their observations of the women they selected for their collection, cautioning that ‘the valleys were by no means homogenous …. the valleys’ women themselves were not necessarily a uniform group’. This is equally valid for my cohort of Rhondda women. In addition, a recent memoir on life for women in the Rhondda during the post-war years has provided the opportunity to substantiate the experiences of the cohort. Catherine Osborn was born in the Rhondda in 1935. In her account she charts her experiences, which include some of the themes I discuss in this thesis, such as the effect of poverty and the traumas associated with a selective education system. This memoir has assisted in adding another dimension to the cohort’s narratives.

The Rhondda interviews

For my study I carried out semi-structured interviews with ten women who had been born between 1929 and 1944. They were selected because they came of age as the instruments of the welfare state were being implemented. There was a fifteen year age gap between the youngest and oldest of the women. Some slightly different perspectives can be identified because of this age gap. However, in the main, the differences or commonalities of their experiences were less to do with age. Rather, such contrasts and similarities were more to do with family and friendship networks and background. All of the women were born and raised

73 Williams, *A Forgotten Army*.
74 Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams eds., *Struggle or Starve: Women’s lives in the South Wales valleys between the two World Wars* (Dinas Powys: Honno, 1998).
75 Ibid., 12.
in the Rhondda and all but two still live there. None of the women had gone on to higher education. The interview schedule [Appendix A], which was carried out at varying times between 2004 and 2014, covered aspects of the women’s lives from education to working life and relationships. I interviewed seven of the women twice, with a number of years in between; the remaining three women were interviewed once. I was able to access the women through my own contacts. I knew some of the women already and they in turn suggested and recommended the others. This method is known as snowballing, whereby this group of women were asked to put me ‘in touch with their friends, who are subsequently interviewed, then asking them about their friends and interviewing them until a chain of informants has been selected’.\textsuperscript{77} Disadvantages arose from using a number of friendship groups: there was an expectation from some women that in recommending others, they should conform to a certain view of the Rhondda. One woman for example, when asked about friends I may interview, ruled one person out and was reluctant to give access to her because she believed that the latter had negative opinions about the community. This was significant in that it was an indicator that some of my respondents may have attempted to portray their home community in an overly positive way, which may have influenced my findings. I was careful therefore to be vigilant to this possibility. When this occurred, I ensured that my questions to the women were both probing and challenging.

The interviewees identified their upbringing as ‘working-class’. This is unsurprising given that the Rhondda had only an insignificant number of people who could be identified as middle-class.\textsuperscript{78} They also strongly identified themselves with being a Rhondda person, which was reinforced by the fact that I introduced myself as a researcher who wanted to focus on this area as part of my study. Focussing on such a group was a useful and deliberate tactic on my part—a means of attempting to understand aspects of women’s lives in the post-war years. With the rolling out of the Welfare State, this period was a time of great social change. As Elizabeth Roberts argues, ‘it is a truism that individuals contribute to and in turn are affected by the times in which they live’.\textsuperscript{79} However, women’s own experiences are a feature

\textsuperscript{77} R.G Burgess, \textit{In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research} 4\textsuperscript{th} Impression (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1990), 55; see also D. Hall and I. Hall, \textit{Practical Social Research} (London: Macmillan, 1996), 113.

\textsuperscript{78} The \textit{Industrial Analysis of Estimated Numbers of Insured Employees} (including unemployed) in Rhondda in June 1957, Ministry of Labour Returns cited by Lewis, \textit{The Rhondda Valleys}, 266, shows how, of a total of 32,575 males and females aged 15 and over who were insured employees (including unemployed), only 1,760 were classed in the Professional Services grouping.

\textsuperscript{79} Roberts, \textit{Women and Families}, 1.
of this and cannot be dismissed. By examining the ‘local’ and the ‘personal’\textsuperscript{80}, as I have done by using oral history methods, possibilities emerge of understanding the continuities and not just the change affecting women’s lives. To offer a richer analysis of how women’s lives were affected in their own community after the war, I sought to supplement the ‘grand narratives of national and universalizing histories’\textsuperscript{81} with an exploration of the women’s ‘lived experience’.\textsuperscript{82} The changes brought about by the new welfare state were meant to challenge the old order. As Winston Churchill had predicted to a group of Harrow schoolboys in 1940, about the long term impact of the War: ‘the advantages and privileges that have hitherto been enjoyed by the few shall be far more widely shared by the many’.\textsuperscript{83} But, applying definitions of class can be complex. As Bourke argues, in trying to ‘define precisely what is meant by “class” there is much confusion and ambiguity’ with various categories suggested such as social status, income and jobs among many others.\textsuperscript{84} Furthermore, selecting women who defined themselves as working-class is part of a broader literature of social science investigation into working-class cultures from the late-nineteenth century into the mid-twentieth century, which serves to give a voice to those who have historically been overlooked or even ‘silenced’.\textsuperscript{85} As Paul Thompson argues:

‘The historian of working-class politics can juxtapose the statements of the government or the trade-union headquarters with the voice of the rank and file—both apathetics and militant. There can be no doubt that this should make for a more realistic reconstruction of the past.’\textsuperscript{86}

However, my study casts some light on a largely invisible group of women. Only one woman, Enid, had ever taken part in social research of this kind before and she told me that she had been interviewed some years previously about her experience as a policewoman in the 1950s. By their own admission the women initially believed their stories to be unimportant and unremarkable. Yet the narratives that emerged during the research included intimate accounts of the women’s own lives at a time in British history, which Simon Garfield has described as ‘an important turning point’.\textsuperscript{87} In a similar way to the Mass Observation Project, the responses of the women interviewed were a reflection of the

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid, 1.
\textsuperscript{82} See Julie Charlesworth and Janet Fink, ‘Historians and Social Science Research Data: the Peter Townsend Collection’, \textit{History Workshop Journal} 51 (April 2001): 209.
\textsuperscript{83} Andrew Marr, \textit{A History of Modern Britain} (London: Macmillan, 2007), 45.
\textsuperscript{84} Bourke, \textit{Working-Class Cultures in Britain}, 1.
\textsuperscript{86} Paul Thompson, ‘The voice of the past; oral history’ in \textit{The Oral History Reader}, 28.
everyday lives of people. It was therefore not an official account of the period. Simon Garfield in his work on Mass Observation writes: ‘I was also looking for a certain frailty in their journals, and a sense that they were not writing what they thought was expected of them’. Likewise, the themes that emerged from the women’s stories at times provided unexpected truths, which gave a greater context to and, on occasions, challenged established narratives of post-war societal change.

The interviews were carried out in their own homes and in private, which gave me the opportunity, as Kathryn Haynes argues, to ‘problematisie and centre women’s diverse situations’. They were also recorded, which helped me to focus on the women’s narratives without the inconvenience of making notes. The interviews were very open-ended in that I allowed time and space for the women to tell their stories. The interviews varied considerably in time. The shortest took approximately half an hour with the longest nearly three hours. Recalling memories of many years previously was perhaps the first opportunity for the women to talk about undisclosed and silenced perspectives in the freedom of their own space. As Geiger notes “life histories”… is a method that enables the discovering of the social experiences of “silenced women” (or other silenced groups). There were two exceptions to this. One woman’s husband decided to join the discussion at the end of the interview and give his views, a rather uncomfortable moment both for myself and the woman. Another woman’s son, who had obviously been listening in another room, from time to time chose to interject and correct his mother. Such use of control methods by men over women accords with a study carried out by Kate Fisher in interviews with married couples. In one example, she cites the case of ‘Cecil’ who succeeded in presiding over the joint interview with his wife ‘Wyn’. As Fisher recalls: ‘Cecil dominated the conversation, and seemed to want to exercise control over the interview, frequently interrupting his wife in order to tell her stories “properly”’. As in the case of Fisher’s ‘Cecil’, both examples of interruptions made while the two Rhondda women were speaking had the effect of temporarily inhibiting the flow of the account of their lives.

88 Ibid, 6.
Oakley’s study of motherhood advocates a ‘non-hierarchical’ approach, in which the interviewer is ‘prepared to invest his or her personal identity in the relationship’. During the interviews I chose to be as open and reciprocal as possible. If the women asked my opinion on any of the questions raised I was prepared to give my views. Nevertheless, I was very aware that, given my status as a public figure (a politician), there may have been power inequalities between myself and the women. I was very aware that this factor had the potential to influence how they related to me. In two of the interviews, comments were made about campaigns and issues with which I was involved in my political life, which suggested that these women had done some research on me in advance of the interview. As Katherine Haynes points out in her study of 15 female chartered accountants who were also mothers, we need to be aware of such issues given that ‘sameness in gender does not override distinctions in class, race, religion, age, ablebodiedness, or ethnicity, or preclude significant differences in experiences’. However, in the main I did not perceive my position to be a barrier to the openness between myself and the women. Although a local politician with some profile, I had taken the decision very early on that I would avoid doing field work in my own constituency. I chose instead the community in which I was born but had not lived for over thirty years.

The women I interviewed were recalling incidents and experiences of up to sixty years previously. There are pitfalls in using oral history interviews. One is the possibility that the memories contained in the cohort’s testimonies could become overladen with more contemporary attitudes and events. This was something reflected upon by Alistair Thomson when he carried out research with Australian war veterans. He describes his interview with one of the veterans, Fred Farrell and his perceptions of himself with regards to the Anzac legend. Thomson demonstrates how Farrell’s memories took on different meanings over time, correlating with later experiences and collective constructions of past events. This has been defined by Penny Summerfield as ‘composure’, which has drawn on the arguments used by Graham Dawson. Summerfield utilises the two meanings of ‘composure’: By shaping or

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‘composing’ earlier experiences, one would reach a sense of composure or ‘equilibrium’. What will emerge occasionally in the thesis will be a sense that the women’s memories of the late 1940s and 1950s took on varying emphases, which I argue reflect contemporary events and influences in their own lives. I was alert to the possibility that memory is fallible. I was also aware from our discussions that sometimes the women may have expressed some inaccuracies in the recall. Chris Williams manages to allay fears about this possibility. Factual accuracy can be checked, as with all other historical sources and, as he argues, ‘one usually doesn’t interview for the factual detail, but rather for the atmosphere, for the subjective experience’. Citing Portelli, he argues that ‘memory is not a passive depository of facts but an active process of the creation of meanings’. Furthermore, as Trevor Lummis argues, ‘contemporary values clearly shape the informant’s interpretation of their own past, and impose the subconscious historical structure of the narrative.’ But that must be seen as a positive aspect, which has the benefit of adding value to the process of understanding. In addition, the dynamics of oral testimony are such that they become the ‘key indicators of the meaning of experience’. The recollections of the women did not just represent their own individual reflections but also that of the community. The women came from the same friendship groups that over the years had shared similar experiences and attitudes, which Samuel Schrager describes as ‘the interdependence of personal and cultural conceptions of the past’. As Sian Jones and Lynette Russell note, ‘the concept of belonging is evoked as a means for describing relationships between people, and between people and places’. By engaging with such friendship groups, there was the possibility of gaining a deeper insight into the extent to which such groups expressed their identity.

**Chapter content**

The testimonies and analyses are arranged into broad themes that reflect the life stages of the Rhondda women. These subsequently inform the structure of the thesis. While care has been taken to isolate those life stages for the purpose of ensuring standalone chapters, this has not

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100 Samuel Schrager ‘What is social in oral history?’ in *The Oral History Reader*, 297.
always been possible given that a person’s life does not always fall into neat categories of memory.

Chapter Two considers how the Rhondda women experienced their education in terms of the barriers and opportunities they faced. It opens with a discussion of the structural inequalities that were a feature of education in the Rhondda. I then evaluate how the school curriculum, in its very stereotypical and narrow approach, affected the way education was received by the cohort. The final section considers what preparation the young women received before they embarked on paid employment. Chapter Two examines the formal structures of the cohort’s education system.

In contrast, Chapter Three considers the factors that enabled or prevented the cohort from gaining a good education and which were outside the formal structures. This chapter examines three themes: teachers, familial circumstances and nonconformity, which all played a part in shaping the lives of the cohort in the post-war years.

Chapters Four, Five and Six address the adult part of the cohort’s lives. Chapter Four looks at early experiences of working life. These are set within the context of the post-war years of reconstruction and new work opportunities for women. This chapter focuses on the extent to which the promises of a new age after the war matched the realities of the cohort’s lives.

Chapter Five is the first of two chapters focussing on the more intimate aspects of the cohort’s lives: it examines marriage and marriage breakdown. This chapter explores both negative and positive experiences of marriage. The predominance of the notion of respectability is notable in both this chapter and the subsequent. I assess how the cohort reacted and engaged with this idea of respectability.

Chapter Six assesses how the Rhondda women negotiated their sex lives in the post-war years against the backdrop of a very close-knit community. It will therefore explore what constraints and opportunities confronted the Rhondda women during this period. Themes highlighted in this chapter include the barriers faced by the cohort in terms of the dearth of good sex education and reliable contraception. Chapter Six also analyses the cohort’s acquiescence or challenge to the norms of sexual conventions.
In this study I argue that first, there were instances in the cohort’s lives that proved to be poor, unchallenging and unsatisfying as they came of age. Second, I argue Rhondda women were discriminated against and disadvantaged simply because of their gender. Third, despite these challenges, the cohort benefitted from individuals who attempted to fill the deficiencies of formal structures. Fourth, the cohort’s narratives demonstrate how powerful such influences were on their whole life trajectories, which not only affected them but others in their community. Fifth, poverty is shown as an ever-present force in the cohort’s lives, a factor that dictated their futures. Sixth, despite some disappointments in their lives, the cohort nevertheless acknowledged aspects of happiness and fulfilment and reasons are suggested for this. Finally, I demonstrate how community standards of respectability were a significant governing force in the women’s lives, engendering contrary responses of both allegiance and rebellion.
Chapter 2 Education

Kathleen clearly remembers the day she failed her eleven-plus examination. It was not a pleasant experience. Her voice became very anxious with emotion as she recalled how: ‘My mother and father were beside themselves. “Oh she hasn’t passed the eleven-plus.” It was terrible.’ For a young girl like Kathleen, and many others in the Rhondda, memories of that day—when results were announced, signalling which path they would potentially take in life—would be firmly etched on their memories for a very long time. In many ways it would also be a prediction of how their futures would unfold.

Chapter Two explores how the cohort experienced their education growing up in mid-twentieth century Rhondda. In examining how the cohort engaged with their education, it will consider the barriers and opportunities presented to them. In addition, the chapter will also probe the community’s own attitudes to the education system, which were influential in the learning experiences of the women. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first will outline the wider picture of education in Britain from 1944 until the early 1960s. The second will look at the structural inequalities that were a feature of education in the Rhondda and affected the cohort. The third section will analyse the extent to which the school curriculum, domestic and narrow in its approach, shaped the way education was received by the cohort. The final section considers how the cohort were prepared for working life.

Women’s experiences of education in mid-twentieth century Britain

The experiences of the Rhondda cohort can be located within the wider context of education in Britain. In the main, for those young women who did not go on to university, the education system was unambitious and unchallenging. As mentioned in Chapter One, the 1944 education reforms had promised a new sense of egalitarianism. This had been aspired to as early as 1941 when George Orwell predicted, somewhat optimistically, in his essay ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’ that ‘the Stock Exchange will be pulled down, the horse plough will give way to the tractor, the country houses will be turned into children’s holiday camps, the Eton and Harrow match will be forgotten’. However, that egalitarianism was not realised. There

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would be no challenge to the class divisions in Britain and, as Brian Simon argues, ‘even under a Labour Government elected with a major function of the education system’. The practicalities of the 1944 Education Act were such that it emerged with the promise of ‘Free Secondary Education for All’, abolished fees for state maintained schools and raised the school-leaving age to fifteen. The Act established a tripartite system, with a selection test at age 11, to enable children to attend one of three types of school: grammar, secondary modern and technical. However, as Melissa Benn has argued, the 1944 Act had a ‘fatal flaw’ in that it was based on the belief that there were three types of children, with fixed ability and talent, requiring three different types of education. As she characterised it:

Golden children were broadly speaking, interested in learning for its own sake and could grasp an argument; silver children were talented at applied science or art, but lacked subtlety in language construction; iron children could only handle concrete things, for abstractions were beyond them.

This approach relied on the principle that talent and intelligence were fixed and paid little regard to the notion that all children should be allowed to develop to their full potential. Yet, there was a double disadvantage for working-class women; their experiences of education were heavily biased against them in many ways. Although the 1944 Education Act promised many things, it left gender inequality untouched. As Madeleine Arnot, Miriam David and Gaby Weiner argue, within the Act there were clear ‘tensions between conventional gender relations in the family and the principle of equality of opportunity… [so much so that]… Conventional gender relations remained a hidden, somewhat taken-for-granted concept’.

A number of key reports in the period were instrumental in reforming education for the young people of Britain. The 1943 Norwood Report recommended the new tripartite system. The 1959 Crowther Report discussed education for 15–18 year olds. In addition, the 1963 Newsom Report reinforced the case for a comprehensive system of education in Britain. However, Ann Marie Wolpe’s scrutiny of these significant reports concluded that, in terms of girls’ education, they were deficient and perpetuated ‘an education system which does not

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6 Ibid., 69.
7 Melissa Benn, *School Wars*, 45.
open new vistas or possibilities to the majority of girls’. What’s more, the pre-eminence of domesticity remained a fixed ideology at the heart of girls’ curriculum. John Newsom’s rationale in his report ‘The Education of Girls’ exemplifies this ideology. As the County Education Officer of Hertfordshire, he justified his belief in domesticity by insisting:

marriage is the dominant function of women in society… The argument for relating their education to the home rests more on the assumption that that this will evoke that intellectual interest and curiosity, without which all education is futile. In other words, the problem is one of educational principle based on an understanding of the particular emotional, mental and physical interests of girls, which will express themselves finally in the business of running a home and rearing children.’

The paradox at the heart of the 1944 Education Act was that although it was to ‘encourage social mobility, there remained a class basis to domestic education for girls, which represented continuity with nineteenth century ideas’. For girls, therefore, education in this period was not the empowering, enabling tool that it might have been.

The quality of women’s education was also uneven. Certainly Deirdre Beddoe has made a strong case for the quality of curriculum in grammar schools in terms of the opportunities they offered. As she observed:

Girls’ grammar schools in Wales offered a good academic education. Working-class girls were introduced to the world of the classics, foreign languages, literature, history, science and mathematics and they studied for O and A levels, which in the 1950s replaced the old matriculation exams.

In contrast, as Benn notes, both grammar and secondary modern schools in the period left a lot to be desired in terms of their uninspiring and limited curricula. Consequently, Beddoe’s assertion of the positive opportunities available for Welsh grammar school girls is perhaps overly optimistic. In addition, the inherent nature of the syllabus, in terms of its domestic bias, poor quality and subsequent low expectations was also a feature of the transition from school into work. May Hobbs describing her interview with the youth employment officer in East London in 1953 makes this explicit: ‘A right old git he was. His advice was, don’t think of making a career out of anything because you’ll only give it up to get married to and have

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13 Benn, School Wars, 45.
kids’. Little, it seemed, was expected of May, as was the case for many other girls in Britain during this period.

**Structural inequalities in Rhondda’s education**

Aspects of Rhondda life and culture, along with systemic structures in education in the post-war years, contributed both positively and negatively to the cohort’s experiences of coming of age. The Education Act, given that it was ‘permissive but not prescriptive’, did not specifically dictate how schools should be organised. Nevertheless, as already stated, there was a priority given to the tripartite system and selection at eleven. Yet in Wales, this meant a largely bipartite system given that here a ‘separate technical provision was virtually non-existent’. In some parts of Wales and England there were moves to foster a more egalitarian system of multilateral education (a precursor to comprehensive school education). For example, a plan was put forward by the educational authorities in Swansea to realise a multilateral system of schooling. This, however, was resisted by the Welsh Department of the Ministry of Education and the Welsh Inspectorate. In 1970, the Secretary of State for Wales took responsibility for ‘all primary and secondary education functions in Wales’. In 1999, under a new constitutional settlement, education policy in Wales ‘was devolved to the newly created National Assembly for Wales’. This brought a greater divergence of education systems among the home nations of the United Kingdom.

As a community, the Rhondda had respect for and held education in high esteem. As the writer Raymond Williams reflected on his life growing up in Llanvihangel Crucorney in Gwent: ‘there was absolutely no sense in which education was felt as something curious in the community… There was absolutely nothing wrong with being bright, winning a scholarship or writing a book’. As Williams further notes, there was less social distance

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15 Melissa Benn, *School Wars*, 41.
17 Ken Jones, *Education in Britain 1944 to the Present*, 28.
between the traditional working class and intellectual classes in Wales in comparison with England:

"Historically, Welsh intellectuals have come in very much larger numbers from poor families than have English intellectuals, so the movement [into intellectual life] is not regarded as abnormal or eccentric... The typical Welsh intellectual is—as we say—only one generation away from shirt sleeves." 20

For the Rhondda, a similarly close-knit community to that of Raymond Williams’, education was important on a number of fronts. Education was a way of bettering the lives of the children of a community, which had suffered enormous poverty between the wars. As Gwyn A. Williams points out, the interwar years had left Wales a ‘battered, sub-standard and lopsided region... [where] the unemployment level did not fall very much from the shattering 32 per cent of the worst moments after the 1929 Depression’. 21 Education was also perceived as an escape from the hardship and drudgery of the coalfield. It was the means by which ‘pupils would rise above the harshness of life at the coalface and bath-tub’. 22 Rhondda’s socialist politics meant that education was also seen as an equalising force. Even before the 1944 education reforms the Rhondda had provided free places for some of its poorest, brightest pupils to go to grammar schools. Yet it can be argued that there were contradictions. Despite its legacy of radical politics borne out of struggle and poverty, in the case of education there was, as Jeffrey Weeks argues, a view that the Rhondda was still ‘deeply socially conservative’ in its approach. 23 While education was seen as liberating, the Rhondda, it seemed, was reluctant to change its approach.

The women were very aware of the extent to which success in Rhondda’s education system was celebrated. Equally they were aware of the affect that the ‘shame’ of failure could have on an individual. 24 Such consciousness was illustrated in their testimonies. The extent to which the community attributed so much importance on the examination to attend grammar school, and neglected those who did not succeed, is evident. There was a strong sense of

23 Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 33.
24 James Macdonald, ‘Disclosing shame’ in Shame :Interpersonal Behavior, Psychopathology and Culture, eds. Paul Gilbert and Bernice Andrews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 142: ‘The word shame is in fact thought to derive from an Indo-European word meaning hide, and the idea that shame motivates hiding and concealment is a central defining component of shame for most theorists.’
Pride among the community of the Rhondda towards those young people who passed the eleven-plus or Scholarship examination. As the educationalist K.S Hopkins described: ‘to be top of the Rhondda in the “scholarship” was to bring honour to the family, the street and the village. To wear the Porth County green blazer was to become one of the chosen few.’

Porth County School was the higher tier grammar school serving all of the Rhondda. As Marion described, it ‘got the cream of the Rhondda’. The veneration shown towards it can be traced to its origins. The school started its life as Rhondda County Intermediate School, one of the schools established as a result of the 1896 Welsh Intermediate Act. Such schools were intended to provide a more classical education, where pupils would learn Latin, Greek and Natural Sciences, and prepare them for university. As Owen Vernon Jones also notes, ‘the Intermediate School was to cater more for the needs of the middle class minority and for talented working class children in Wales who would benefit from a limited number of scholarships’. The girls’ and boys’ departments of the Rhondda County Intermediate School became separate single sex schools in 1915.

Competition to enter such a school as Porth County was high and this was enabled by success in the eleven-plus and its predecessor, the scholarship examination. The sense of pressure and expectation placed upon passing the examination is evident in a number of autobiographical accounts of women from the south Wales valleys who experienced it. Norma Lloyd Nesling in her description of growing up in the 1950s in Abercynon in the Cynon Valley, a neighbouring valley to the Rhondda, illustrates how much this examination meant for an eleven-year-old pupil:

Scholarship day dawned after a sleepless, fitful night tossing and turning. Fiddling with pens, clutching lucky charms, some futilely tugging at socks, rubbing imaginary smudges on desks we waited anxiously for the papers to be distributed knowing that the outcome of this day would influence our lives in the years to come.

In addition, another account, that of Mary Davies Parnell, captures a sense of the importance of this one examination and for all that it stood:

In late May the day arrived that everyone had striven for since entering the junior school—the Day of the Scholarship Exam, later to be known as the Eleven Plus... Tense children arrived in school...

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27 Archives Wales: Rhondda County Intermediate/Grammar schools, Porth Records.
earlier and tidier than usual, laden with small pieces of coal, black cat brooches, dried and pressed
clover leaves, Cornish pixie badges and various other lucky charms.\(^{29}\)

Her autobiography also illustrates how this sense of importance extended beyond the child to
parents and to the rest of the community:

My favourite dinner of spam and chips was ready waiting for me in the house, together with a
hovering mother anxious to hear how I thought I’d done…. Time passed and one morning, instead of
shouting up the stairs: “Mary! Quarter to eight! Time to get up!”, my mother came bursting into my
bedroom waving a piece of yellow paper. “Oh, Mari fach, Mari fach, you’ve passed for Porth
County, you’ve passed, Twenty-fifth, it says here; twenty-fifth girl in the Rhondda,” she reiterated.

According to the community, this accolade meant a new status for young people of the
Rhondda. As Davies Parnell further describes, passing the examination meant ‘life was lived
on a cloud of pink cotton wool for the next few months. Parents were proud, teachers pleased
and friends were more respectful in their attitude’\(^{30}\).

But while Mary may have experienced a ‘cloud of pink cotton wool’ of emotions at reaching
this very important milestone, the experiences for some of the cohort were vastly different.
Testimonies from the cohort also display a sense of shame and feelings of stigma in their
failure to pass this examination. As Kathleen observed, failure to get to grammar school
attracted a certain dishonour in the community: ‘The people in the church. they said “Oh you
failed the eleven-plus!”. It was if you had acquired some sort of stigma.’ Kathleen’s
deliberate use of the word ‘stigma’ reinforced how ‘public’ the failure was, which, as
Michael Lewis contends, is ‘something which can be noticed by others and which involves a
“spoiled identity”’\(^{31}\). In other words, the elite system of which the cohort were a part, could
be both damaging and publicly humiliating. Irene who attended grammar school, after a year
in the secondary modern school, contrasted her experience to the shame experienced by a
friend who had not. Significantly, Irene spoke more quietly when she talked about her friend
who had failed her scholarship, an experience from which Irene believed her friend never
recovered nearly 60 years later: ‘We don’t bring school up at all in front of S because she is
very bitter. She doesn’t like it that we were grammar and she stayed in the secondary’.
Moreover, the effects of failure ran deep. This examination appeared to seal the fate of many
pupils at the time, a point very poignantly put by Kathleen: ‘It was almost as if you had been
labelled a failure and I am dead against any kind of segregation of children’.

\(^{30}\)Ibid., 185–189.
\(^{31}\)Michael Lewis, ‘Shame and Stigma’ in *Shame: Interpersonal Behavior, Psychopathology and Culture*, eds.
The cohort’s experiences of and exposure to failure can be attributed to the structural inequalities they faced as a result of their class and gender. The British education system in the post-war years disproportionately favoured the more academic pupils and there was a double disadvantage for girls because of the way the system operated. As Pedley argues, there were biases with the eleven-plus examination system, which discriminated against children ‘from culturally poor homes where books were unknown and conversation severely limited’. But even within that context, girls were disproportionately affected because greater numbers of less-capable boys were allowed to pass. As Beddoe notes, the eleven-plus examination was gender-biased in its selection for grammar schools. Based on the approaches used by some local authorities in England, in which girls had to achieve ‘higher marks’ than boys to gain a place in grammar school, it would appear that ‘in some areas of Wales’ there were more places for boys than girls. The fact that girls were outperforming boys at this stage was regarded as a ‘problem’ that had to be fixed. Jane McDermid argues that the ‘solution... was to weight girls’ performances differentially from those of boys’. My evidence suggests that the Rhondda placed great store on the power of education to address social injustice. Yet, for this cohort, it appeared that such high ideals were marginalised. In contrast to such ambitions, these young women were systematically discriminated against at a very critical time of their lives.

Rhondda’s formal education system, where pupils who did not pass the eleven-plus examination were earmarked for a secondary modern education, also meant that some of the cohort were separated from long-term friends. As David Kynaston argues, such a policy was ‘undeniably cruel’ and a ‘social hurt’, and the feeling of failure ran deep amongst the cohort. As Kathleen explained, such a system meant separation and brought with it a sense of isolation from friends with whom she had grown up:

I loved books and I failed the eleven plus and it never occurred to me that this was any great sort of impact on my life but when it dawned on me that socially I was cut off from a group of friends. They all went. I could show you a picture of our school class. People I associated with disappeared. They went on to Tonypandy Grammar School. They wore different clothes to me. They spoke a different language to me. I mean it was really so cruel.

33 Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 152
Going to different schools also meant an end to friendship groups for some young women, which may have been particularly hard to bear given the very close-knit nature of the Rhondda. Writer Elaine Morgan testifies to this experience of separation, when young women went their different ways to either grammar or secondary modern schools in the valley communities: ‘For British children in 1931, the eleven plus was, in social terms, the great divide. All the friends I knew from primary school went on to Mill Street Secondary, and I went on to the girls’ grammar school and entered an entirely new world’. 36

There was, however, a second chance for some pupils to transfer from secondary modern school to grammar school at the age of 13, if they had achieved academically. This transfer arrangement from secondary modern to grammar school was common across most education authorities in England and Wales. It was for ‘outstanding’ pupils who were 13 years of age. However, as was noted at the time, such a procedure was ‘less effective than it should be, because… the average modern school pupil tends to fall behind in ability to pass examinations’. 37 This practice proved equally problematic for some of the cohort, leading to further disadvantage. While the policy offered new opportunities, some of the cohort rejected this, preferring to stay with friends. Kathleen explained why she had spurned the scheme where you could be transferred to the grammar school… Because in secondary modern school I was a high flyer. I can show you my reports, this was great. I had success at last… In fact I was horrified because I still wouldn’t find my friends. I would be a year behind.

Sandra had transferred to the grammar school, after being in secondary modern school for two years: ‘I got recommended to the grammar school on how good I were and I was there for two years and then I was sixteen and I left school then.’ But Sandra regretted this decision, believing that her former school had offered more to her than the grammar school. She described the grammar school as something she ‘didn’t like as much as the secondary modern’. The latter was more supportive, given that she was finding some aspects of her schooling quite difficult. As she explained: ‘I had the ability, it was my nerves. I used to get so worked up but then I went to secondary modern, which I enjoyed very much and I regret moving from there.’ There were elements in the move that proved to be rather humiliating for Sandra. As she explained:

If you came from the secondary modern, they put you back a class because we didn’t do all the subjects so we were like a year older than all the other people in , what do you call it. I’m not saying

that caused problems, but I just didn’t enjoy it as much. I enjoyed it, don’t get me wrong, but I wish I’d stayed in the secondary modern but there we are!

In an interview with Catrin Edwards, Margaret Tegwin John, who was born in Blaenrhondda in 1935, described how she had been offered the opportunity to transfer to the grammar school from the secondary modern. Like Sandra, the reason for her mother preventing this move was because it was ‘degrading… you would have been simpled’. The sense of belonging was very important to the cohort and friendship groups were cherished. It was reinforced by the community’s history and legacy. Yet the transition expected of them in terms of their education often proved painful.

Some of the cohort also pointed to the inadequacies of the secondary modern schools in the Rhondda. Of the ten women, six had attended such schools. Two of these had subsequently been transferred to the grammar school to finish their education. The average proportion of pupils attending grammar school in Wales ‘varied from 35 to 45 per cent’. Yet the women in the cohort were disproportionately represented in their attendance at grammar school in terms of these statistics. Despite this picture, it would appear that neither type of education offered little more than an average level of satisfaction and fulfilment.

Most of these women alluded to a belief that the secondary modern schools had not served them particularly well. Stella reflected on her lack of confidence as a pupil: ‘But I mean, how can I say, I want to say that I was, it affected my education. I mean I knew I had to learn and I learnt it but what held me back was I didn’t have the confidence... And that’s what held me back’. Stella’s lack of confidence had the potential to be addressed by a good education but it was clear that the secondary modern school failed her in this. Stella described ‘the state of the school’, and a culture in which ‘the children in my class then, they just didn’t care about education. They just wanted to leave school, have a job and get married’. Such schools failed to promote any sense of ambition or aspiration for girls. Stella felt no connection with her school explaining that ‘I didn’t feel as if I belonged there then’. The tragedy for Stella was that she was aware she was being neglected. Unlike her fellow pupils who ‘weren’t really

38 Interview with Margaret Tegwen John [8/1/2014] by Catrin Edwards on behalf of Women’s Archive of Wales in Voices From the Factory Floor: The experiences of women who worked in the manufacturing industries in Wales, 1945-1975. March 2015, accessible at: www.factorywomensvoices.wales/ This archive collection was developed to profile the contribution of women to the manufacturing industries in Wales after the Second World War. For more information see the Final Report of the project.
interested in education’, Stella believed that she ‘didn’t belong there’; she felt that she was ‘missing out on something. Like I should have been learning it.’

Little was expected of secondary modern school pupils in the Rhondda, like Stella, in any case. Mary Davies Parnell in her autobiography of school life in the Rhondda provides a revealing indictment of the way such pupils (colloquially called ‘Toads’ in her account) were neglected by the education system:

How the Toads had failed to pass the Scholarship exam I could never understand as their wit, quickness of tongue and originality in the insulting reply always amazed me and I felt I could never match them. The odd thing was the more elevated in brain power you were rated, the slower you seemed to be in the quip and smart answer stakes. Perhaps these Toads, of whom little was expected in the way of behaviour, dress (for they wore no uniform, lucky things) or academic achievement had less entrammelled minds, and cruel, funny words came spilling out of their mouths with easy spontaneity.40

But it is difficult to avoid the conclusion from the cohort that the secondary modern schools they experienced were not good. Stella, who did not enjoy school, believed that although her teachers could have supported her more, she and her pupils were thwarted by a poor system. As my interview with Stella illustrates:

CC: But could the teachers have done anything for you, even though if you are all in the secondary modern school, could the teachers have encouraged you more?
Stella: No, they didn’t have much chance because there wasn’t the… not like the education is today, education in the Rhondda at that time, my way of thinking, it was poor.

The cohort was also very much aware of the poor image and facilities of the secondary modern school, which, for those who failed their eleven-plus, was the only alternative to grammar schools. Kathleen, a secondary modern school pupil, compares the two types of school: ‘Whereas we would be dissecting a worm, he [her brother, a grammar school pupil] would be dissecting a rat and he learned French. There weren’t any foreign languages in our curriculum.’ Generally the cohort were disadvantaged by the system of education in the Rhondda. The education provided by the secondary modern schools was considered ‘second-rate’, which ‘even sentimental depictions of them, like E.R Braithwaite’s To Sir with Love were unable to hide’.41 Their reputation, in comparison to the grammar schools, was such that the historian A.J.P. Taylor recommended that students should ‘run away to sea rather than go

40 Mary Davies Parnell, Snobs and Sardines: Rhondda Schooldays (Bridgend: Seren, 1993), 10.
to’ them! 42 Very little was expected of those girls of the cohort who attended secondary modern schools in the Rhondda. These schools had few redeeming features. Subsequently, the cohort felt both alienated and disengaged from the education they provided.

Although obtaining a place at grammar schools was regarded positively by many in the Rhondda, the cohort implied that they did not find grammar schools supportive. Shirley, who went to grammar school, did not feel particularly special because of that fact. She explains: ‘I went to Porth Sec and that was about it. I went there. No I wasn’t very bright, not very academic. But I did welsh and maths, and the usual. No I wasn’t very good in school at all’.

As I argued earlier, the interviews with Kathleen and Sandra also reveal that grammar schools did not, in their belief, offer any more support to them. For Kathleen, it was a question of doing well in her secondary modern school as compared to feeling invisible in a grammar. For these young women, attending grammar school appeared to offer very little in the way of advancement and, like the secondary modern school, proved to be alienating. This was both a disappointing and dispiriting situation for young women who were coming of age. School, which potentially could open up a whole new world of possibilities, seemed to be irrelevant to the lives of the cohort and furthermore exposed grave weaknesses in the Rhondda education system.

Such separation, division and competition, as experienced by some young women in the Rhondda in terms of their education, is the antithesis of the frequently held view of working-class communities as being close knit and supportive. This has been characterised by Joanna Bourke as ‘where conflict has been forgotten in favour of doors that were always open’. 43 Yet this alternative view is not entirely an unexpected one. Analyses of working-class community life indicates frequent division and conflict. Benjamin J Lammers, for example, in his study of the dynamics of neighbourhoods in interwar east London, illustrates this. He argues that there was certainly division in the way of ‘competition and jealousy’ at a very local level, albeit that same neighbourhood would unite against outsiders. 44 Rhondda, it seems, was no exception to this. Hierarchies, competition and division were normal patterns of behaviour and visible in the way formal education was organised and played out. For the ‘successful’

43 Bourke, Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 137.
girls and other young women in the Rhondda, particularly for those who succeeded in
attaining the highest grammar school, this may not have been problematic but welcomed.
Mary Davies Parnell embraced her new status at the grammar school and new friends,
although with a sense of some trepidation:

One morning an invitation arrived in the post to go to tea and meet Cynthia Hughes who lived in
Porth and who had also (naturally) passed for the County School. I wasn’t too keen on this but didn’t
argue or complain to spoil the delightful dream I was living.45

But there was a negative side to this, which I would argue was detrimental to the cohort.
Furthermore, the very divisive nature of grammar schools and secondary modern schools was
as Weeks argues ‘a highly selective system that risked breaking the ties which bonded you to
family and friends, risked losing the virtues of community for another world’.46 Byron
Rogers remembered how ‘in a working-class childhood there were always faces that, because
of the eleven-plus disappeared as abruptly as in any totalitarian state, so if you met them
afterwards, either you or they were embarrassed, not knowing how to react.’47 The sense of
failure would have been played out time and again as a result of the selective education
system and, for such girls, the formal education system offered little in the way of
encouragement.

A curriculum suitable for a girl

The formal education undertaken by this cohort of young women did not broaden their
horizons—rather, it channelled them into a very prescribed and limiting path. Young
working-class women in the post-war years received clear messages about what their
educational priorities should be, and certainly the curriculum they followed was not value
free. The extent of its bias towards preparing young women for a predicted future as wives
and mothers was powerfully summed up by the educationalist and Labour MP Leah Manning
who, in arguing against the position that children’s aptitudes were predetermined, stated that
such thinking was evident:

in the prospectuses of some technical school, [where] one sees offered to… girls cookery, laundry,
millinery and embroidery—all those arts in which women are supposed to surpass men but which are
really intended to give women the components with which to make men happy and comfortable.48

45 Davies, Block Salt and Candles, 189.
46 Weeks, The World We Have Won, 33.
47 Byron Rogers, The Bank Manager and the Holy Grail: Travels in the Weirder Reaches of Wales (London:
Aurum Press, 2003), 257.
The practice of some separate subjects for girls and boys continued after the Butler Act and a number of the women interviewed referred to doing ‘cookery’ while the boys did ‘woodwork’. Concentration on subjects such as these demonstrates, as Watson notes, the extent to which there was an ‘emphasis on vocational careers for working-class students and the gendering of education’. But, with the hindsight of time and maturity, some women challenged this. As a grandmother, Kathleen reflected upon her schoolgirl self of the 1950s, questioning the way she had been shoehorned into doing a very narrow curriculum, which to her represented lost opportunities and waste of potential. Describing time spent on domestic subjects, which were only confined to girls, she questioned:

Why on earth is she [a fellow pupil] getting such praise for ironing a shirt? [laugh]. I mean our domestic science lessons were ridiculous when you think about it. Lovely teachers, wonderful and when they talk to people about their sisters and what they are doing. You think they did manage to get to a teaching job and taught domestic science which is another aspect. I remember the first cookery lesson, we learnt to wash a brush... Doot. Doot. Doot. Doot. Good gracious. It was fun but it was as if it was all we were capable of doing. We would cook something like my five year old [grandchild] does!

The curriculum’s strong emphasis on preparing for motherhood was consistent with the government’s approach to women: they were to be tools in rebuilding a stable society after the war. The educational experiences of young women circa 1944 was intentionally stipulated in such a way. As Jane McDermid argues, education for women came with preconditions. As agents for stability in the post-war period, ‘women were to be educated, not for self improvement, but to promote social cohesion’. This policy was also reinforced by experts such as John Bowlby and others who influenced the debates around women’s lives and aspirations. These experts helped to reinforce the role of motherhood as a woman’s natural function.

For these girls, it also seemed that education was not for life but merely an interim experience while waiting for a husband. There was also an element of haste to this because of the fears in the 1950s concerning the rise in juvenile crime and disorder. As Stephanie Spencer argues, delinquency in girls would be expressed through ‘sexual promiscuity and “unfeminine”

50 McDermid, ‘Women and education’, 123
As a counter to that, and for young women to fulfil their roles to promote social order, there was pressure on the curriculum to be increasingly feminised. As Brian Simon and Gary McCulloch argue, the role of the secondary modern schools was seen as an enabler for working-class girls to achieve the appropriate skills to attract a husband. Furthermore, a woman’s eventual class status in society was indicated by what her future husband may achieve in terms of occupation and not through her own efforts. Kathleen described how this had been the case when she was growing up:

It was a family thing. I think it was a family thing. It was in most families you know. I think they were very caring loving parents and my father wanted the world for me but I don’t think it was ever expected that girls went away to a university. They would find a nice tidy chap that you could marry and settle down and bring your grandchildren and look after the family and that is what I did.

Kathleen also believed that her educational experience in a secondary modern school determined her future as a settled mother, a life trajectory depending more on what society expected rather than what she, as an individual, desired. When Kathleen reflected on her time at school, she said: ‘I don’t think it hit me then’, indicating the extent to which the deliberate feminisation of the curriculum at the time was normalised in the minds and lives of those who experienced it.

Evidence also suggests the cohort felt disconnected from their schooling. Some of the women demonstrated how their experience of education was alienating rather than something which they positively embraced. Shirley, who, as previously noted, had not particularly liked school, shared this sentiment with Betty. She reflected that she ‘wasn’t very bright at school’, qualifying this by adding ‘I didn’t like it. I don’t think I was very interested in the school work.’ When I tried to establish whether there were any particular subjects that she had enjoyed, she simply answered ‘No, not really.’ The inevitability of marriage discouraged many working-class girls like Betty and Shirley from considering education as useful for their future lives. As their time for leaving school became more imminent, they became gradually alienated from it. Memories of the disconnect from education experienced by both women also accords with the reflections of Pearl Jephcott in her 1942 study of adolescent girls:

52 Stephanie Spencer, Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 56.  
54 Spencer, Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s, 51.
A good many girls indicate that they do not really think school work has any bearing on their future… When I was in the senior school… I didn’t really bother. They don’t teach you no more than last year and I was bored stiff. I used to give out the tea and the milk. I wish they taught you something a bit useful.\(^{55}\)

While much has been written about Rhondda’s enthusiasm for education as a way of liberation and a better life, for some of this cohort of women this was clearly not the case.

A curriculum that placed a heavy emphasis on preparation for a domestic life was foregrounded, and any alternative with the potential to open up many more opportunities was marginalised. That alternative was science and technology, which, to a community like the Rhondda, could have presented many possibilities economically. Essentially, Britain, in the 1950s, experienced some great technological and scientific advances. Conscious of the growing power of the USSR and the USA, it saw a potential rival in Germany whose ‘remarkable economic recovery’ followed the Marshall Plan. Therefore, in reaction to this there was a ‘breakneck expansion’ in colleges, especially in the field of science and technology.\(^{56}\) Studying science was an important gateway into these new industries, which offered highly skilled and highly paid jobs. But problematically, Rhondda, like other mining communities, had an uneasy relationship with industry, which prevented it from embracing this as a beneficial opportunity for its young people. Rhondda was not alone in this and this discomfort was shared by other south Wales valley communities. As Martin Johnes argues, such an approach meant promoting the ‘classics or the arts rather than engineering or sciences’. He cites the testimony of ‘one pupil at Ebbw Vale Grammar from 1946 to 1952 [who] remembered the annual prize giving and academic awards at the eisteddfod: “I watched with envy as the parade of budding poets and essayists walked on stage to receive their prizes. There was never an award for the most creative physics experiment or the most poetic mathematical formula written in Welsh”’.\(^{57}\) When comparisons were made with the humanities, many Rhondda people, like those of neighbouring communities, were at best indifferent to the sciences. At worst they were downright disparaging.

Two sections of Irene’s interviews are particularly revealing in that she gives a flavour of the antipathy the Rhondda had towards science, technology and industry. First, Irene told me of

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\(^{57}\) Johnes, *Wales Since 1939*, 42.
her mother’s disapproval of a boyfriend who ‘was dead serious’ and had wanted to marry her. When I explored further the reasons why Irene believed her mother held these views she explained that her ‘mother was a snob’. Furthermore, the boyfriend was a miner and was studying in the School of Mines in Treforest.\(^{58}\) Irene explained this disapproval as a result ‘of what he was doing possibly’. Irene’s recollection of how her mother reacted provides a glimpse into the negative attitudes held by some in the community about its legacy of mining. Irene recalled that, although her boyfriend had started as a miner, this eventually led him to progress in the world of industry outside the Rhondda. She explained that ‘of course he went up high, high, high as could be with one of the oil companies’. Second, the way in which Irene spoke about her relationship with science subjects at school was also significant. She described how she ‘took physics and chemistry’, but this was said laughingly in a rather rebellious tone, as if she had tasted forbidden fruits. Her decision to do sciences was ‘absolutely crazy!’ albeit she enjoyed them. This suggests that Irene was conscious of going against the norms of both community and gender. While other members of the cohort did not directly corroborate this point, other sources appear to corroborate this. The flippant way Mary Davies Parnell dismisses her failure to pass ‘O’ level Mathematics demonstrates how many girls believed that they were not suitable subjects for them. As she writes: ‘I didn’t care about Maths and hadn’t expected to pass. I’d left the Algebra exam well before time. It was mid-June then and in Tydraw, my uncles’ farm, they were washing the sheep in the brook nearby, and I couldn’t possibly miss that.’\(^{59}\)

Furthermore, while girls themselves did not, in the main, identify with such subjects, there was and is a wider bias against women’s aptitudes for science, which has questioned whether they have ‘the same propensity as men to excel in scientific thought’.\(^{60}\) Studying science had the potential to open up new doors for women. Nevertheless, these were effectively closed. On the whole, such a lack of encouragement towards the science subjects meant that girls tended to do ‘humanities and social science subjects’, which predisposed them to entering careers more closely identified with women, such as the caring professions.\(^{61}\) But this was exacerbated by very practical difficulties in that that school did not always offer the same


\(^{59}\) Mary Davies Parnell, Plateaux, Gateaux, Chateaux (Bridgend: Seren, 1997), 7.

\(^{60}\) See Natasha Walter, Living Dolls. The Return of Sexism (London: Virago, 2010) 152–158 in on how scientific cases about the biological determinants of men and women’s scientific ability have been made and rebutted.

\(^{61}\) Gerry Holloway, Women and Work in Britain Since 1840 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 225.
subjects for boys and girls with ‘mathematics, physics and chemistry’ associated with boys and ‘English and modern languages’ for girls. In addition not every girls’ grammar school taught physics for example, as it was not seen as an appropriate subject for girls. Additionally, science facilities were poor for girls in Wales. Despite the promise of opportunity which grammar schools offered, girls suffered inequalities in provision in comparison to boys. The girls’ grammar schools had second rate equipment and fewer laboratories than boys’ grammar schools. This situation did not improve during the post war years until the National Curriculum was introduced, when more ‘girls took up subjects such as science and maths, previously dominated by boys.’ Indeed, a study on changes in educational attainment post-war shows how girls were more likely to be submitted for examinations and their performance increased.

**Preparation for work**

In preparation for leaving school the cohort would have been given support from the statutory advice agency for finding young people jobs. This was the Juvenile Employment Service, which became the Youth Employment Service in 1948. This service originated with the Education [Choice of Employment] Act of 1910. This specific piece of legislation was brought in with the Labour Exchanges Act of 1909. Under the auspices of local education authorities, the Youth Employment Service and its predecessor, was responsible for giving careers advice and referral to jobs. Officers of the service would visit schools, offering talks to pupils in their final year. In addition, they would offer more in-depth interviews for pupils, often in the presence of a teacher or parent. As Ken Roberts outlines, the main purpose of the process was to ensure that young school leavers would be enabled to ‘reduce their risks of

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63 Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 152.
64 Jones and Roderick *A History of Education in Wales*, 150–151.
65 Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 152.
67 Arnot, David and Weiner, *Closing the Gender Gap*.
becoming unemployed, but also to steer them clear of physically and morally hazardous employment and dead-end jobs’.70

Yet, while the structures of the service should have offered a gateway to their futures, the cohort were left deficient. Evidence suggests that contact with the Youth Employment Service left little or no impression. Sandra could not remember any advice she received before leaving school: ‘Trying to think back. No, I don’t remember that. I might have, I don’t know.’ She was clearly very hesitant and unsure about exactly what support she had received, if any. Irene too had very little recollection of any advice: ‘No nothing like that, not that I could recall.’ Stella had slightly more recall of the process, although there was little enthusiasm in her description. In response to my questions about who had talked to her about her future after she left school, she replied: ‘Yes, we had careers people come round.’ When I pursued the question further she explained how ‘they asked us what we wanted to do and we were taken into the headmaster’s study and George Flock [Headmaster] sat in with us’. Significantly, Kathleen first denied having career advice, and yet, when pressed, she acknowledged receiving some help:

> I don’t remember having any careers advice. I remember this teacher talking to me you know saying you have done very well. You could do teaching. I don’t know whether they said that to everybody but our first priority was to get a job because there was nowhere else to go really. There was no specific course for you to go on.

When discussions focussed on matters relating to career advice, at times the women had difficulty recalling details. This suggested to me that talking about their careers was not an important step for them at the time. Indeed, it appeared to be a rather insignificant event in their lives. They expressed a sense that once their education was finished, other opportunities would not arise. Stella described how:

> I left school in 1950 but that wasn’t sort of, you know, they were just, “Okay, you’ve done your education, you’ve done your school now, it’s up to you what you do”. That’s what I was, because I mean they did sort of, they did sort of encourage you and of course there was none of this, you could go to night school. Nothing like that then. It was a poor start after the war for education but education hadn’t come into its own.

This sentiment was echoed by Kathleen:

> Well nobody else suggested that I did that actually [go to Barry coll]. I think my parents sort of said well, everybody looked for a job. That was like the end of the line for our level of education. I think

it was. Nobody ever thought of... I know none of my old school friends that went to teach or anything like that. That was the end of the line. And I considered myself lucky to have got that far.

Analyses of women’s lives in the 1950s indicate that discourses around careers offered only a limited world of temporary work. This was shaped by the main objective of a woman’s life: to be a wife. As Virginia Nicholson argues: ‘The word “ambition” remained incongruous in the feminine lexicon, unless coupled with the word “marriage”.’ There was a clear sense, therefore, that career planning was not compatible or an integral part of the cohort’s future lives.

In addition, career advice received by the cohort proved to be limited and stereotypical. The young women were clearly directed towards a job rather than a career. Some of the women merely colluded with this. Shirley, for example, said she was not ‘careers minded’. The advice focussed on jobs that could be compatible with a male breadwinner model, with a strong focus on dependence and motherhood for women. The following interview extract gives a flavour of how Kathleen was prepared by her school for employment:

Kathleen: I remember an open day (before 14) to Swansea and we were all taken as girls to a college of domestic science in Swansea and I can remember clearly a girl ironing a shirt collar and shirt and the instructor saying “very good marks for that” and we were all girls!

CC: Were boys taken there?

Kathleen: No! [laugh].

CC: Leading up to the time when you went to college at 14 do you remember any lesson where they talked to you about where you should go whether it was Polikoffs or domestic science college or the office?

Kathleen: Yes there were only three choices. We did have careers people come and it was only domestic work. It was like cooking, cleaning or typing if you passed. Or nursing. That was it.

Betty’s experience had similar overtones. She explained that before she left school, she had gone ‘to the infants’ school to help with the babies. They must have been about three or four years old. And I went down to help them with the teachers and that. Yes I quite enjoyed that.’

The full professional qualification for those offering careers guidance to young people did not appear till 1949 with the Diploma in Vocational Guidance (DVG). Prior to that as Roberts argues ‘The advice offered to juveniles was based on personal experience and the era’s

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common sense.’ Yet the ‘common sense’ that dictated the cohort’s lives by such professionals predisposed them to narrow and limited options: a future as wives and mothers.

**Conclusion**

This chapter examined the extent to which the formal education system in the Rhondda provided opportunities or barriers for the cohort to reach fulfilment. Themes that affected the cohort’s education were explored. Largely, the cohort of Rhondda women experienced a very mundane, mediocre and uninspiring education, which was consistent with and shared by women across Britain at this time. Opportunities that may have given the Rhondda women the building blocks to construct a fulfilling future for themselves did not materialise. As the formal education system held little meaning for them, the young women largely became marginalised and alienated from education. Such an indifferent education was also compounded by a disappointing lack of challenge to the stereotypes regarding what young women should do with their lives. Again, this was a common and widespread experience across Britain and is supported by debates about women’s lives in the mid-twentieth century. Indifference and failure to critique women’s roles came from all quarters and was reinforced by a curriculum that remained unchallenged for a generation. Rhondda’s formal education system enshrined a very certain view of what women should do and was institutionally discriminatory to the girls of this cohort at a very impressionable time in their lives. Rhondda’s selective education system—a process that, at times, was extremely cruel and painful in its delivery—had a similar effect on its young women as experienced in other communities across Britain. The necessity for separation from friends and allies as a result of the system proved traumatic for some of the cohort with the result that they simply opted out.

Earlier in chapter one, I cited Deirdre Beddoe’s view that grammar schools offered new opportunities for young women in Wales. However, my findings reveal that this perspective is overly simplistic. Certainly, a grammar school education may have been an empowering and liberating experience for some young women, but that was not the case for my cohort. The Rhondda had ambitions for some; however, for this cohort of young women it offered very little. Nevertheless, what also stands out from the women’s testimonies is the strong sense of anger at the way they had been treated as young people. In recounting their

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memories of many years previously strong emotions were stirred up and they were given the opportunity to voice their feelings of betrayal. Despite its legacy of radical politics, Rhondda’s authorities disappointingly demonstrated a very conservative approach in terms of its formal education. Against this backdrop, the cohort’s sense of anger and injustice at what had been meted out was magnified. Changes and aspirations for a more equal society may have been eagerly awaited in the post-war years, but in terms of their education, the cohort’s experiences fell far short.
Chapter 3 Rhondda’s Influences: Teachers, Family and Chapel

From the comfort of her armchair, Shirley reflected on her schooldays of over sixty years ago: ‘I wasn’t very bright but I went to Grammar School. I wasn’t the brightest one you know. I got through. I didn’t get as far as ‘O’ Levels. I left then.’ Shirley was also forthcoming about the difficulties she faced in school. She recalled how: ‘She [the teacher] used to dictate so fast I could never keep up with her. I would be borrowing somebody’s books to keep up you know’. Finally, her formal schooling ended when as she explained, her mother:

had to apply for me to come out of school because she was a widow so she said she couldn’t afford to keep me in school, you know, which wasn’t the real reason. I didn’t want to stay in school.

Shirley’s testimony alludes to factors that, if taken as whole, contributed to the premature ending of her education, something which was a vital part of her flourishing. Chapter two explored how unsatisfactory Rhondda’s education system was to the cohort.

In this chapter I explore the influences that compromised their engagement with formal education. This chapter will examine three themes: familial circumstances, teachers, and nonconformity. These influences were not randomly selected. They were highlighted frequently by the Rhondda women in the interviews and it was clear that all played a part in shaping the lives of the cohort in the post-war years. Chapter three argues that, first, the cohort’s experiences of their formal education were clearly and deeply shaped by familial and community influences and circumstances of the Rhondda. Furthermore, the cohort suffered the ‘double handicap’ of poverty and gender. In recalling memories from many years ago, the cohort were clearly troubled by past injustices and their past fatalistic approaches to their youthful lives. This period of recollection moved them, in many cases, from feeling powerless to seeking redress. Second, the cohort had teachers who were a powerful influence on their educational outcomes, both positively and negatively. Such teachers had a long lasting legacy on their lives. Third, in the main but with some exceptions, nonconformity was a positive influence for the cohort. It provided an alternative educational experience to that of Rhondda’s formal education system, which had failed the cohort.

Social capital

One of the ways that society reproduces itself is through its social capital. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defined this as:

the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. 2

The cohort’s evidence revealed the extent to which they received, or were denied, the benefits of social capital from families, teachers and Nonconformity. In the following, I discuss the wider context for these circumstances.

The impact of parental and familial influence has been widely documented. It is important to note that the relationship that parents share with their children has not historically been static and changes have occurred over time. Yet in ‘modern families… parents tend to spend so much of their time and energy on their children’, and consequently ‘we tend to view the careful nurturing of the young, their protection and their education, and their emotional well-being, as the raison d’etre of the family as an institution’. 3 A number of scholars have explored the provision or lack of social capital invested in individuals by parents and families, both from gender neutral and gendered perspectives. Both Michael Carter and Catherine Avent comment on the importance of parental influence on their child’s prospects. Avent particularly argues that there is differentiation in attitudes to daughters based on geography and location. 4 Furthermore, there are marked differences in the debates surrounding approaches to sons in comparison with daughters. Sian Rhiannon Williams’ work on women teachers in Wales disputes that sons and their careers were always prioritised by parents. 5 In addition, Alun Burge makes a similar case. 6 In contrast though, a very powerful argument is made by Graham Goode and Sara Delamont on the experiences of

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5 Avent as noted by Stephanie Spencer, Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 58 that ‘parents in the North of England were more interested than those in the South in their daughters’ employment prospects’.
schoolgirls in Wales in the interwar years who missed out on their grammar school education. Whilst economic factors were a cause, more significantly their loss was as a consequence of ‘prevalent gender stereotypes’.\(^7\) The impact of parental influences also needs to be seen within the context of poverty affecting families. This issue is explored by Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams in their edited work about women’s lives in south Wales during the interwar years. As they explain: ‘opportunities for self-development remained limited by economic circumstances and by the norms of social and gender relations. The overriding theme here is not freedom, but constraint and sacrifice’.\(^8\)

The powerful influence that teachers similarly displayed can be partly attributed to the fact that the profession itself was very much regarded as a fitting job for women. Certainly, in the middle years of the century, young women in Britain would have been familiar with career manuals promoting teaching as an appropriate route to take in life.\(^9\) Teaching, which ‘has historically been numerically dominated by women’, with ‘its ethos of vocationalism, dedication and nurturance’ also reinforced the notions of what constituted women’s stereotypical characteristics.\(^10\) Furthermore, choices were made that determined the vocation of these women, and as Carol Dyhouse argues:

Even in the more academic schools of the 1950s, girls were often steered into sitting for two rather than three A levels, since that would get them into teacher training college if not university. After all, teaching was probably what they’d end up doing if they didn’t get husbands.

In Wales, contemporaneous accounts illustrate how much the profession was regarded. In 1957, Tropp wrote that ‘the high status of the teacher was particularly true in nonconformist Wales.’\(^11\) However, as Sian Rhiannon Williams warns, further interrogation on this is needed and that ‘this view should not be accepted at face value’.\(^12\) Yet, teaching was also regarded as respectable. Writing in her memoir, headteacher Margaret Miles described it as ‘an

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\(^8\) Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams eds., ‘Introduction’ in *Struggle or Starve: Women’s lives in the South Wales valleys between the two World Wars* (Dinas Powys: Honno, 1998), 13.

\(^9\) Eleanor Brockett’s advice manual, *Choosing a Career* (London: Staples Press, 1959) was keen to promote teaching and nursing as a suitable job for young women; see also: Louise Cochrane, *Marion Turns Teacher* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1955), one of the many ‘Career Novels’ which were produced for school girls during the 1950s. As Stephanie Spencer, *Gender, Work and Education in the 1950s*, notes, they were a ‘prime example of the way that leisure reading provided informal education to a substantial readership’, 104.


\(^12\) Williams, ‘Women Teachers and Gender Issues in Teaching in Wales’, 79.
honourable profession’ and ‘in the Welsh and nonconformist milieu from which I came, it was respected for what it was.’ Teaching offered ‘economic independence’ to women in Wales, one plaudit offered by Deirdre Beddoe when discussing women’s lives in the early years of the century. Nevertheless, care must be taken not to overemphasise the close allegiance that women had to teaching. Not all women were suited or indeed naturally predisposed or skilled in teaching, simply on the basis of their gender. Eiluned Davies’ account of her first job in a comprehensive school in Aberavon makes for grim reading, both in terms of the difficulties women faced and the lack of skill in getting the best out of children.

Religious belief in Britain also had an impact on women, as a number of key scholars argue. Essentially, religious belief and adherence to it in Britain saw changes during the course of the twentieth century. According to Peter Brierley, church attendance on Sundays saw a marked decline. Whereas in 1903, 19 per cent of the population attended church, by 1951 this had fallen to 15 per cent. Yet, what is noteworthy is the gender divide in religious belief: ‘All religions were by now predominantly female in their membership’. The decline in religious adherence over the course of the century also had differing effects based on geography and economics, a factor that would have disadvantaged south Wales given its relative poverty. As Ross McGibbon, writing about the fabric of church buildings, notes:

> Unlike the Church of England the Free Churches had no national endowment: their structure depended on the willingness and ability of the congregations to pay for them, and thus directly on the prosperity of the communities from which they drew their members. But it was these communities, the traditional strongholds of nonconformity, which was most pauperized by the unexpected depression in the old staple industries after 1920, and nowhere more severely than in coalmining.

Parents/Family circumstances and attitudes

The cohort’s formal education, discussed in chapter two, was affected by parental actions and attitudes and family circumstances, both of which were strongly influenced by living in the Rhondda.

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18 Ibid, 282.
Parental support for education

Most of the cohort’s parents had little in the way of formal education themselves. Like many other working-class children before the outbreak of war in 1939, they had made an ‘abrupt transition’ from school to paid work.\(^{19}\) Yet ‘social capital’\(^{20}\), which the parents and other members of the family had invested in the cohort, helped to broaden and add value to the women’s formal education. Such social capital came from a number of sources and drew on a diversity of family experiences. Despite their lack of formal education, Ruth’s parents compensated by being very supportive of their daughter. Ruth described how her parents: ‘were very good really. They were great believers in education.’ Ruth’s mother received an interrupted education. As Ruth explained, ‘she’d had rheumatic fever on three occasions so she was very poorly educated then but she spoke Welsh fluently and she had… how can I explain… she had a good knowledge of things but not educationally then.’ The sort of informal learning provided to Ruth by her mother came, in part, from her experiences in the chapel tradition, which I will discuss later on in the chapter. In working-class areas in the mid twentieth century, education, with some exceptions, was regarded as a route to better things. Working-class mothers, as surveys suggest, were particular advocates of the idea of ‘education for its own sake’\(^{21}\). This was something that resonated with Ruth regarding her own mother.

Enid described how her mother had ‘worked down in the Arsenal down in Bridgend for two to three years more or less’ during the war. As one of the ‘“forgotten army”, of female munitions workers’, she ‘performed dangerous but vital work in the filling of shells and detonators’.\(^{22}\) This hazardous work made a difference to the war effort, a fact which was noted by Elizabeth Andrews, the Labour Party’s women’s organiser in Wales. She argued

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\(^{20}\) Teresa Smith, ‘From educational priority areas to area-based interventions: community, neighbourhood, and preschool’ in *Researching Families and Communities*, eds. Rosalind Edwards (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 192, defines ‘social capital’ as such: ‘For some, it is an individual attribute [people’s individual contacts help them get jobs]. For others, social capital belongs to groups or communities [eg the density of formal and informal groups]. Social capital thus invites us to focus on social relations and the purposes for which people engage in social networks: to improve education; to get a job; or to create a clean water supply.’


that ‘In these days of war for freedom and democracy, when women are doing such noble work, to ignore them is a grave injustice.’ Clearly, Enid’s mother was doing ‘noble work’ as part of the war effort. But what is significant is the fact that, in recollecting this memory, Enid casts a new perspective on this. She relegates the bigger picture of service to her country in favour of a more authentic reason as to why her mother worked in the Munitions industry. Enid described how her mother ‘was quite loyal to the cause, but her primary cause was to have enough money to buy a piano for me. She did. She bought a piano out of the money.’ War work was important but it was the social investment in her daughter that predominated in Enid’s memory.

Enid’s relationship and engagement with her grandfather was also an important aspect of helping to forge her education. She described how her grandfather had helped her to read and develop an interest in history:

My grandfather, my mother’s father took an interest in teaching me to read and explaining things. I can even remember the day that the war was announced because I was with him in the kitchen and he was listening to the radio, and I could hear the voice on the radio saying we are at war. I asked him ‘What’s war?’ I didn’t know. And he went ‘I’ll tell you after.’ Then he was telling me what war was. I heard more about the First World War than I ever heard afterwards through him and it was the same with history and things like that.

Enid was also talented musically and later went on to play the piano, but it was her grandfather who supported her initially. A music teacher had been selected to teach the young Enid, and her mother had bought the required tutor books, but at the last moment the teacher had had a ‘nervous breakdown’ and was unavailable at the start. There was a great deal of pride and affection in her voice when Enid described proudly how her grandfather, without any musical knowledge, had stepped in:

Here comes my grandfather again now. She had a breakdown and she told my mother that when she’d get better that she’d send for me to go back with her. There was that piano stuck in the house there with nobody playing it. My mother had lessons when she was a child but didn’t like it because she had to go out to practise because they didn’t have a piano in the house. So she didn’t like it so she gave it up. It was there doing nothing, and apparently my grandfather said ‘Where are those books?’ That piano is stood there idle. So out came the tutors and he went through them and in one of them it was Ezra Reeds. I had two tutors, Ezra Reeds and I had Smallwoods. In one of them I can’t remember which, there was a paper piano forte, a piano keyboard.

CC: To stick over the piano?

Enid: For you to know what’s what. He studied that with the piano. Then he started to read about what note was what and all this sort of thing. He had it all sunk in and he started me off. He taught me and he didn’t know a note of music, but he had the interest to do it.

23 Western Mail, 9 January 1943.
In later years, Enid became a Woman Police Constable, aspects of which I focus on in chapter four, including examples of her feistiness, spirit and challenge to authority. The way she described how her father reacted gave me some impression of the influence he had on her. Enid described a discussion she had with her father about his republican views:

There was a TV programme on Edward VIII. I’d lived through the time. I wanted to know about it. I was sitting watching this. Of course Edward VIII was there and he was going round the valleys having a look at how awful it was. My father turned to me and said “You don’t want to take much notice of what he says”. I said “Well Dad, I want to know”. “Well you watch it”, he said then. It came to a point where the king said before he left here that something should be done. See? “There, you see?” my father said. “Something was done”. “Well what was it?” “Well he went from here Enid, and he went to a lovely, beautiful, big feast, and all the valleys were starving. That’s what he done”.

Enid’s father was clearly deeply sceptical about the extent to which the soon-to-abdicate monarch was compassionate about the suffering of the south Wales coalfield. Enid, as will be shown in chapter four, displayed an excellent skill in not taking things at face value, which was important in her police work. I had the impression, therefore, that her father’s strong influence, which she alluded to at times in her testimony, had sown the seeds of this in her early life.

Parents’ lack of education

Other women in the cohort, however, believed their own parents’ educational background had a detrimental effect on them. Betty told me how her own parents lacked the basic skills of education, a situation which she held responsible for her lack of academic success. She recalled how: ‘Well to be honest with you my mother and father couldn’t read or write… Both of them couldn’t read or write so we didn’t really have a lot of support from my mother and father’.

Enid explained how illness had affected her during her schooling:

I came out when I was 16 because I had to go to hospital for some time with pain in my side… And I was home for a whole term and when I went back I was lost. I couldn’t catch up.

While Enid’s family was able to provide some support to enhance her learning this was limited because of their own lack of a full education. As she explained with a note of

24 John Davies, A History of Wales (London: Penguin, 1994), 585 describes the severe unemployment in south Wales in the interwar years and writes: King Edward VIII visited the south Wales coalfield in November 1936 and in Blaenafon he made his famous remark: ‘Something must be done’.
exasperation and disappointment in her voice: ‘It was even beyond my poor grandfather. I’d say Gramp “What do you do about this?” And so I gave up.’

Despite the community’s respect for and veneration of a good education, some parents nevertheless were challenged by the pressure of the competitive nature of the Rhondda education system. Subsequently, evidence suggests that some parents encouraged a sense of anxiety in their daughters and became over-protective of them. This was to the detriment of their daughters’ education. Stella’s mother prevented her from taking the scholarship examination because she believed that Stella ‘was bad with [her] nerves’. Evidence suggests that some working-class families, like those of the cohort, became quite anxious about the stresses around formal education and the education system. We see echoes of this from other sources. Patricia Howard born in Blaencwm, Rhondda in 1943 recalled how passing the eleven- plus had affected her family. As she explained to Catrin Edwards:

I went down there [to the grammar school]... I couldn’t stick it and my Grandfather was on my side, “oh she’ll have a breakdown” because that nervousness. So I went back to Treherbert and went to the ordinary school and then just wasted my time really. 

Christine Elliot of Willenhall in Coventry had poor experiences of education, along with family poverty suffered throughout the 1930s, which meant she was content for her own daughters in the 1950s ‘just to be happy’. 

Favouring brothers

Some of the cohort believed that, in the eyes of their parents, their ‘education mattered less than that of their brothers’. As Kathleen explained:

Well I didn’t realise at the time but I am much more aware in retrospect about what went on but it definitely used to grate- “it is much more important for David to be educated than Kathleen, of course she will get married” Of course I am quoting.

CC: How did you feel at the time?

Kathleen: Well my brother was always… his homework was much more important for him than it was for me. My brother was a brilliant pianist and he had to have his music lessons but I whinged a bit. “No never mind it is not so important you know”.

25 Patricia Howard, interview with Catrin Edwards for Women’s Archive Wales in Voices from the Factory Floor, 2.
26 Todd, The People. The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 220.
Some of the cohort experienced parents who did not rate education that highly because they were girls and given ‘the old story: daughters were expected to marry and men didn’t like women to be too clever’. 28 As Kathleen confirmed, the tradition of favouring sons over daughters:

was a family thing. I think it was a family thing. It was in most families you know. I think they were very caring loving parents and my father wanted the world for me but I don’t think it was ever expected that girls went away to a university. No, no it was my brother’s education which was important. My father had great ideas for my brother. He was going to be a doctor or a lawyer and you know it was “get the Horlicks for David”. He needed to sleep at night. [Laugh exasperatedly] It wasn’t unkindly meant. It wasn’t. No they were very caring parents.

Here, in Kathleen’s testimony, we see a sense of a past injustice, which she didn’t perceive at the time. However, with maturity, Kathleen concludes that, despite her parents being caring, they did impose different expectations on her and her brother. Her parents had higher aspirations for her brother than for her, based simply on the grounds of gender. Like many other young women of her age she acquiesced in this injustice. A similar pattern emerges in Marion’s story. Her parents ‘didn’t have a lot of money’ yet it was decided that her brother should go to university in London despite the cost, which was ‘a lot’. Such collusion by the cohort in their own injustices has resonance in the autobiographical account of Rachel Treadwell and the relationship she had with her twin brother. From an early age she was obviously academically brighter than him yet allowed him to do better because he would become ‘upset and cry’. Like the cohort, Treadwell absorbed the belief at a young age that ‘girls didn’t need to be clever’ only to realise in maturity how much they had been misled. 29

One woman disputed the premise that boys would be favoured over girls in a family. Sandra did not agree that her parents had favoured her brother over her yet the eventual outcome seemed to point to the contrary. As Sandra explained:

I mean he had the chances to do what, you know, well he worked in the mines and he went to night school to learn to be an electrician and then it went on from there. He ended up lecturing then.

While Sandra’s career seemed to come to a halt in that she left paid employment to raise her children, her brother’s flourished. Boys’ education in south Wales was affected by poverty; nevertheless, the choices they made led to jobs with more prospects. In contrast, girls were affected by their ‘limited promotion prospects across all sectors’. 30 Between 1950 and 1960,

28 Ibid, 131.
29 Rachel Treadwell, ‘Girls Didn't Need to be Clever’ in Changing Times, 59–60.
for example, disproportionately more boys than girls entered employment categorised as ‘apprenticeship to skilled occupation’ or ‘employment leading to recognised professional occupations’. In addition, young working-class women like Sandra were also limited by the presumptions made about their futures. As Elizabeth Roberts notes, it was presumed that their ‘ambitions did not centre on work but marriage and children. Work may have been enjoyable, but it was not seen as a lifetime commitment’.

Parents and poverty

The scale of poverty that south Wales communities endured in the post-war years limited the cohort’s educational achievements. A 1954 Government report identified poor housing in England as one factor in manual workers’ children leaving school early—that is, they were more likely to be without space to do homework and had less access to books. In Wales, however, the situation may have been worse according to Martin Johnes. Admittedly, during the immediate post-war years there was a large house building programme, but nevertheless ‘the supply of new housing in Wales lagged far behind both people’s needs and aspirations and the rate of building in parts of England’. Maureen Jones—who was born in Islington, London in 1940 but raised in the Rhondda—testified to the fact that her family had suffered financially, which shaped her decision to leave school prematurely. As she told Catrin Edwards: ‘I really was pleased to leave... and we were a poor family. I have to be honest we were quite poor… and it was just nice to have some money in my pocket.’

Like Maureen, the Rhondda women all experienced a degree of poverty while growing up. It was clear that the way in which their parents dealt with this did have an impact on their formal education. Some of the cohort were frank about how their family’s financial circumstances had ended their formal education. Others were more hesitant in their admission. Sandra, as described earlier, had to finish school prematurely because of her parents’ poor financial circumstances, despite her headmaster wanting her to continue. Equally, Irene’s education came to an abrupt halt when the family was affected financially.

31 See British Labour Statistic Historical Abstracts 1886–1968 in Spencer, Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s, 201.
34 Johnes, Wales Since 1939, 39.
35 Maureen Jones talking to Catrin Edwards for Women’s Archive Wales, 13 November 2013.
Irene: then came the year when I should have been trying CWB[Central Welsh Board, examination] it was called then and then at 16 I had to leave. Because I went into the 5th year and my mother said you’ll have to leave. So I got a job.

CC: Why did she say that?

Irene: Well things were pretty tight. My father wasn’t working then.

But among the cohort’s testimonies there was some evidence to suggest that education for daughters was prioritised despite the poverty of the Rhondda. Ruth recalled that she:

had a very happy home. Whatever my mother could do for us she did. There was never any spare money but I mean I always had a nice uniform to go to school. I mean she had premium checks to pay for them.36

Furthermore, Ruth’s mother placed a high value on her daughter’s education despite the existence of forms of gender inequalities within the family home relating to poverty, which were not unique to the Rhondda but indicative of working-class practices in other parts of Britain.37 As Ruth explained:

My mother never expected anyone to do anything really but I can remember her carrying coal and my father was waited on hand and foot, you know he was the breadwinner and you know, as you say, we had to get out of his chair.

Ruth was affected by poverty when she was growing up. Clearly her family were not the poorest in the community given that for dinner ‘on a Sunday like we would have a joint of beef’. But when teatime came, the left over beef would only be provided for her father. She described how at ‘Sunday tea my father could have some of the beef but there wasn’t enough for everybody else but you know “well your father’s got to have it like”. We’d have a tin of fruit or something you know’.

Ruth chose to leave school at 16 despite being academically able to enter the sixth form. She subverted the expected route of Porth County, which was ‘go to college and get a degree etc’ but chose instead to leave at ‘O level stage’. She certainly did not regret that decision many years later and, significantly, her mother supported her in this decision. However, one question is left unanswered as to what her motives might have been for leaving school

36 Explanation of premium checks/cheques. Also called Pioneer Vouchers. Someone would call to your house and give you your cheque, then you would pay it back in instalments. No interest charged. Could be used for clothes and household goods but not food. You could spend it in shops that took part, for example Co-op.
prematurely and whether, while her mother was supportive of her education, this was only to a limited degree.

**Making excuses**

Despite the obvious injustices experienced by the cohort, they were reluctant to attribute blame to their parents. If the cohort’s education was ended prematurely, and they did not achieve what their natural ability dictated, then this was regarded as merely an economic necessity. Sandra was reconciled to the fact that she was taken out of school early by her parents, simply adding that ‘it wasn’t their fault they couldn’t afford to keep me’. Furthermore, despite their education clearly being affected by poverty, some of the women appeared to be reluctant to attribute this reality to their circumstances. At the opening of chapter three, Shirley explained the circumstances surrounding her premature exit from education. Marion’s testimony, like that of Shirley’s, is also revealing because it shows the extent to which some of the cohort excused their parents for the difficult decision to end their formal education early as a result of poverty. But what presented itself very forcefully in Marion’s story was the continuum of emotions, which exposed deeper layers of meaning. Marion was keen to point out to me that, despite the fact that she did not pursue further education, her parents continued to hold ambitious aspirations for her. She explained, rather unconvincingly I sensed, that ‘I am sure my mother and father would have been pleased if I had gone on to college’. As a way of offering reassurance that this could have been a possibility for her, she cited how her cousin from the same locality had the same opportunity:

> Well I had a cousin who was two years older. She was very good at school and she’d had rheumatic fever and she missed an awful lot of school but she managed to get 7th of the Rhondda even through that. And she went on to coll although when she came out of school she went to work for the electricity board but then she had a year off and then went to college and then everyone then if you didn’t go to university ended up in Barry College because it was near home.38

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38 Becoming a teacher, which Marion’s cousin did, was a very conventional route for women. As Jane Salisbury notes, ‘Women have traditionally always been teachers, particularly in Wales’. See Jane Salisbury, ‘Chasing credentials : women further-education teachers and in-service training’ in Jane Aaron, Teresa Rees, Sandra Betts and Moira Vincentelli eds., *Our Sisters’ Land* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), 140. Furthermore, attending Glamorgan Training College (Barry College) was a very typical destination for women in south Wales who wanted to train as teachers. As a single sex college it was both local for many and deemed in the eyes of parents, a protective environment for young women. Ann Rodgers in writing about her time there in 1950, talks about its ‘rules and regulations, and the strictness of the regime [which] earned the place the nickname of the ‘nunnery’. See Ann Rodgers, ‘College Days’ in *Changing Times*, 79.
Despite the college’s limitations, it seemed that Marion was not afforded even these. She seemed quite wistful about not being given this opportunity. Her testimony continues by focusing on why her father could not support her:

I mean there wasn’t the money around. My father was a cobbler and I know he struggled. [Laugh] My father was too good natured because if someone couldn’t pay the bill you know. No I wouldn’t say that I had had a lot of direction. Don’t think for one moment that I didn’t have good parents. I did. I did!

Then Marion’s voice changes a little with frustration and anger when she considers what might have been if she had been supported to go to college: ‘But no I should have.’ She seems to now blame her father because he was ‘too good natured’ in his approach to getting his customers to pay their debts on time, which Marion hints was one reason why she was not supported in her choice of career. Towards the end of the interview, Marion’s tone appeared to change again. She plays down her parents’ financial circumstances, choosing instead to hold herself entirely responsible for ending her education prematurely. In a louder, calmer and much more assured way she explained: ‘No. It is my own fault more than anyone else’s and I have regretted it.’

The interview with Marion was both fascinating and complex. First, in terms of its delivery there was, like ‘Pam’ in Lynn Abrams’ exploration of life history interviews of women from the post-war years, a change in the ‘pitch and volume of her voice’, becoming ‘more fluent and confident’. This was significant because it signalled that Marion (like ‘Pam’) had finally ‘taken ownership of this element of her life story’. Second, the loyalty she expresses to her family, in terms of not holding them responsible for her failure to go to college, oscillated during the course of the interview. The strength and importance of family was important within the context of the Rhondda community, and any indication of rejection of this would have made Marion very uncomfortable. Ruth Finnegan has argued that:

Equally influential is the image of ‘the Golden Age of the family’ the story that in the past ‘the family’ was stable and united, held together by unstressed love and harmony. This myth may have little support in literal historical fact, but that does not prevent its being a powerful influence on our self-images and life stories.

Third, therefore, Marion would have been very aware of the weight of a collective history of the Rhondda that reinforced a view of community ‘bred in the hard labour and mutual

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dependencies of the pit, the union, the club, the chapel, the neighbourhood and the home’.\textsuperscript{41} Again, any divergence from this would have been a very uneasy transition for Marion. As Linda Shopes argues, there is a risk in conducting community interviews of the existence of a ‘celebratory impulse... both those that fall within what might be termed the “genteel tradition”, which views the past as a benign refuge from the unsettling present’.\textsuperscript{42} Clearly, though, Marion rejected that tendency. In retelling her story she decides that neither her family nor community values would have any bearing on what she did. As Charlotte Linde argues ‘In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable and constantly revised life story.’\textsuperscript{43} As such, Marion decided to take a very individualistic view of her own destiny rather than blaming her circumstances on any state or community injustice.

**Responsibilities**

Limited family income also meant that some of the cohort took on paid work outside school hours, which may have affected the time they could engage with formal education. Betty described how she had looked after the child of a family in a local shop. As Betty described:

> I was 14 I was working, I was still in school but I was working for G’s... I looked after D, she was only a baby and because Mr & Mrs G had the shop. Well when they had the shop then I used to go and look after D while they were working in the shop and then after D then went to bed, I used to work in the shop then, serving coffees... That was in the evening, that was after I finished school then I used to look after D then and look after her on a Saturday.

Hazel too had to help out at home when her mother became ill. She remembered: ‘my mother was ill, she had blood pressure and when I was 15 she was taken ill, she had blood pressure but she didn't realise until I was 15 and I had to do a lot of work at home’.

Both women were taking on the role of ‘Little Mothers’, undertaking domestic duties and caring for family members, which was a familiar practice in south Wales valley communities.\textsuperscript{44} Such expectations of the women were made according to their gender, as it would be rare for male siblings to carry out similar duties. Subsequently, the extent to which some of the young women benefitted from a good education was diluted because of the added pressure and expectation from parents that they should take on paid or unpaid work outside

\textsuperscript{41} Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 25.
\textsuperscript{42} Linda Shopes, ‘Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities’ in *The Oral History Reader*, 263.
\textsuperscript{44} Williams and White eds., *Struggle or Starve*, 161.
school. Such an early introduction to unpaid domestic work was a presage of experiences in later life, which could arguably be characterised as a ‘Second Shift’. This study of contemporary women argues that although they increasingly procured paid employment, they still bore the main burden of domestic care. Significantly, as Katherine Holden observes, ‘at the end of the twentieth century the burden of caring still falls much more heavily on women than on men’. Both Hazel and Betty, along with most of the cohort, continued to take on the main share of domestic duties during their married lives, a pattern that started for them at a very young age.’

The cohort’s education was influenced greatly by parents, family circumstances and attitudes. All of the cohort were affected by poverty to a greater or lesser degree while growing up, which reflected the situation in the Rhondda in the post-war years. It appeared that all of the cohort felt under pressure to leave school early because of their family circumstances. This led them to end their education prematurely. Some of the cohort adopted very gendered roles in terms of family responsibilities, which set a pattern for their adult lives. The cohort also indicated that a brother’s education was favoured over theirs. Brothers, while still affected by poverty, were nevertheless provided for, encouraged and supported by their parents to continue their education. This accords and adds to Graham Goode and Sara Delamont’s study, which I outline earlier in the chapter, on the experiences of the ‘lost grammar school girls’ in Wales.

All of the cohort’s parents had poor educational experiences, which shaped the cohort’s aspirations and prospects in different ways. Some of the cohort believed that there was some indication that mothers were particularly keen for their daughters to do better than them. Others too believed that their parents had received a good informal education, mainly as a result of chapel and music in the Rhondda (a theme discussed in the next section), which had helped to support their daughters.

The ways in which the cohort discussed their memories of familial influences were particularly significant. Some of the cohort directly and openly blamed their parents’ poor

financial circumstances for their leaving formal education. For others, it remained a strong factor, but they were less open about the reasons and made excuses for their parents’ decisions. Yet all of the cohort appeared to be fatalistic about their lack of fulfilment at the time. However, through the process of interviewing, which triggered certain emotions, some appeared to question their own acquiescence when they were young. Despite the new opportunities and equalities promised as a result of the 1944 Education Act, for the cohort these would not materialise.

**Teachers**

Teachers both provided and withheld social capital, which influenced how the Rhondda women engaged with their formal education. Furthermore, teachers were an integral aspect of the hidden curriculum, a phenomenon which, as Walter Humes argues, constitutes ‘a range of things (attitudes, opinions, values) that pupils learn not from the formal curriculum, but simply from the experience of being in school’. Such values are transmitted through the institution in ‘implicit’ ways, including through relationships between teachers and their students. Teachers were a very influential group in the lives of the cohort. In many ways, their attitudes and approaches were key to the extent of the success or otherwise of the young women’s engagement with their formal education. It is clear that the cohort presented a diversity of experiences. Some of the women were taught by experienced teachers who were supportive and subverted the negative effects of formal education. Others in the cohort, however, had negative experiences of teachers. These teachers did little or nothing to encourage the young women to succeed, diminishing them through their actions and attitudes.

**Supportive teachers**

One woman, reflecting on her life as a schoolgirl, acknowledged the way in which one teacher had tried to offset the impact of poverty on her education. Sandra described to me how her headmaster had tried to persuade her to remain at school to sit her qualifications. Her parents wanted her to leave because they could not afford for her to stay an extra year in school:

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It was a case of having to finish at sixteen because my parents were in their sixties then and my father had retired so they really couldn’t afford to keep me on there… he [the headmaster] didn’t want me to leave because I was good at school but I didn’t have any choice.

There is a sense that Sandra was resigned to the situation in which she found herself, as a consequence of the poor economic circumstances of the Rhondda in these post-war years. In reflecting on the situation of their younger selves of over half a century earlier, the cohort recognised the good qualities in teaching that helped to nurture them. As Eva Pomeroy argues, the ability of teachers to be ‘caring about their students has a direct relation to the students’ perceived ability to engage in work and learn’. Such caring teachers—many of whom were from similar backgrounds as the cohort—as experienced by Sandra, understood and empathised with the disadvantages the cohort faced as a result of Rhondda’s poverty. Clearly such teachers were able to see beyond such constraints and glimpsed the cohort’s potential. Nevertheless, such laudable dedication was simply not enough to stem the tide of gender and circumstance that overwhelmed the cohort.

The existence of good, inspirational teachers, who valued the young women and sought to get the best out of them during their time at school, is clear from the testimonies. Some of the women recounted words of encouragement from teachers as examples of the way in which an inevitably poor future could be countered. Furthermore, some of the women believed that the attitudes of their teachers influenced their eventual success. Irene recalled how one teacher had ‘rescued’ her from the secondary modern school. Irene’s use of the word ‘rescued’ is significant in that it emphasises a theme, prevalent in the thesis, of the Rhondda’s hostility towards secondary modern schools. However, this was not something unique to the Rhondda but a feature within Britain in the years immediately preceding and after the war. As Spencer notes, there was general cognisance of ‘the poor publicity which secondary moderns were receiving by the late 1950s’. Irene’s teacher had encouraged her to put herself forward for entry to the grammar school a second time, after initially failing her scholarship examination, by means of the transfer arrangement, which was discussed earlier in chapter two. Irene’s teacher had encouraged her by saying ‘you shouldn’t be here, you are better than this’. The ‘here’ and ‘this’, that this teacher pejoratively talked about, was in fact the lived experience for many girls in the Rhondda. Teachers who communicated this message of perceived

50 Spencer, Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s, 59.
failure only served to reinforce the sense of marginalisation that many secondary modern pupils would have absorbed.

Kathleen, who was to find a greater degree of satisfaction and self-esteem after leaving her secondary modern school for a college course in secretarial skills, partly attributed this to the efforts and inspiration of her ‘fantastic English teacher’, the sort of inspirational teacher who ‘can light candles in the darkest mind’. 51 He had encouraged Kathleen to attain something she had not thought possible: to be a teacher. As Kathleen further explained: ‘it was that which sort of planted the seed and he wanted me to move on’. Some of the cohort also flourished and reacted favourably to the high expectations laid down by some teachers. Being strict was regarded as a good trait by some of the women. Sandra welcomed the sense of structure she experienced in grammar school, believing that this was the best to nurture a pupil: ‘I found the teachers very good. In the grammar school, children found them strict but I don’t because you have to be’. Ruth, who attended Porth County School, admitted that it had ‘very strict discipline’, but she nevertheless perceived this to be ‘good for us in later life’. This was a feature of school life, which was also acknowledged as beneficial by Enid. She explained why she had enjoyed her time in school, linking strictness to her later success in the police force:

> It was alright. Lots of people didn’t like it because it was so strict but I didn’t mind it. I always was fortunate that I went through it because going to the force it meant a lot of discipline, and I got through it alright. It didn’t matter to me. That was fine.

Positive experiences with teachers meant that the young women’s formal education was enjoyable and stimulating. There was a sense too that the young women equated strictness with high expectations for them, something to which they reacted favourably.

**Poor teaching**

Conversely for others in the cohort, attitudes and approaches by some teachers meant that their education became sterile and irrelevant to their lives. Some young women felt undermined by their teachers, approaches that appeared to have caused hurt for many years. Such teachers appeared discouraging and dismissive. Enid claimed that her teacher discriminated against certain pupils on the basis of where they lived and was mystified as to

the reason why and its apparent unfairness. She explained that this particular teacher ‘wasn’t a nice person and especially horrible to people who came from Pontygwaith. I don’t know why. I’ve no idea.’ Irene had ‘hated’ her teacher whom she felt ignored her. This teacher, it seemed, only concentrated her efforts on the more academic pupils destined for the grammar school. Irene’s teacher had only focused on ‘her favourites’ something that still angered Irene over sixty years later: ‘I have never forgiven her for this… this teacher really put you down… A woman very sanctimonious. This teacher had four or five in her class who were top pupils and she worked with them… and I was frightened of the woman’. A contemporary view of effective teaching argues that it comes not from ‘shouting but through gaining the respect of the students’.

Clearly, Irene’s poor experience fell far short of respect, something she believed had disadvantaged her learning.

Marion also described how teachers dismissed her as ‘not very bright’, a label she found difficult to ignore even in adulthood. Marion was particularly wounded by what one teacher had written about her:

> Everyone had an autograph book and you took it to school for the teacher and I can always remember what she wrote in mine. Sometimes I think she did influence me. “Be good sweet maid and let those who will be clever do things, not dream them all the day”.

The use of autograph books was a common feature in schools up until the 1950s. The phrase Marion recalled was actually incorrect. The Charles Kingsley poem was a guide to life, commonly written in children’s autograph books. The correct quote from the poem was: ‘Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever, do noble things, not dream them, all day long.’ Marion had mistakenly understood the phrase to include the word those. Although this had not altered the meaning to any great degree, all her adult life, Marion had interpreted herself as not being included in those ‘who will be clever’. Such an interpretation was a blow to her self-esteem and confidence.

Another Rhondda girl, seven years younger than Marion, also experienced extremely poor styles of teaching. The author Catherine Osborn recalled her time in her primary school in Trealaw under the tutelage of ‘Mr Cording’ who coincidentally taught me some twenty years

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52 M. Younger and M Warrington, ‘“He’s such a nice man, but he’s so boring, you have to really make a conscious effort to learn”’, the views of Gemma, Daniel and their contemporaries on teacher quality and effectiveness’ in Teaching, Learning and the Curriculum in Secondary Schools, 86.


54 From A Farewell by Charles Kingsley, a poem whose meaning appears to have perplexed many over the years.
later. Up until the age of ten she had been regarded as an ‘able pupil’. But in Mr Cording’s class her work and motivation quickly deteriorated. Her memoir is painful to read as she describes how: ‘Mr Cording became my bogey-man. He asked me questions I couldn’t answer, making me blush with embarrassment. Soon, I began to feel sick with worry whenever my turn to answer came up.’ So frightened was she by the teacher that ‘instead of asking for help’, Catherine ‘gave up trying and did my best to disappear from view, sitting at the back of the class, hoping that Mr Cording wouldn’t notice me’. Intimidation it seemed was regarded as the means to get the best out of the pupils. As Catherine further elaborated: ‘While sitting there I would sink into day-dreams and wake up only when a piece of chalk or board rubber was flung at my head with the shout, “Attend, girl!”’. Finally, Catherine gave up any aspirations of doing well, describing how ‘Mr Cording began to treat me like a moron. I began to act like one, sometimes even unaware that that he had asked me a question.’

Significantly, Catherine Osborn’s recollections accord greatly with those of the Rhondda women. Feelings of being unimportant, ignored and marginalised as experienced by Osborn was also the legacy inherited by the cohort.

The cohort also recalled poor techniques by some teachers. At the start of Chapter 3, Shirley talked about the difficulties she experienced understanding history because of the approaches used by teachers. In addition, Irene had been described by one teacher as ‘lazy’, telling her parents: ‘she is very lazy… she’s got it but she is lazy’. It appears that the responsibility for their own learning was placed on the girls themselves, rather than the teachers using their professionalism to motivate and inspire. Teaching in the post-war years was not consistent in its quality. As Melissa Benn notes, ‘maths teaching was often mediocre and there were vast tracts of uninspired rote learning’. Inspection reports on science teaching in Swansea’s secondary modern schools in the post-war years criticised it as ‘unsatisfactory’. Grammar schools were also accused of having ‘dull and arid’ lessons. This climate of indifference clearly had a detrimental effect on the cohort’s education.

During their schooling, the labelling of the cohort’s intellect and potential was over-simplistic and polarised. As Carol Dyhouse argues: ‘There was a growing tendency to divide girls into

two categories: the “normal” majority, who looked forward to lives centring on marriage and family life, and a deviant minority of intellectual girls who likely as not wore spectacles and would end up as spinsters.\textsuperscript{58} Some of the cohort regretted the fact that their ineffectual teachers did not recognise their true worth. Furthermore, they took great delight in expressing how, on the contrary, they had triumphed over such early predictions. From the tranquillity of her comfortable living room, Shirley, with added confidence and despite a certain lack of progress in her earlier years, stated that, ‘I’ve learned a heck of a lot more since I’ve left school’. Irene had been categorised as ‘lazy’ by the teacher who taught her ‘arithmetic’. Yet her eyes sparkled with indignation and triumph, which belied her frail frame, when she told me how she had moved away from the Rhondda to a prestigious post office job in the heart of London. Irene described how her work had been ‘involved with figures… and people look at me now and say how did you count that out. How did you do that?’ Pointing to her head she snapped: ‘But you learn to use that don’t you!’

\textbf{Uniform}

Ruth talked about how her school, Porth County, had operated its school uniform policy and the ways in which her teachers had approached this. Ruth believed that her school was ‘very strict’ in that ‘you had to wear your uniform until you got home... You wouldn’t dare walk to school without your hat on and when you went into school you had indoor shoes which you had to change into’. Similar sentiments are expressed by Mary Davies Parnell in her autobiographical account of attending the same school, a few years earlier. Here, she recalls the rule of having to wear ‘baggy navy knickers’ that conveniently doubled as games wear and the ‘beret or tam’, which the author in later years saw as symbolising being part of the ‘old school network’.\textsuperscript{59}

On one level, requiring pupils to wear a uniform suggests allegiance and belonging to a particular school. However, at a deeper level, more complex messages were being promoted to and about young women. The school, like other single sex grammar schools, was very protective of young women’s sexuality. Ruth, for instance, reminded me how ‘we weren’t allowed to speak to the boys in the next school’. As such, uniforms became endowed with meanings and symbolised ‘the highly refined control of the bodies, minds and even the

\textsuperscript{58} Dyhouse, \textit{Girl Trouble}, 127.
\textsuperscript{59} Parnell, \textit{Snobs and Sardines}, 13–18.
language of girls’ and ‘a new set of attributes appropriate to adult feminine conduct: being attractive, socially passive and in search of a husband’. 60 Ruth and others acquiesced with the wearing of uniform. In contrast those girls who rebelled against the uniform code were labelled ‘tougher minded pupils or “saucy pieces”’. 61 Teachers who enforced the school uniform policy were conduits, unwittingly in some cases, in promoting ideals of femininity as sexually passive, to their pupils.

**Rhondda’s political disappointments**

Stella, like many other Rhondda people, had an intense loyalty and allegiance to the Labour Party. Indeed Rhondda’s Labour politics was a significant influence in the lives of its people. Chris Williams, recalling the obituary of John James Garwood in the *Rhondda Leader and Gazette* on 22 May 1948, observes how this well respected Labour Councillor for Porth ‘symbolized the overwhelming positive contribution made by the Labour movement to Rhondda society from the end of the nineteenth century onwards’. 62 Stella too, like many others, had high expectations that society could be changed for the better with the election of a Labour Government after the war. Stella told me how such expectations had influenced her thinking. She regarded the end of the war as a particular milestone that also had implications for the careers of teachers. As Stella pointed out: ‘I mean the teachers were just beginning to come back after the war and we had a mixture of old and young.’ Yet this, according to Stella, did not quite accord with the spirit of the new age. While acknowledging the potential for improvements, Stella hinted that education in the Rhondda was not improving and the high expectations were not yet being met. Discussing further how her teachers had risen to the challenge, she explained that ‘there was some with ideas and some that didn’t have ideas… George Flock was our Headmaster and he was a Labour man, but not… it’s a bit of an in-between’. The hesitancy evident in her words suggested a sense of a divided loyalty. On the one hand, as one who was proud of her Labour allegiance, Stella expected better things from her teachers at the end of the war because of the political drivers of the Rhondda. On the other hand, reluctantly she admitted that she had been disappointed.

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61 Parnell, *Snobs and Sardines*, 18.
As Gareth Elwyn Jones argues, ‘the conservatism of the 1944 Education Act is more apparent in Wales than in England’.\(^{63}\) Such ‘conservatism’, with its reluctance to relinquish its longstanding loyalty to and predominance of grammar schools, meant that Stella and the rest of the cohort were badly let down and their education and all that it offered suffered.

**Sexual harassment**

The women’s experiences also illustrate some of the barriers they faced in their earlier years. Incidents described by one woman provide a glimpse of the casual and secretive nature of sexual harassment perpetrated upon the young women by teachers. Without prompting, Irene recalled:

> biology teacher... everybody loathed him. He was the type of guy who used to come and sit next to you and his hand would be wandering around you know. And the Welsh teacher, he was notorious for sitting down and pushing you up. Today that wouldn’t happen, you didn’t say a word.

Such experiences of sexual harassment at school are a reflection of the wider narrative of sexual inequalities in the post-war years. As Linda McDowell argues: ‘in the labour market context, for example, experiences of sexual harassment tended to remain unspoken until the social and legislative climate in the UK changed from about the late 1960s onwards.’\(^{64}\)

Young women like Irene, who were coming to maturity, could expect little in the way of respect. Furthermore, in addition to expecting very little, young women were also expected to remain silent about their situation. Some teachers, it seemed, took advantage of such silence and in so doing became conduits of women’s inequality.

**A reflection on teachers’ own lives**

The extent to which teachers influenced the lives of young women in the Rhondda in the post-war period needs to be understood from within the context of their status and experiences. As Beddoe points out, in the years following the Second World War, ‘teaching remained the main women’s profession’.\(^{65}\) Teaching historically was a well-regarded and predictable career for women in communities like the Rhondda. Nevertheless, women’s decision to become teachers was, for them, a rather limited choice given that, in reality, there


\(^{65}\) Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 142.
were so few career options available to them. Furthermore, despite the teaching profession offering ‘respectability and security’ it may not have been a main ambition for women.

Mary Davies Parnell provides an impression of this, describing her teachers during her time as a pupil at Porth County. Parnell makes observations of the way individual women teachers engaged with the young women in the 1940s at this Rhondda grammar school. She recalls incidents in which some women teachers struggled to maintain discipline. Parnell recalls how the pupils’ behaviour affected one young Australian teacher:

We were heartless, even cruel, towards Miss Lauder and only realised this when one day, to our horror and subsequent remorse, she put her head down on the teacher’s desk and wept, deep sobs lifting her shoulders. Silence in the room was absolute and although the next day we collected to buy her flowers as a lame gesture of apology and were never as naughty again, she was clearly delighted when the summer arrived and it was time to return down under to marry her fiancé.

Given these reflections, clearly some of these women teachers may have had difficulties with their own careers, something that also affected the young women. By contrast, we see an example of how one teacher was able to fully engage young women. In the final book in Mary Davies Parnell’s series on life in the Rhondda in the 1940s and 1950s, she reflects on the transformative influence her English teacher, Denise Ormond, had on her. This teacher arrived at the school in 1951, ‘not so much like a much needed breath of fresh air as a gale force wind and showed the school what the twentieth century was’. Miss Ormond, Parnell argues, was responsible for ‘a course of instruction which has had more influence on my life than any other’, noting too that many other students then and in later years ‘who came under the guidance of this remarkable women will say the same thing’. Teachers were themselves shaped by the values, attitudes and constraints of the community and of the time. In many ways they bequeathed these to the cohort.

Notably, the women retained very strong impressions of their teachers later in life. Such influence was both positive and negative. On the positive side, teachers demonstrated empathy with the cohort who faced often difficult circumstances in their coming of age in the Rhondda. In some cases, the teachers inspired the cohort to raise their sights higher than the

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66 See Deborah James ‘Teaching girls: intermediate schools and career opportunities for girls in the East Glamorgan valleys of Wales, 1896-1914’, *History of Education* 30, no.6 (2001): 513–526. James argues that a ‘disproportionately high percentage of girls’ entered the teaching profession. ‘At a time when increasing numbers of girls were gaining employment as nurses, clerks, telephone operators and typists, valley girls appear to have been severely limited in their choice of career’, 513.


68 See Parnell *Snobs and Sardines*, 38.

69 Parnell *Plateaux, Gateaux, Chateaux*, 52.
prospects immediately and obviously available to them. On the negative side, some teachers failed to inspire the cohort. The teachers were simply conduits of a system that maintained the status quo. By only focusing their efforts on some pupils, others like those in the cohort were cast adrift in an education system that, despite promises of new beginnings, remained stubbornly elitist. The teachers too failed to challenge inherent gender inequalities in educating the cohort. Such influences also proved to be a lasting legacy in the lives of the cohort as they entered adulthood and beyond. By talking about their memories many years later the cohort acknowledged the frustration they endured over their lifetimes. In some cases, while such experiences made them angry, it also gave them a steely determination to seek redress.

**Chapel**

The cohort’s life trajectories were affected by the religious influences within the Rhondda. These influences were contradictory in that they were both empowering and at the same time limiting. Eight of the ten women of the cohort referred to activities relating to Nonconformity and chapel attendance within the Rhondda. The cohort talked about their relationship with chapel largely without prompting, which suggests such influences were ubiquitous in the community. They played a big part in the life of a coalfield community like the Rhondda. Ruth recalled that if you lived in the Rhondda, a frequent question would be: ‘which chapel did you go to?’ Your identity then became not just a matter of who you were but where you belonged. In parallel with their lives in formal education, many young women attended chapel in mining communities. In the main the women referred to chapel; however, there are occasions when references are made to church and it is important to distinguish the two. Church refers to the Anglican church, which in the nineteenth century had been challenged and superseded by the arrival of nonconformist preachers during the ‘Great Awakening’. Starting with Methodism, nonconformity with its numerous chapels brought ‘something that had been signally lacking before, namely mass enthusiasm for religion’.  

The spread of industrialisation in the first half of the nineteenth century in Wales, with its mass movement of people into the valley areas, meant that the older Anglican churches started to be displaced. As ED Lewis writes, ‘the ‘coal rush’ quickly tilted the balance in

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favour of dissent’ and nonconformity became the primary religious influence in Wales.\textsuperscript{71} Chapels grew at a fast rate and from 1800 to 1850 ‘the number of Welsh places of nonconformist worship rose from 1,300 to 3,800’.\textsuperscript{72} According to the records of the 1851 religious census: ‘On the Sunday that the census took place, over half the population of Wales were recorded as present in the pews, and two out of three were Nonconformists.’\textsuperscript{73} What is more, each community had a chapel. As Lise Hull notes: ‘the Welsh willingly erected chapels to serve themselves… While their distinctive features make them readily recognisable, each is different, emphasising the independence of congregations from each other’.\textsuperscript{74}

The Rhondda, which has been described as ‘physically and ideologically marked by religion, and by Nonconformity in particular’,\textsuperscript{75} attracted influential preachers who became community leaders, bringing with them their ‘burning enthusiasm and remarkable energy’.\textsuperscript{76} However, in the closing years of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, secularisation within Wales meant that ‘the average Rhondda miner’s love for the culture of Welsh Nonconformity was in danger of being submerged by new and powerful forces’.\textsuperscript{77} This was as a result of other attractions, such as socialism, organised sport and cinema. Chapel attendance sharply declined and by the middle of the century, as Martin Johnes writes, the chapels that had been ‘bastions of welshness’ were now ‘falling away’.\textsuperscript{78}

**Positive and empowering**

In many ways, chapels and churches offered experiences not available in formal education. Such experiences helped to give the cohort confidence and skills, the provision of which they found lacking in their school lives. Rhondda chapels and churches were empowering to the cohort. Given the rapid decline of chapel attendance during the course of the century, its influence and importance may have varied depending on the age of the Rhondda women.

\textsuperscript{73} Chambers, *Religion, secularisation and social change in Wales*, 5
\textsuperscript{75} Williams, Democratic Rhondda, 18.
\textsuperscript{76} Lewis, *The Rhondda Valleys*, 220.
\textsuperscript{77} For a fuller discussion on secularisation see Chambers *Religion, secularisation and social change in Wales*, 20; Lewis, *The Rhondda Valleys*, 224.
\textsuperscript{78} Johnes, *Wales Since 1939*, 26 and 141.
Marion, one of the oldest members of the cohort, reflected on how chapel had been a key influence in her life outside formal education. As an adult Marion had enjoyed amateur musical theatre. Yet she regretted that at school:

there was no drama. The only social things you got... you couldn’t have after school activities because of the War. You’d been out with air raids and things and you’d have to come home so there was no after school activities.

However, it was the chapels which made a difference in Marion’s life:

in contrast but the only activity—in most of the areas in the Rhondda—were the church and chapels. They provided everything really. I have always gone—got married there. There were drama groups then and every chapel put on operettas, children’s operettas. I always managed to get a part in those and I did enjoy it and as I got older I ran the Sunday School for years and years and years which helped, - and the children always came to see me. And yes I always think I had a bit of an influence there.

There is a certain ambiguity about who was ‘helped’ by Marion’s actions as an older woman in chapel. Certainly such activities were beneficial for the children who attended chapel but there is a strong hint that this also gave Marion increased confidence. Jude Brigley, reflecting on her youth when she attended chapel in the south Wales town of Maesteg, recalled how: ‘At chapel we learnt to understand narrative, to dispute and deconstruct the text, to disagree yet act with formality and restraint. From hymns came poetry, from sermons came speech, from textual study came awareness of language.’ 79 Such an experience proved to be a formative one for her for her later life as a teacher and writer. Marion’s experiences, like those of Jude Brigley, were similar in that they gave her a good grounding for the future.

Musical activities provided by the churches and chapels of the Rhondda were very influential on the lives of some of the cohort. Such a tradition had strong roots in Wales. As Gareth Williams, in his study on the tradition of choral singing in Wales, writes: ‘The outpouring of musicality was enabled by a concentration of population which provided a market and an audience, by middle-class patrons and philanthropic employers, and most of all, by the all-pervasive influence of non-conformity’. 80

Ruth believed that any shortcomings in her formal education were supplemented by her mother’s love of music and the inspiring way she encouraged Ruth to learn. Ruth described how her mother was: ‘very musical you know. She would sit down in the night and she’d go through psalm books and hymn books with me. You know, just singing the hymns’.

80 Williams, Valleys of Song, 114.
Some of the cohort also believed they benefitted from the way in which Rhondda chapels and churches gave them a sense of belonging. Some of the women attributed an increased achievement and self-esteem to the activities of churches and chapel. In an autobiographical account, Enid Morgan has written of her own experience in the Welsh Baptist tradition, which accords with the experiences of some of the cohort:

There is much glib talk these days of the chapels and guilt; there is less that acknowledges the warmth of the chapel community, the love and concern for individuals, the way in which young people were nurtured, valued and affirmed.\(^{81}\)

Like Enid Morgan, some of the women were ‘nurtured, valued and affirmed’. As discussed in chapter two, these were good practice often missing in their formal education.

The cohort’s testimonies suggest how chapel gave structure and security to young women’s lives, offering up new experiences and opportunities. Marion Tawe Davies reflected on her time at Zoar Chapel in Ystalyfera in the Swansea Valley:

It is difficult to explain the atmosphere on a Sunday evening as we listened intently to Mr Jones’ sermon. It was as if we were “at peace with the world”. Maybe it was because we were young, with our future before us, and anything was possible.\(^{82}\)

Like Marian Tawe Davies, Irene readily embraced what chapel offered her. As she explained:

Well the attitude was that you went to chapel and you were expected to go Sunday night, sometimes I had to go to Sunday School you attended Sunday School. You even had exams in Sunday School. And of course being a big chapel, a huge chapel we had our section behind, we had school rooms and it was a... oh it was a huge chapel. There were two levels of school rooms that you... it went from tiny tots up and then there was a hall above where there was a balcony and that’s where we had penny readings.

Irene enjoyed the fact that she could participate and enjoy many cultural activities:

That was great because there was music and it was art, you know, and I had to take part of course......and of course Christmas time we had concerts, wonderful concerts and my parents when my father was well my parents took part and they had great singers there Christmas time. So you were very much involved, I was very much involved with the music in as much as I had to go to rehearsals with my mother for the ladies choir or the mixed choir and you went and you sat and you kept quiet because there were no baby sitters then. So I was brought up in that attitude of music which was great.

At the heart of Irene’s comments is the existence of Wales’ musical legacy. This, as Gareth Williams so richly describes has its foundations built on ‘the enormous musical vitality of these south Wales valleys, from oratoria to amateur opera, from drum-and-fife bands to


\(^{82}\) Davies, ‘Zoar Baptists’ in *Changing Times*, 123.
working-class orchestras, from temperance anthems to the palace of varieties’. The writer Gwyn Thomas who was born in Cymmer, Rhondda in 1913 was equally convinced about the importance of music to Welsh men and women. In a 1975 radio talk he remarked how: ‘The valley where I was born was one vast choral impulse. If you had more than a fag end of a voice and there happened to be room for one more on the stage you were just whipped in to the nearest choral unit’. Musical taste may have changed over the course of the twentieth century in Wales. Yet it would be difficult to argue against the premise that Wales and its mining communities like the Rhondda were quite distinct in their love of music and this culture enabled many young women to flourish.

The cohort’s engagement with nonconformity also provided them with social activities, something which enhanced their lives outside formal education. Ruth described how she:

used to have youth club once a week which we all loved because it was a way of getting to know the boys. Then we used to have what they called- a pleasant fellowship where they’d have something different every week. They used to have a New Year’s eve party you know your life was sort of centred around there.

The chapels and churches that existed in the mining communities of south Wales were places, not just for formal religion, but centres of the community, offering much in the way of a social life. As Ian Pincombe notes in his study of the dance culture in post-war south Wales: ‘there were lots of churches running Friday and Saturday gigs’. Such places were important to the lives and outlook of the cohort.

**Chapel as negative and limiting**

But while chapel was a place of belonging for some of the cohort, for others it also reinforced their sense of exclusion. In chapter two I discussed how some of the women felt alienated from schooling. Chapel clearly helped some young women to compensate for this by offering alternatives by improving skills and increasing self-esteem. However, some of the cohort experienced chapel differently and as an alienating experience. It also represented a ‘joylessness’. Stella experienced attending chapel as ‘depressing—you were sinning. I went

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83 Williams, *Valleys of Song*, 5

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a few times in the 50s. Couldn’t get over it as it was so depressing’. But she also felt that she
did not belong in any case. As she explained, in chapel there was:

A class distinction. Lots of people had businesses in the vicinity and if you didn’t belong you
weren’t part of that. All people who went to Salem—old Mr Evans had started Salem. All worked in
Thomas and Evans. All higher people school teachers... I went to Cymmer Chapel—all spoke Welsh.
I couldn’t speak it and they would look at you as if you had come out of another world. They looked
down their noses at me.

A strong sense of being an outsider from, or conversely belonging to, the community is a
recurring theme throughout this thesis. Stella clearly felt an outsider from chapel as she had
from school. As highlighted in chapter one, communities are complex and not singular.
Stella’s testimony here invokes feelings of being excluded because of language. A number of
writers have talked about this emotion in relation to the Rhondda, which resonates with the
experiences of the cohort. The writer Rhys Davies, who was born in Blaenclydach in 1901
and left the Rhondda at 20, believed himself to all intents and purposes to be an outsider
within his own community. His sexuality was clearly a factor, but in addition:

Davies felt both part of his community and yet excluded from it by his status as the grocer’s son. His
sense of alienation, of a divided self, his bewildered sense of “difference”, of being at a tangent to
the world, may be traced to this fact.87

While chapel was a positive experience for some of the cohort, it also reflected the gender
inequality of society at large. For example, women were very evident within chapel life as
worshippers, but their roles were nevertheless secondary to men. There were no women
leaders who could act as role models to young women. Ruth described how ‘there were no
women priests or ministers. There were no womendeacons. That was unheard of... There
were no women officers. There were a lot of women in the church but held no positions.’ In
her testimony, Ruth compares her life in church, and her eventual accession to the position of
an elder. Ruth testifies to changes that have occurred in her life and in society as a whole:

Ruth: Yes I am an elder now—that’s what they call them now.

CC: So when do you think that would have changed?

Ruth: Quite recent in the late 1980s I would say or later. Because we’ve recently had a woman
minister and that is the first one we have had like.

The Church, like other institutions, experienced and continues to experience its share of
gender inequality. It was not until March 1994 that ‘[t]he Church of England finally agreed to

87 Ibid, 22.
the ordination of women.’ 88 Nonconformist chapels were much less formally structured than
the Anglican Church, which as Richard Hoggart emphasises was ‘associated with privilege,
with the upper classes, with ritual’. 89 In terms of gender equality, it was mainly men who led
the chapels. However, in the post-war years, women became an ‘important force for change’.
They tended to outnumber men in the congregation, and social activities organised and led by
women members predominated. 90 Transformation has clearly taken place concerning the
greater dominance of women in church and chapel life during the end of the twentieth
century. Such changes have occurred in the course of the cohort’s lifetimes and their
testimonies further validate this.

Chapels were more than just a religious force in the lives of the cohort; they also acted to
police their conduct. As Deirdre Beddoe notes, their influence was such that it applied ‘strict
control over their behaviour and at the same time being the hub of their social lives’. 91 For
Kathleen, an Anglican, it was ‘the people in the church’ who raised their voices to condemn
her failure to pass the eleven-plus. Kathleen also described how: ‘The fact that I was pregnant
three months after I got married wasn’t very nice’, both in the eyes of family members and
‘even the vicar’.

While churches and chapels in the Rhondda acted as the centre of the cohort’s social life,
there were still constraints put on them. Betty recollected how at ‘St Johns church hall’ she
had met her husband:

it was all sequence dancing and I can remember the MC up there they would shout—a couple in the
corner would start jiving and he would say “no jiving in the corner there please”. You weren’t
allowed to jive.

Many of the cohort talked about their fondness for dancing. In the post-war years it was
certainly the ‘usual way of meeting a boy’. 92 ‘Jiving’ was closely associated with the arrival
of US culture. 93 Its prohibition was possibly a sign of the church’s fear of anything regarded
as subversive or different. But it was also a sign of how much the Rhondda had a distrust of
outside forces or new influences. Margaret Tegwen John talking to Catrin Edwards recalls
how she had to go outside the Rhondda to experience the new 50s youth culture: ‘First rock

90 Chambers, Religion, secularisation and social change in Wales, 82.
92 Claire Langhamer, Women’s Leisure in England 1920 –60 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000),
117.
93 See Peter Hennessy, Having It So Good (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 85.
and roll we ever seen was when we went down the Palais de Danse in Bridgend, was the first time we saw a teddy boy, because we never saw any teddy boys or anything up in the Rhondda.’ 94 That is the context within which the cohort would be defined.

Adherence to religious life and church and chapel attendance continued to decrease during the middle years of the twentieth century. Yet, at the same time, the cohort hinted at the fact that the values associated with belief and tied up with being a part of the Rhondda itself still remained under the surface. Although Irene moved away from the Rhondda, its influence still remained. Irene felt that chapel could be stifling but she vowed that:

   when I go to London I’m not going to a chapel at all [laugh] and the first thing I did I went to chapel because I met a gang of Welsh girls and of course they were all going up to town and... oh god we were going to King’s Cross. And I used to go to King’s Cross with them and I think... I said I wasn’t going to chapel again [laugh] and I still went. And then when I moved to the hostel and B my friend who lives in Canada now she was in the hostel as well she was church, so we used to go to Trafalgar Square to St Martin-in-the-Fields. So on Sunday nights we’d go there.

Irene had made a conscious effort to leave behind that which was associated with the Rhondda when she went to London to work. However, as her testimony demonstrates, such influences, which had been so strong in her youth, would prove difficult to dismiss. In many ways her references to religion were less to do with pure belief and more to do with its associations.

Grace Davie’s position on ‘believing without belonging’ has been at the centre of debates within the historiography on religion in Britain in more recent times. 95 Davie’s contention that religious identity remains even though the institutions are absent has clearly been influential. Yet this has been challenged somewhat by Peter Brierley and Robin Gill who have argued that belief is acquired by belonging to the institution in the first instance. 96 Davie also makes some slight modifications to her earlier iterations on the notion of ‘belief without belonging’. 97 In a later work she reflects on the changing approaches to belief, arguing that there is evidence of a ‘growing number of British people who have indeed lost their moorings in the institutional churches, but not their inclination to believe’.

Consequently, for them, ‘belief becomes individualised, detached, undisciplined and

94 Margaret Tegwen John, in Voices from the Factory Floor, 17.
97 Davie, Religion in Britain since 1945.
heterogeneous’. Irene’s testimony resonates with Davie’s contention to a large degree. A vestige of belief mixed with the strong ties that she had with her community, and all that these represented both positively and negatively, would remain with her for many years.

Nonconformity, as it was experienced in the Rhondda, was a powerful influence in the lives of the cohort. Nonconformity in the Rhondda provided a rich alternative curriculum of education, which successfully supplemented a formal education that was deficient. Where the cohort felt ignored and marginalised, chapel, with its roots in the community, reached out and embraced. However, nonconformity, in some instances, reinforced the cohort’s sense of not belonging and alienation. It also did not challenge the status quo in terms of the continuation of gender inequalities. As with the other influences, the cohort’s early engagement with nonconformity appeared to be long, and lasted well into adulthood. Despite the continuing decline of religious adherence in Wales throughout the twentieth century, values and skills the cohort absorbed from chapel life stayed with them.

**Conclusion**

The extent to which the Rhondda women were able to lead fulfilled, satisfying lives was partly determined by the social capital they acquired. This, as outlined earlier, was achieved through the contributions of family, teachers and chapel, which all proved to be powerful influences in the lives of the cohort. Evidence in this chapter supports but also challenges existing literature regarding the three influences on the lives of women. Specifically, in terms of parental attitudes, the cohort’s experiences did not bear out previous suggestions that daughters’ education, as opposed to that of sons, was becoming more important. Much of the literature also illustrates the degree to which the teaching profession was held in high esteem, particularly in Wales. Yet this chapter has shone a spotlight on the contribution they made to both failing and supporting the cohort to reach fulfilment. In addition, while the literature points to the extent that religion was in decline in the mid twentieth century, the women’s testimonies illustrate how forceful a role it played in their lives. However, it was not an overt faith or religiosity on the part of the cohort which was significant. Rather, what predominates is the close allegiance chapel had to the area. All three influences were firmly embedded in the community life of the Rhondda. For good or bad, all three had a long lasting influence on

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the life trajectories of the cohort. Indeed, it seemed that such early influences helped to set a pattern for the way the cohort’s lives unfolded.

Of note in this chapter is the sense that the three influences, although seemingly individual and disparate, through the importance attached to them by the women’s testimonies, become symbols of the Rhondda itself. As Linda Martin Alcoff argues:

‘Individuals make their own identity, but not under conditions of their own choosing. In fact, identities are often created in the crucible of colonialism, racial and sexual subordination, and national conflicts, but also in the specificity of group histories and structural position.’

It follows, then, that the identities of the cohort are closely aligned with those symbols relating to their ‘group histories’, which thus reinforces a strong sense of belonging. Finally, at best, the teachers, family and chapel supplemented a deficient and unequal system of formal education. At worst, the three influences reinforced the status quo of gendered inequalities, alienation and isolation.

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Chapter 4 Employment

Irene’s friends thought she was ‘crackers’ for leaving the familiarity of the Rhondda in 1956 for an unknown future in Essex. The friends ‘couldn’t understand’ why she wanted to go. They ‘were quite content with what their life was’. Irene, on the other hand, was ‘fed up’ and wanted to escape the ‘oppression’ of home and sought the freedom of a life and employment outside the Rhondda. Despite being coerced by family and community, she nevertheless relinquished her life in the Rhondda where she had grown up. She removed herself physically from that community. However, it is debateable whether the emotional ties were severed.

The contradictory and polarised themes of opportunity, thwarted ambition, escape and strong community ties, as contained in Irene’s account, are a starting point for a discussion around the working lives of the ten women of the Rhondda cohort. In chapter four, I examine their testimonies in terms of their employment opportunities. I consider the extent to which the cohort’s aspirations, within the post-war context of reconstruction and new beginnings, matched the realities of their lives. Specifically, chapter four will consider six themes. These relate to the extent to which jobs in the Rhondda in the post-war years continued along the same gender-segregated path that proved rather disappointing for most of the cohort. The chapter will examine how women were compromised in their work simply because they were universally defined by their domestic roles. As women they found themselves constantly pressured into accepting local jobs, which limited their choices and disadvantaged them.

In chapter four, I argue first that despite the suggestion of a more just society, the cohort continued to be limited by work that was undervalued as ‘women’s work’. Second, the cohort was influenced by the need to enter what they regarded as respectable work. Despite this ambition, such work proved disappointingly and stubbornly low status. Such jobs did not live up to the women’s aspirations for a more equal career trajectory. Third, the cohort was limited by the expectation that they remain local to the community. While this situation did present limitations to the women in terms of the variability of jobs, it nevertheless enabled them to seek and receive support from family and community networks.
Women’s paid work in Britain

The end of the Second World War marked a change in women’s experiences of paid work in Britain. The war provided some new job opportunities for women, who were expected to fill the vacancies left by servicemen. In engineering, for example, women’s participation rose from ‘10 per cent to 34 per cent’. In the chemical industry the figure was ‘27 per cent to 52 per cent’. Likewise, increases of women workers rose from ‘32 per cent to 46 per cent in metals’.¹ Yet the women who replaced the men were often faced with ‘hostility’, and their efforts were minimised as they ‘were not considered to be as important and valuable as male workers.’² At the end of the war, women in Britain were expected to once more take on the ‘domestic role’.³ However, the ‘buoyant demand for women’s labour in the 1940s’ meant that women and particularly married women were also encouraged back into the workforce.⁴

The scenario for women’s employment within Wales was markedly different. Post-war Wales was ‘dominated’ by coal and steel, and moreover ‘these industries were overwhelmingly male’.⁵ In the years following the end of the war, young women who did not continue with their education were increasingly entering a range of jobs which were becoming increasingly available and targeted at the female population, albeit many of which remained low paid and low status.⁶ Such jobs included factory work. An important recent historical record of this sector can be found in Voices from the Factory Floor. During 2013–14, over 200 oral history interviews were carried out with women throughout Wales on their time working in manufacturing between 1945 and 1975.⁷ The diversity of experiences illustrated by the archive shines a welcome spotlight on women in the post-war years. The onset of the new welfare state after the war offered new opportunities for women in health and caring professions. However, as Harriet Jones cautions, the increase in opportunities did not equate

¹Gerry Holloway, Women and Work in Britain since 1840 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 165.
³Holloway, Women and Work in Britain since 1840, 164.
⁶Beddoe, Out of the Shadows, notes how ‘by 1947 more new industry had gone to south Wales than any other part of Britain. Part of the attraction to industrialists was the huge reservoir of female labour’, 139
⁷Women’s Archive of Wales, Voices from the Factory Floor: The experiences of women who worked in the manufacturing industries in Wales, 1945–1975.
with an increase in status and many women recruits were ‘confined to the lowest paid and least regarded jobs in in the sector’.\(^8\)

**Low paid, menial and disappointing**

For those women in the south Wales valleys who left school with few or no qualifications, the opportunities for employment were narrow in scope. Such jobs included office work, factory work and retail. Patricia Howard was born in 1943 in the Rhondda. Recalling her time doing factory work she described it as ‘soul-destroying’.\(^9\) Like Patricia, some of the women had very negative experiences of work after leaving school. Their jobs proved to be menial, low paid and unfulfilling. On leaving school at fifteen in 1949, Betty went to work in a local factory. She only stayed there for three days describing it as ‘very grotty… and it was dirty’. On leaving school at sixteen in 1945, Marion went to work for a local ‘architect and surveyor… a bit of a crusty old character’. Although she enjoyed the role, which was clerical work, she admitted to being ‘very poorly paid’.

Some of the women were also very disappointed by the work they obtained after leaving school. They discovered the ambitions and aspirations they harboured while at school were not matched by the employment they eventually secured. When Kathleen attended secretarial college in 1957 she held high hopes of becoming ‘a court reporter’; but the job she entered on leaving the college, a solicitor’s office, was far from this. She recalled:

> I did very little except make the tea and answer the telephone because you were such a junior. And I thought I was going there to take shorthand and do letters you know. It was very disappointing. You were very much the junior.

Kathleen almost looked beyond me and seemed to be momentarily transported back to her youth when she told me enthusiastically and excitedly that ‘of course all girls had these aspirations—“I might be a secretary you know.” ’ But then her voice changed and became flat when she said: ‘But it didn’t turn out like that’. The future that Kathleen imagined, which seemed at the outset to be full of promise, did not materialise. She went to work in a neighbouring town as an office clerk, reflecting with a note of sadness that: ‘I don’t think the wages they paid covered my bus fare’. ;


\(^9\) Howard, *Voices from the Factory Floor*, 2.
There was a poignancy in the way Kathleen discussed her ambitions of becoming a court reporter. The job suggests a certain glamour, the promise of excitement and a career very much in the public eye, which was in complete contrast to the job she did enter. Thwarted by not achieving her goal, she entered into what she regarded as a mundane job. Her description of making ‘the tea’ was very much attached to the private sphere of domesticity. Kathleen’s entry into work reflected a time of juxtaposition between ideas of womanhood as, on the one hand, belonging to domesticity and on the other, working life.\(^\text{10}\) As Stephanie Spencer notes, ‘[c]hanging moral codes also meant that the idea of marriage as the holy grail for female school leavers was diminishing and the persona of the career girl… who combined home and family was increasingly accepted.’\(^\text{11}\)

The cohort’s dissatisfaction with their employment can also be attributed to the situation of women’s earning power in the post-war years. Though women’s paid employment increased in the post-war period, women continued to lag behind men. As Joanna Bourke argues, despite the ‘remarkable movement’ of married women into jobs in the post-war period, there was little sign that they should be adequately rewarded for their endeavours. Women’s full-time equivalent wages were only ‘51 percent’ of the average full-time wages of men.\(^\text{12}\) In Wales, as Deirdre Beddoe notes, by 1948 women’s average wages at £3 18s a week were only half that of men who were getting £7 3s a week.\(^\text{13}\) In terms of 2014 this equates to £126.70 per week for women and £232.20 for men.\(^\text{14}\) Women’s activity rates in Wales were also considerably lower than in the rest of the Britain. In 1951, there were 24.96 per cent of women of working age employed in Wales compared to 43 per cent in the rest of Britain. In 1961 the figure was 28.02 per cent to 47 per cent.\(^\text{15}\)

Contemporary social studies of the 1950s and 1960s emphasised the breakup of traditional working-class communities through migration and affluence. As Martin Johnes argues:

‘Many people were moving up the social ladder thanks to educational achievement, better wages, increased consumerism and new housing, ending the old idea of a working class

\(^\text{11}\) Stephanie Spencer, *Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 104.
\(^\text{14}\) See the ‘purchasing power calculator’ in [www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com).
united by poverty.' Yet, living in the Rhondda limited the cohort’s job opportunities. While many women may have travelled outside the Rhondda for work, most of the cohort remained close to home and took only very local jobs. Only Ruth, Enid and Irene worked more than 13 miles from their homes. The Rhondda was dependent on its main industry namely coalmining. Although there were new jobs becoming available, in the main, the ‘male, mono-industrial culture remained dominant’. By working locally the cohort could only rely on a small pool of jobs where quality and choice did not always exist. The cohort’s experiences of work in and around the Rhondda was largely disappointing. In the main the jobs they entered were unfulfilling. While the post-war years offered new opportunities, the cohort, because of their gender, backgrounds and community ties, did not benefit.

‘Tidy’ jobs and factory work

Kathleen explained how one indicator of success in the Rhondda was to get a ‘tidy job’. Such jobs were highly valued, were seen as having better prospects and were more respectable. In contrast, other jobs were looked down upon. Kathleen described how her mother had reacted to a friend taking a job that was not regarded as ‘tidy’:

> Well there was an old friend of mine. It was terrible. She left before the end of term and got herself a job in a garage. Oh my mother thought a garage was not good enough for you so you waited until you could get a very tidy job with a solicitor’s.

Kathleen’s friend was doing clerical work in a garage. The job itself would have been similar to other clerical environments. Yet it was located in a blue collar workplace with all its associations of getting one’s hands dirty. Jeffrey Weeks in his case study of Rhondda life in the post-war years, described women’s work as ‘the unremitting hard labour that caring for the home involved with large families, poor domestic conditions, overcrowding and a constant battle against grime and coal dust’.

Such a ‘battle’ shaped the deeper ambition that parents had for their children to enter clean jobs, which had not been their own experiences. Furthermore, such an ambition was, it seemed, part of the psyche of Rhondda people.

However, the reaction of Kathleen’s mother suggests a deeper level of meaning. Evidently, some working-class parents held even greater aspirations for their children than was the case

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16 Johnes, *Wales Since 1939*, 122
for others within their own community. Class divisions and differences may be another indicator of the diverse nature of the Rhondda. While theoretically it was politically egalitarian, the realities were very different.

Kathleen only stayed working in the solicitor’s office for a short time because she then passed the examination to work for the ‘Council’. To her delight, both she and her friend succeeded in this with the result that ‘we were made. It was the best jobs in the Valley then.’ The Council referred to was Rhondda Borough Council, which had replaced the former Urban District Council in 1955. Tidy jobs, like those available in Rhondda Borough Council, as in other parts of Britain, were created as a result of legislation relating to the new welfare state. This legislation ‘spawned a huge bureaucracy’, which meant new opportunities for women, particularly ‘in government departments’. But while tidy jobs were much sought after, for women they were not without their problems. As Harriet Jones argues, ‘this army of female workers who staffed the welfare state were often confined to the lowest paid and least regarded jobs in the sector’. Ruth went to work in the Civil Service and although that was regarded as ‘tidy’ by the community, she nevertheless believed that she too was affected by low pay:

I mean the money in the civil service was dreadful- I used to earn 44 shillings a week and I used to pay 7 and 9 bus fare out of that and give my mother ten shillings so I really couldn’t afford to do a lot.

In addition to the problems of low pay, the cohort encountered entrenched discrimination and barriers in their employment, which meant that they were at a considerable disadvantage in achieving promotion. Ruth had worked in the Civil Service before she had her daughter and had ‘started off as a temporary clerical assistant and ended up as an executive officer’. Her career path had been good and she acknowledged there were possibilities opening up for women. Nevertheless she accepted that full equality for women was still a long way off. As she explained: ‘saying that, most of the top civil servants were men’.

The Rhondda was just one area in south Wales where manufacturing jobs were also becoming available immediately before or shortly after the war. This rapid expansion of employment created new opportunities for young women of the Rhondda. However, changes

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20 Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 143.
to the employment patterns of the area attracted fierce criticism and a backlash towards women who benefitted from these new opportunities. There was some resistance from male trade unions because of the displacement of men, a view that existed across other south Wales valley areas. News that the Board of Trade was expecting the majority of workers on the new Rhigos Trading Estate to be women was met with strong opposition from one Aberdare councillor, as reported in the *Aberdare Leader*: ‘That was not what our boys fought for: to place the responsibility of earning money on the women while the men are on the dole.’ 22 Another journalist fulminated that:

Is it time to cry a halt and to return to the old-fashioned view that it is the man’s job to go out to earn the family’s income and that the woman’s natural sphere is the home, where she must be and is indispensable?23

At the beginning of the 1950s, the Rhondda ‘had a total of 29 thriving factories’.24 The women of the Rhondda worked in new factories such as Hitachi in Hirwaun (in a neighbouring valley) but also more locally. Local factories included EMI, an electronics factory in Treorchy employing many workers,25 and Polikoffs where the production of clothing started in 1939. In the coming years the workforce was made up of mainly ‘girls and young women’ and reached 1,500.26 Other manufacturing workplaces included Porth Textiles, Trefano, Flex Fasteners and Gainsborough Flowers. Factory work proved to be a popular occupation for young women who did not stay on in school or college, a factor apparent in the recollections of the women interviewed.

Yet some of the cohort were uneasy about the idea of factory work and were aware that, in some quarters, factory work was seen as not respectable.27 There was also an impression that young women who worked in factories were sexually available, something that seemed to bother some of the cohort. Being regarded as not respectable in working-class communities was strongly associated with promiscuity. However, this only applied to women. As Hera Cook argues, such double standards meant that: ‘The “easy ones”, the girls with whom the “local lads” could have sexual intercourse were treated with contempt and unkindness, while

22 *Aberdare Leader*, 13 October 1945.
23 *South Wales Echo*, 29 January 1946.
24 From ‘The demise of a factory’ by Malcom Saunders in [www.walesonline.co.uk](http://www.walesonline.co.uk) 5 April 2007.
25 See Patricia’s Howard’s account of working there in *Voices from the Factory Floor*.
26 Malcom Saunders ibid; See also Margaret Tegwen John’s very happy account of working there with particular reference to its camaraderie and acquisition of skills in *Voices from the Factory Floor*.
27 Phyllis Powell described how factory work had a ‘bad reputation’ amongst parents in *Voices from the Factory Floor*.
good girls were admired for their lack of sexual awareness’.28 Such attitudes meant that some parents clearly did not want factory work for their children. Kathleen described how her parents had reacted to the idea of factory work: ‘And all the time during that period there was concern about me that I was a duffer because “if you don’t pull your socks up you will end up in Polikoffs or the Pop Shed”. That was the threat.’

The cohort themselves were affected by these attitudes, although they were clearly uncomfortable. Lowering her voice, Shirley seemed apologetic when she described:

it was an awful thing to say but you wouldn’t want to work in a factory. That wasn’t so respectful. Treforest Estate. Oh yes factory girls. I shouldn’t say this but a lot of my friends were [laugh] and then you used to say ‘Oh you’re a bit snobbish working in an office.

But while both Shirley and Kathleen were aware of strong disapproval of this at the time, they questioned this many years later. Rhetorically Kathleen asked:

And was it such a terrible place? I mean at that point in time at 14, my brother was starting to go out with girls and he thought Polikoffs’ girls were very nice [laugh].

CC: And they used to earn a bit too?

Kathleen: Yes.

After considering the situation, Shirley came to the conclusion that ‘really they earned more money than you and when they’d go out in the night they would be looking smarter than you. I shouldn’t say that should I?’ The irony was that although factory work was not seen as a good or ‘tidy’ career, it paid more in comparison with other jobs. As such, given the higher wages, factory jobs would have given young women the edge in terms of more independence and freedom. Some of the cohort were conflicted about this. During the course of this section of the interview, Shirley twice attempted to correct herself by the way she said ‘I shouldn’t say that should I?’ This suggests the extent to which she was aware of the importance of respectability in Rhondda life in her youth, an influence that still weighed on her. Conversely, over the course of her lifetime, she has questioned such attitudes. Both Shirley and Kathleen’s reflections indicate the changes to attitudes that women held about themselves and others during the post-war era. While respectability was clearly predominant in the immediate post-war years, women’s aspirations and perspectives towards self-determination and independence were clearly becoming more prominent.

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The cohort’s experiences of and reflections about both ‘tidy’ and factory jobs suggested a dilemma, one that did not affect young men. To earn more money, and therefore be more independent by working in a factory as opposed to entering a tidy job, was a risk for some of the cohort because it determined perceptions of respectability by community and family.

**Paid work and fulltime wives**

The cohort defined their own paid employment as secondary to their husbands and families. Betty explained how she negotiated her paid work in a local factory in the Rhondda around her domestic role and the support she gave to her husband. She said, ‘when I went to work then he was home about half past three, well then I would give him his food, make food for the children, then I used to go to work then.’ Betty was working what is known as the ‘Twilight Shift’, an early evening shift. Due to labour shortages in the late 1940s, women were particularly targeted to make up the shortfall and such an arrangement was attractive to married women with families. The twilight shift was initiated as a result of the Factories (Evening Employment) Order of 1950, which opened up the possibility for married women to combine paid work and domestic responsibility. Many married women in the Rhondda, like Betty, undertook such shift patterns. It was certainly convenient for women who were making a financial contribution to their families. However, it ‘tended to fix the notion that married women’s paid work was peripheral’.  

By the same token, this ‘peripheral’ definition also helped to embed the view that married women’s work was temporary and disposable. The fact that Betty downplayed her role as a contributor to the family finances may be a feature and tradition of communities like the Rhondda. Margaret Williamson carried out a study involving women and men workers in East Cleveland, a mining community in the North Riding of Yorkshire that has a similar industrial heritage to the Rhondda. This study of a comparable community demonstrated how men and women’s roles remained stubbornly polarised, even though women were increasingly entering paid work in the years 1945–65. Key to Williamson’s findings was the

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30 Holloway, *Women in Work in Britain Since 1840*, 199.
direct link, like that of the Rhondda women, to ‘attitudes to women’s employment... [which were] influenced by ideas associated with companionate marriage’.  

Downplaying her paid employment in her youth as secondary to that of husband and family duty had an influence on the adult life of one of the cohort. Sandra married in 1964 and had her first child the following year. Before that, she had been employed for four years in a local factory doing administration and had been directly supervised by two male managers. Sandra told me how much she had enjoyed the work. She was very cheerful and positive when she explained: ‘It was very interesting because when I took them up, they were in a mess and I put them all right and he [one of the managers] was appreciative. I enjoyed that very much’. What she said, and more significantly, how she said it, told me that she had gained a lot of personal satisfaction from the job. It had also given her a sense of achievement and power. During this section of the interview there was a sudden change in tone when she told me about the circumstances surrounding her leaving her job. She was very animated up until this point but her tone changed and her voice seemed to trail off becoming more and more quiet when she told me that: ‘But I left after four years because I was having Angela and I wasn’t able to carry on because I had a rough time on Angela. I left and I haven’t worked since then.’

Sandra, now a widow, seemed rather melancholy and displayed a certain ennui. I sensed that her period of work represented a time when she felt more powerful and independent. Sandra shared a similar situation to most of the cohort: she had left paid employment when she started a family. But Sandra’s experience seemed to point to a heightened sense of loss. In 1963 Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. In this feminist classic Friedan writes about housewives in the United States:

> But on an April morning in 1959, I heard a mother of four, having coffee with other mothers in a suburban development fifteen miles from New York say in a tone of quiet desperation “the problem”. And the others knew without words, that she was not talking about a problem with her husband, or her children, or her home. Suddenly they realised they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name… Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say “I feel empty somehow… incomplete”. Or she would say “I feel as if I don’t exist”.

It may seem counterintuitive to compare Sandra’s life in the small close-knit community of the Rhondda with that of Friedan’s suburbanite New Yorkers. However, I found it hard not to

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31 Margaret Williamson, “‘I’m going to get a job in at the factory’: attitudes to women’s employment in a mining community, 1945-65”, *Women’s History Review* 12, no.3 (2003): 407–21.

draw parallels with the lack of fulfilment and emptiness that both Sandra and Friedan’s housewives were experiencing. From the evidence in her testimony, it appeared that Sandra’s life now had its roots in the barriers and disadvantages she faced as a young woman, which as I have argued in chapter two, was a result of her gender, the time and the community dynamics. This was a woman who, despite showing academic ability, had seen her promising future prematurely end when she was forced to leave school by her parents. She seemed to gain a certain independence from her short period of work. However, that was replaced by the expectation and reality of her new life of financial dependence and the inevitability and ‘isolation’ of motherhood. In hindsight I regret that I did not probe deeper as to the reasons why Sandra decided not to take up even part time work like that of other Rhondda women.

This lack of power to which I allude was visibly reinforced during part of the interview. Sandra’s adult son was living with her. He was out of the room but was obviously listening to some of the interview because, when she hesitated, he would suggest some possible responses. Occasionally he even corrected her account, a response that prompted Sandra to raise her eyebrows slightly. She did, however, say little to challenge this and seemed rather resigned to the situation. This led me to believe that such interventions, while clearly well meaning, nevertheless entrenched Sandra’s dependence and the restatement of male authority in her life. Significantly, over her lifetime, male authority presented by parents, husband and now adult son, had only been interrupted by the short term of paid employment. Paid work for Sandra represented the chance for self-fulfilment and, continuing the allegory, the opportunity for experiencing ‘A Room of One’s Own’. Yet this was not an option for her. Like many other Rhondda women in similar circumstances, she set aside her own ambitions and interests in favour of those of family.

**Mothers in the workplace**

Betty had worked in Trefano shoe factory until she had her first child. Talking about this experience she explained: ‘when he was a toddler I went back to work but I only worked nineteen weeks because Mark was pining so I had to finish. My mother was looking after him. He was about two, two and a half’. Betty was typical of the rest of the cohort in that she

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had ended her employment when she had her first child. For many women, undertaking paid work continued to be extremely challenging in the post-war period. They not only still shouldered the main burden of domestic and motherhood roles, they were also inevitably expected to do so. As David Kynaston argues, popular culture still dictated what a woman should ideally be: the ‘embodiment of femininity’, ‘dutiful’, a ‘good-companion wife’, an ‘ingenious, cost-effective, uncomplaining homemaker’, a ‘strict yet infinitely loving mother’. Not surprisingly, ‘it was a daunting, home-centred, fourfold role’.35

If they were working mothers, this dual role was regarded as a private matter for them, something to be managed and negotiated by them alone or with help given by other women. Betty’s experience of paid employment was that it had to be accommodated around her domestic role. Betty’s use of the word ‘pinning’ when mentioning absence from her son was very emotive and she clearly felt very guilty about this. I visited and interviewed Betty twice over a period of eight years, each time looking at different aspects of her life. Significantly, without prompting she used this exact expression on both occasions. This suggests that the guilt she may have experienced many years previously was still something with which she had not come to terms. This is unsurprising given the climate of the time, which put a lot of psychological pressure on working mothers. Mothers in the post-war period were heavily influenced by the prevailing propaganda, such as that of John Bowlby who argued that children would suffer maternal deprivation if looked after by adults other than their own mothers.36 In an area like Wales, with ‘deeply entrenched cultural assumptions’ about the different roles that men and women should undertake, that guilt may have been the greater.

Esme Williams had worked in a factory near Merthyr Tydfil in the 1950s. She recalled that ‘if you went out to work they used to say, “Oh well, they can’t be doing for the children”, and it did used to make me feel very guilty’.37 Betty, like Esme William, expressed the pressure she was under to abandon work, a disproportionate pressure on account of her gender, which would not have been felt by fathers. However, in talking about her daily work in Trefano, Betty also told me about one particular incident when her work had been praised:

> Oh one of the setters. He said you are too conscientious Betty but I was pasting the bottoms of the soles and they were a plush slipper and if you put too much glue on the bottom, all the glue would squelch over and it would mark all around. And this woman was helping me to paste them and it was

37 Kynaston, *Family Britain*, 579.
my job, but there was so much work there she was helping me and then the supervisor a Mrs Jackson and she had come on and she wanted to know who had pasted these slippers. And I thought Oh gosh we are in for a row by here now. And I said well I did. And this other lady said I didn’t do many of them but I wasn’t having a row. I was being praised for it because they didn’t have to clean too much around the edge so then when I said that then she wanted to take the praise as well laugh. No I quite liked my job.

As Betty recalled this incident, she was positive and elated. However, her demeanour changed when I asked my next question regarding whether she gained promotion during her time there. Betty seemed slightly surprised that I had suggested this to her, and she became instantly self-deprecating and unassuming. As she explained, she had remained ‘just being a factory hand’. Progression to supervisor was limited to those who were ‘quite a bit older than we were’, who in this instance were female employees who had already raised their families.

Working women created clear economic benefits. While incomes in Wales were not as high as in England, ‘for those men who did work, especially if their wives did too, the 1950s and early 1960s were good times’. However, women of childbearing age were not taken very seriously by employers. In addition, it seemed that Betty like many other mothers in the Rhondda did not expect it either. Equally, their priorities as mothers made them more likely to ‘choose casual unskilled work with few prospects of promotion’. During the post-war period there was little recognition of the particular skills women as mothers could offer to the workforce other than being a flexible and cheap source of labour. In contrast, contemporary evaluations of the skills that employees bring to their work do partially highlight and include that of both women and men. Such theories suggest that there are benefits relating to women’s contributions because they are mothers. As Green and Cassell point out, ‘The benefits of the successful management of diversity are seen to be very rich… [in terms of] better decision—making, greater creativity and innovation’. It is hard not to conclude that because the cohort were mothers, they were seen as outsiders in the workforce.

Assumptions and policies made about mothers in the workplace excluded the cohort as serious employees. As one such mother, Kathleen felt that her contribution was not as valued as that of men. She argued her case by describing what she regarded as a commonly held attitude among the community: ‘You were taking a man’s job, his livelihood away from him,

a man needs a job.’ Such a view was underscored by the notion that women would always be financially dependent on men. Such an assumption can be traced historically. As Ina Zweiniger-Bargieslowska notes:

When the franchise was extended from 1832 onwards, it became a privilege associated not only with property but with a distinctive notion of masculinity—only men primarily as heads of households, held the parliamentary franchise at the beginning of the twentieth century. Likewise women’s position in the labour market was marginalised as men, earning a breadwinners’ wage, came to be seen as the quintessential workers. While men were assumed to have to support dependents—women and children—female workers frequently could not command a wage adequate to maintain themselves.41

But these assumptions were also reinforced by policies in the workplace. Ruth had worked in the Civil Service where, as a matter of custom and practice, women were ‘required to resign upon marriage… [because] Whitehall chiefs generally viewed marriage—and by extension motherhood—as incompatible with the interests of the state’.42 In my conversation with Ruth, she described how the Civil Service had reacted to women workers and the extent of the marriage bar:

In the civil service when you got married you could take your gratuity, a marriage gratuity. If you took it you had to finish. Now I chose not to take it because I didn’t particularly want children. So I knew I was going to carry on working for a number of years but if you decided to take it you had to leave… the marriage gratuity… was a lump sum… It was handy money… it was so much for every year you’d worked.

The amount women could receive was enough for ‘a deposit for a house so if they intended say to have children within a year or two then it was worth them taking it you see’. Ruth’s evidence reveals the extent of the financial incentives to remove women from the workplace. It also shows how women themselves acquiesced with policies, which in many ways were instrumental in removing their talents from the workforce when they got married. However, in some cases, such mechanisms to exclude women from the workplace were subverted.

Kathleen described the innovative actions her colleague had taken to avoid being made to leave. The young woman ‘had a boyfriend for many, many years and she had a mother to support so she couldn’t leave her job so she was engaged for years and years!’

One of the cohort was also angry about the lack of support from trade unions. Kathleen, who married in 1965, talked about the frustrations she had experienced with her trade union. Kathleen, who worked as a clerk, believed that they had offered little support to working women. She resented the trade union official who had come for subscription payments,

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describing how: ‘when I was in the Council offices, you had to leave if you got married... NALGO [The National and Local Government Officers’ Association] rules’. She resented the fact that she, and other women like her, were taken for granted by the very organisation whose role it was to fight injustice. She continued:

There was competition for jobs in the education department because they were under the County and the Borough Council said you have to leave if you get married and this man used to come down with the Union tin and took a lot out of our pay really and used to say ‘yes you grizzle and you take your holidays’ and I honestly used to think well I would really like a job because if you were thinking about getting married you had to leave.

Kathleen expressed a mixture of anger and deep-seated frustration at what she perceived as grave unfairness. One aspect of this was the existence of marriage bars. They had been ‘lifted in teaching [1944] and in the Civil Service [1946]’. However, they existed informally alongside ‘isolated examples of the practice’ up until 1975 with the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act’. Trade unions too showed little support for women against marriage bars, which reinforced women’s undervalued status within the job market. They perceived women workers as ‘temporary employees and therefore relatively unimportant’. Carole Dyhouse argues that ‘labour politics and the emergence of social welfare in early twentieth-century Britain certainly served to institutionalize a conservative vision of family life’. Similarly, although the Rhondda community was left-leaning politically, it nevertheless was deeply traditionalist when it came to standing up for women’s rights as mothers in the workplace.

Although Enid was not a mother, her employer, the police force, nevertheless targeted her because of her ‘identification with childbearing and domestic life’. As such, Enid explained how she was assigned particular duties because of her gender. She recalls one incident when she was particularly selected because of the fact she was a woman officer:

While he [the Inspector] was there talking, a CID man came in and said he had a complaint and he needed the help of a police woman. Could I go with him? Yes by all means. So I went with him. That was my first day and after that I worked more and more with the CID.

CC: When they said it had to be a policewoman to do this particular work, what do you mean by that Enid?

43 Roberts, Women and Families, 117.
44 Holloway, Women and Work in Britain Since 1840, 219.
Enid: If a woman had been assaulted.

CC: Right. Is that domestic abuse?

Enid: It could be domestic abuse. It could be indecent assault, kids in the park things like that it could be. Attempted rape and it’s surprising how many of those go. I’ve attended to loads of them. But you need a woman to be with another woman. You’ll get many women who prefer to talk to a man because they are that way inclined.

The introduction of women into the police force was in response to ‘concerns about the treatment of women and girls by an all-male police force, especially in cases of sexual assault and partly emerged from nineteenth-century moral rescue philanthropy’. Interestingly, while Enid was chosen for certain duties partly because of her gender, she did not overly display those womanly skills, such as empathy. In describing to me the way she dealt with those cases assigned particularly to women police officers, she appeared both professional and pragmatic. Enid’s work was good and she was praised by her employers for her very thorough and meticulous approach to her detective work. She recalled some of the praise she received from the Chief Inspector:

He was a marvellous policeman. He sat next to me. I took the statement. Now after I finished I thought to myself “have I got it all?” And I turned to him and I said “would you mind reading through it before I get it signed first in case I’ve missed something?” He took it off me and he read it all the way through very carefully and he wrote down “Couldn’t have done it better myself.” And I thought “What a compliment! From him of all people!”

Enid also recalled an unexpected reaction she received from an Inspector who was not in favour of women in the police force:

I remember being told there was a man coming to Ferndale. He was going to be the Inspector. He’d been there years previously before the war when he was a policeman. He was a big man. He’d had a lot of war service and he did not like women in the force. I was told that. He doesn’t like women Enid so look out. “Oh!” I said “He can please himself. I’ll do my work and I couldn’t care less what he thinks. I’ll do the same with him as I’d done with every other Inspector I’d gone to.” I went to see him first. I said, “Is there anything in particular that you want to get in this statement?” He told me all about her. That should cover it. I went and I did it. When he had it back “Good God!” he said. “We’ve already won the case!” Because every point had to be covered.

Enid’s case suggests that there were some advantages to being a woman in a mainly male workplace. She gained experiences in the police force because of her sex. The fact that she was offered training in the CID also indicates some support for women. Although Enid was clearly competent—and recognisably so, as her testimony illustrates—there were, however, barriers to her being promoted. She told me that at the start of her police career ‘there was no

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establishment for a CID woman’. Although the situation changed later, there were obvious hurdles to her moving up the career ladder, some of which were of her own making. Furthermore, she seemed uncomfortable with what she was expected to do to get promotion. Reluctantly, she took up the offer of training to be ‘permanently in the CID’ dismissing it disdainfully as ‘Well I may as well, because I’m doing it now and I’m spending my time with them.’ She believed she was already competent. She described a three month training course in Yorkshire in 1964, which involved participating in ‘incidents that they put up for you, like as if you are in a play, and you deal with that and you show what you’d do and how you’d go about it, and all the rest of it’. This included searching for ‘clues’ in a ‘muddy’ forest. There were clearly tensions between her and her trainers. Enid explained how angry and reluctant she had been to carry out tasks which she believed were unnecessary, given her experience already: ‘I’d already been doing it—actual murders! These were put up jobs for us to train but I’d already been on things like that.’

Evidence suggests a gendered element to achieving promotion and that many women are less adept at this than men. As Singh et al argue:

- some individuals believe that for promotion, they have to deliver extremely high performance,
- manage impressions that they give, and build relationships with their superiors. However, there is evidence that women tend to believe that doing a good job is sufficient, and that political behaviours should not be necessary for promotion. Hence, women’s inclination to use IM [Impression Management] may not be as strong as that of males.49

From time to time during the interview, Enid talked about her achievements in the police service—for example she stated: ‘I don’t think there is any other woman in the police service who’s had as much experience as I’ve had’. When speaking about these achievements, Enid sought reassurance that anonymity would be guaranteed given that she was reluctant to praise herself and place herself in the spotlight. A pattern emerges with Enid, and presumably with many women, in which promotion did not sit easily. She was not inclined to play this game. She declined to participate in Impression Management and ultimately refused to conform.

The cohort regarded themselves as either mothers or potential mothers in the workplace. This label defined them and was a means of discriminating against them.

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49 Val Singh; Savita Kumra; Susan Vinnecombe, ‘Gender and Impression Management: Playing the Promotion Game’, *Journal of Business Ethics* 37, no.1 (2002): 77–89.
Close to home

Paid work in the post-war years had the potential to open up new opportunities for the cohort. However, these opportunities were compromised because the cohort were not given the same level of freedom as young men and were pressured into working very locally. One of the cohort felt obligated to stay at home to carry out unpaid caring duties. Stella, who described herself as a ‘homebird’, obtained only sporadic paid employment but ‘stayed home for about ten years to look after my father with dust’.\(^{50}\) Stella’s father, like many other men in the Rhondda, suffered this chronic lung disease as a result of the work in the coalfields, which increased their chances of early death.\(^{51}\) Stella, like many other daughters, found herself ‘deliberately discouraged from marrying by parents who wanted them at home as an “insurance policy” for their old age’. Such unpaid support enabled the state to be able ‘to make considerable savings in providing for the needs of its dependent members’.\(^{52}\) Stella remained as an unpaid carer for her family, and she was dependent on them for money.

This situation came at the cost of missing out on other opportunities available in the post-war period. Financially dependent on her parents, Stella believed this also limited her opportunities for dressing well. After the greyness and drabness of the war years, when many goods were in short supply, the post-war years saw a boom in consumer goods. The motivation for women to work was no doubt fuelled by the desire to have a taste of these new consumer items, fashionable clothes being one of them. Stella described how she remembered ‘seeing [someone] going out with a New Look on’ and reflecting that it would be ‘nice to have money like that’. The New Look created by Christian Dior was a radical change from the functional fashions of war time and was meant to ‘enhance beauty…. [by accentuating the] hyper-feminine silhouette of the outer attire’.\(^{53}\) Many Rhondda women like Stella aspired to this new fashion; in Stella’s case, she lacked money and had to do without.

As described in chapter three, Marion’s brother had the freedom and opportunity to study law in London. This was made possible even within the context of a family that ‘didn’t have a lot

\(^{50}\) A colloquial term to denote the lung disease from which many miners suffered.


\(^{52}\) Katherine Holden, ‘Family, Caring and Unpaid Work’ in *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 137.

of money’. However, such opportunities were not offered to Marion. She wanted to train as a nurse in London but was prevented from doing so by her father, who wanted her to stay local. As she explained: ‘And that was another thing. I would have gone nursing ‘cos lots of my friends went to the Middlesex Hospital which was a great hospital but my father didn’t want me to go away from home’.

For Marion, opportunities were there for the taking. The setting up of the NHS in 1948 provided jobs. Furthermore, the new two-year State Enrolled qualification, which concentrated on practical skill, introduced in 1943, was designed to ‘alleviate the chronic shortage of nurses in hospitals by extending the recruitment base to working class girls’. The take up of such nursing jobs was encouraged by government by way of popular culture, namely the cinema, which was enjoyed by many younger women. Despite the opportunities and outside encouragement, Marion’s father only allowed her to train as a nurse at a local hospital, which Marion rejected. Part of the attraction of nursing for Marion was the chance to move away from the Rhondda. Marion was angry, boosted by the confidence of maturity and experience, when she described this injustice of sixty years ago. She recalled her father advising her that: ‘You can go to Llwynypia but on reflection there again why not. I could have. I could have got somewhere and I think that’s another thing, this is me, myself. I would have made a good nurse!’

Marion, like other women in her situation, was left with a sense of what could have been and regretted why she had not challenged her parents on this decision. Nevertheless, such early perceived failures and disappointments encouraged Marion to be much more determined in later life. Now in her eighties, Marion, by her own admission, leads a very full life and takes a very active part in amateur musical theatre. She has also developed skills from voluntary work undertaken in Chapel, one of the key influences for women in valley communities in Wales. This was confirmation to her that her aspirations could have been fulfilled if circumstances had been different. She explained:

I think I would have made a good teacher as well because I did years with the chapel, with Sunday school and things. You know, directed plays and always had a very good Sunday school. And if you

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56 See M Wynn Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit: Literature and Nonconformist Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010).
haven’t anything to give the children, you have always got to have a certain amount of charisma. It is like a minister. If you can preach and give something of yourself in the sermon.

Her relationship with her own daughter, now a lawyer, has been different. Marion had definitely ‘encouraged them as much as you could’. Marion’s own mother had ensured as a priority the success of her son by supporting him. Through obvious hardship to herself, she worked two jobs, one paid, the other unpaid in that she, like many other women in the Rhondda, would have taken on the bulk of domestic care.\(^57\) In contrast, a generation on, Marion seemed more determined to ensure that she would not favour her son over her daughter. She was now more conscious that her daughter, too, needed support that Marion at the time had lacked.

The presence of a strong and encouraging mother had an effect on the extent to which young women’s horizons were broadened. Ruth, who entered her first job in 1951, reflected on how she was ‘allowed a lot of freedom’ by her parents who ‘wanted me to have a good education and a good job when I left school’. Her mother was particularly proud of Ruth’s achievements and ‘loved the fact that I was working and earning money and possibly had a career’. Ruth also contrasted her parents’ attitudes with those of her friends: ‘their parents were happy for them to go into factories as soon as they came out to work. But to be fair my parents weren’t like that’. Yet despite her mother’s relatively liberal approach there were still occasions when Ruth’s parents actively discouraged her from moving away from home into what was perceived as uncharted waters:

I tried an exam for the civil service as you had to do in those days and I passed and I was posted to GCHQ in Cheltenham. Well my parents didn’t want me to go there. I was 16 years old going somewhere where I didn’t know anybody. So they said “don’t go there Ruth”. They didn’t want me to go to GCHQ—It was a scary place.

GCHQ was and is the Government Communication Headquarters, which exists as a ‘security and intelligence organisation… to protect the nation from threats’.\(^58\) After the Second World War, the Government Code and Cypher School (GC and CS as it was then) moved from Bletchley Park, first to Middlesex in 1946 and then to Cheltenham in the 1950s. In Ruth’s account there is ambiguity in her memory of her parents’ use of the word ‘scary’ in relation

\(^{57}\) Mari A. Williams, *A Forgotten Army* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 259, ‘Despite claims that the post-war years witnessed a change in the nature of the marital relationship, there is little evidence to suggest that a significant shift in traditional gender roles and responsibilities occurred in homes of south Welsh industrial communities’.

to ‘GCHQ’. That would have meant a move away from the Rhondda and her family networks, which was resisted by her parents. But there is a hint too that it was related to the nature of the work at a time when many ordinary people had a heightened sense of ‘Cold War terrors and threat of biological warfare’.59

Irene left school in 1946 and began working in a post office near Cardiff. After a year, she relocated to a post office much nearer home. During her ten years there she became increasingly ‘fed up’ with the demands her employer, the post mistress, was making on her free time:

But that woman (the postmistress) again. She wasn’t a very helpful person. Because Polikoff’s was the clothing factory quite near there she would want me to stay when the workers were coming out at 1 o’clock for lunch. She didn’t like me leaving because that was my lunch time as well. I had to stay open if she had her way to serve anybody and then go home and be back there for 2 clock... And at lunch time there was a bus going down at five to one but she wouldn’t let me... because it would have helped me to get that bus. So then I had to run or walk because it was quite a distance from Ynyswen to where to I lived in Treorchy and that was the type of woman she was and when she asked me to work on Sunday, she didn’t pay me and I was too scared of her. Too meek and mild.

It was clear that there were obvious tensions between what Irene wanted with regards to an independent personal life, and the needs of what she believed to be an exploitative employer. Furthermore, the fact that Irene acknowledged that she had been ‘too meek and mild’ around her employer as a young woman also implied an increase in confidence that she gained over time by rejecting a life in the Rhondda. Irene, unlike some of the other women interviewed, chose to rebel and reject the life expected of her by her home community. Irene, who remained unmarried and did not have children, chose to leave a post office position in the Rhondda and move to London to give herself more financial security. Such a move also represented a bid for financial independence: she believed a career with the Post Office in London would make that possible and give her a good pension. This was more appealing than staying in the Rhondda, which she associated with less financial security. She explained that ‘if I had worked in the factory I wouldn’t have had a pension’.

The concern that Irene showed regarding her fear of financial dependence is well placed given the precarious position women may have found themselves in the post-war years. According to Derek Draisey, three factors meant that women in Wales found themselves financially disadvantaged despite improved employment opportunities. First, most women

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only earned half what men doing similar work were likely to earn. Second, the 1948 National Insurance Act ‘served to buttress the dependency of a married woman’ in that benefits available to her were dependent on what her husband contributed. Third, the ability to raise a mortgage or hire purchase was not possible ‘without the backing of a male guarantor’. 60

The Rhondda of the 1940s and 1950s appeared to Irene as very closed and lacking in opportunities. Irene’s decision to leave the Rhondda and move to London was highly satisfying for her; it represented ‘freedom’. Very excitedly she told me:

Oh yes I had the freedom yes. I enjoyed my work. I loved it. It was a laugh a minute especially when you were working on the counter. I mean you worked at Trafalgar Square that never closed in those days. And you were the only female with fifty-one men [laugh]. It was great!

Irene had, by her own admission, been regarded as a ‘flirt’ when she lived in the Rhondda. She seemed very aware that she had been criticised for being so sexually free. There is an implied excitement about being the ‘only female with fifty-one men’ that suggests a sense of liberation. Significantly, the repeated use of the word ‘freedom’ in her interviews referred to the restrictions Irene believed were holding her back by remaining in the Rhondda. It was the freedom to live her life as she wanted, without the constraints of community and gendered expectations.

Shirley had a close relationship with her own mother. She left school in 1948 aged fifteen and worked first in an office in Pontypridd but then ‘came to work in Thomas and Evans because it was nearer home’, the cost of the bus fare being a factor for consideration here. On having her children, Shirley left work but when they were older she went back part-time in a factory. For a time, she and her husband had lived with her mother and also ‘had an aunt who lived next door who had no children’. During the interview, Shirley was slightly hesitant before she described in an almost guilty way how her mother had ‘done it all’ in terms of housework and caring for the children, ably supported by the aunt, while Shirley undertook paid work.

Shirley was also full of praise for her mother describing her as ‘wonderful’ and someone who ‘helped out a lot in the house’. Shirley frequently referred to being ‘lucky’ and being ‘spoilt’ because she perceived that combining work and domestic care was made somewhat easier than for other women in her community. This description also applied to her ‘best friend’ who was equally ‘lucky because her mother did everything’. It was clear that, as a young mother, Shirley was having the best of both worlds in many ways. She was able to mix her

60 Derek Draisey, Women in Welsh History (Swansea: Draisey Publishing, 2004), 173.
enjoyment of paid employment without the burden of excessive housework given that other family members were helping out.

The contribution of grandmothers and other family members to childcare was a common feature of life in the Rhondda and Shirley’s experience is fairly representative of this. There are also parallels in other working class cultures. Describing a 1956 study of ‘South Borough’, Joanna Bourke argues how women, on marriage, tended, much more so than men to live in close proximity to their mothers. In addition, there are long-term benefits ‘in terms of emotional relationship, communication and services… the tie between the mother and her children is normally very strong and tends to remain so throughout her life’.61 Such patterns of ‘intense relationships’ were consistent in working-class communities.62 Yet Shirley was conflicted, which her hesitancy in the interview reveals. She described herself as ‘spoilt’ and ‘lucky’, suggesting her outcomes came about from chance rather than by design or her rights. There is an impression, therefore, that she felt rather guilty about her situation. She was aware of the ‘powerful social expectation’ that her main role was as mother and housewife.63 Yet because of help from family members she was able to break the ties.

There were pressures from family placed on the cohort not to move too far away from their homes in the Rhondda in order to work. This limited their opportunities. I would argue that there are a number of reasons as to why this happened. First, constraints placed on the cohort suggest simply a desire to protect them from uncertain danger or unfamiliarity. Second, that such attempts to keep the cohort close to home were for convenience sake. Certainly girls were constantly reminded of their role in life as future wives and mothers and that reminder was ever-present. With such a pervading message that women’s lives should be at the service of others, convenient and accessible, some women continued to perform a useful role supporting their families, their employers and their husbands by shouldering the bulk of domestic tasks.64 Paid employment would always be compromised by this role. Third, the strength of the relationships of the cohort to their mothers meant that there was little or no opportunity for them to become economically independent from family. Despite this, that

61 Bourke, Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 153.
63 See Alistair Thomson, “‘Tied to the kitchen sink’? Women’s Lives and Women’s History in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain and Australia”, Women’s History Review 22, no.1 (2013): 126–147, 134.
close relationship proved also to be a means to economic independence once some of the cohort became mothers themselves.

Work culture

The workplaces of post-war Rhondda, Wales and Britain would have felt very different in comparison with modern workplaces. While contemporary offices, shops and factories may resonate with staff addressing managers informally on first-name terms, post-war workplaces, by contrast, reflected a certain deference and formality. This simply reflected society at large. In the post-war years there were signs that challenges to the establishment were being made. In one example, the 1950s has been depicted as the era of the ‘Angry Young Men’, a term closely associated with John Osborne’s 1956 play Look Back in Anger but which also included the likes of other ‘Angry Young Men’ such as novelists Kingley Amis and Colin Wilson and playwright Alan Sillitoe among others. However, such challenges were only sporadic and as Andrew Marr argues, ‘conforming to authority’ was widespread ‘in millions of homes’.

The gulf between the classes and the formality of relationships can be found in Shirley’s recollections:

I remember JL Thomas, now he was a gentleman. He was a Director with Thomas and Evans. He wasn’t the Thomas of Thomas and Evans but he wore a bowler hat and long umbrella and you called him sir. Oh yes that was an important bit I should have said about. I did go the manse once—Bronwydd with a message, I only went in the Hall and I think Mrs Evans [William Evans’ wife] was alive then but I only went in the hall where they had this great big marble fireplace. Another thing was respect. You called people Sir and Mrs and if they were neighbours they were aunties not first names like they are today.

CC: And did that happen to you- when you were working. Your bosses you called them Mr and Mrs?

Shirley: Oh yes. Oh gosh yes you never called them by their first names. Ministers and Doctors they were always Mr—never first names. So there was more respect everywhere... that was part and parcel of your upbringing [and of employers]. They were your boss and that was it. You took your orders.

Despite a semblance of egalitarianism in the community (highlighted in chapter one), the workplaces of the Rhondda in the post-war period were a microcosm of the unequal culture that permeated the rest of society. Within the workplace there existed power inequalities in terms of gender segregation and sexual harassment. Betty reminisced about her time working in Trefano’s shoe factory:

They used to make slippers and shoes and I was inspecting some of the shoes and slippers and making sure there were no bits of cotton hanging. You had to snip them off and I can remember working in the stores making sure everything was there ready to go out into the factory.

CC: Were they mainly women there in the factory?

Betty: Mainly women but there were men as well of course. They had machines. Clickers they used to call them and the men used to work on them.

CC: So the men used to do different jobs to the women?

Betty: Yes, yes and it was cutting out the shearing it was called sometimes to put on the soles of the slippers and they would have pieces of things to put in the shape of the soles. But it was mostly women. It was more women than men.

Betty’s experience of paid employment in the post-war years is consistent with experiences of women in Britain in the same period. Despite the improvement in economic circumstances and the fact that women were now essential to it, women’s status within paid employment hardly changed during the early to mid-twentieth century. In 1901, 88 per cent of women in paid work were mainly in jobs that were predominantly female. By 1951 the figure had only decreased marginally to 86 per cent, which, as Elizabeth Roberts argues, did ‘nothing to lessen sexual segregation’. Furthermore, the prevalence of gender segregation is another indicator of the very polarised lives of Rhondda people, where ‘men and women were clearly pigeonholed into roles’.

Workplaces in the post-war years also mirrored the wider gender inequalities and power dynamics of British society as a whole. As Hearn and Parkin contend, ‘organisations, and particularly work organisations, are arenas that, though public, offer opportunities for the continual definition and redefinition of the public and the private.’ If gender segregation was a normalised practice then so too was sexual innuendo. The extent of this was made clear in Ruth’s testimony. Ruth, who worked in the Civil Service, described how:

67 Roberts, Women and Families, 119.
68 Johnes, Wales Since 1939, 53.
We had a trolley and things but if someone asked you to make tea if they had a meeting, you wouldn’t say ‘it is not my job’. You were the lowest of the low and it was your place. But I was never treated shabbily then. I suppose sexual harassment was around then and you weren’t aware of it. You know people would tease you about things which perhaps today they would take offence at.

CC Well do you remember any of that?

Well I can remember someone saying “I always know it is you because I can tell by your legs”. Well now people would take offence but then we would take it as a compliment [laugh]… but I never saw any particular sexual harassment but I suppose there were things which perhaps today wouldn’t be accepted. I mean a boss could come over to look at something and he could put his hand on you and you wouldn’t think anything of it would you. Not in those days.

Workplaces were such that sexist behaviour could be passed over as jokes. Enid recalled one such joke that was played on her by her male colleagues in the police force:

So I went into work and I went in through the back gate that day. I don’t know why I did it. I went in through the back, through the yard and there were all the garages there, and most of the doors were closed and on one of the little doors of one of the garages there was a pair of ladies’ knickers! Now do you remember, years ago women used to wear knickers with elastic around the knees and elastic around here? A pair of them!

Clearly there was no doubt that this ‘joke’ was aimed directly at Enid because as she recounted, the ‘knickers’ were:

Pinned up on the doors and a big notice at the side of it and on the notice: “These belong to Enid Jenkins”, (because I was Jenkins) “Found in Gelli Park last night.” The devils! So I went in. I thought the cheeky buggers! They said “Enid there’s something…” I said “I’ve just seen it and it’s not mine.”

Enid was working in a mainly male environment but was determined to assert herself, excusing the perpetrators because she did not want to lose face and undermine her hard-won credibility. In further describing the incidents and its effects, she was resigned about the behaviour of her male colleagues:

That’s the sort of thing they’d do, and you see, the thing was, I was willing to take a joke and I’d give them as good as they gave me see. I wouldn’t swear like them because you do hear it. You hear the words that I don’t like, and let me tell you about this one first. Anyhow there was these knickers up there. I went into the work now, and the boys told me about it. They’re not mine. Right. Didn’t bother. The next thing, here comes the inspector from up in the office. Sunday morning. No civilian staff there see. Great on a Sunday. In he comes. Enid he says, I just passed something belonging to you. They all had something belonging to me. I’m damned if the Super didn’t come down and he always went into the office on a Sunday morning by walking up the steps to the outside of the building.

I asked Enid whether she had been offended about the incident, to which she replied defiantly:

No. Why should I? I knew what they were the men. Then he went round the yard and he comes in and he says “Enid there’s something belonging to you out in the yard.” “I know, Sir.” I said. He said “go and take it down.” “I am not going to take it down” I said, “because those men put it up there and they don’t belong to me.” Anyhow they had all had a good look. Now I said “Right come on
then, who do they belong to? Because they’re not mine and everybody knows they are not mine because I’ve got little short ones!” and then they all had a good laugh.

Enid was laughing as she told me about this story but was more concerned to ensure that the people responsible would not be identified. She seemed, on the surface, more than capable of dealing with such behaviour even though she was the victim in this. Furthermore, she had no choice but to stand up for herself and be seen as a credible police officer. It would be some years off before the police force started to deal seriously with its ‘very masculine, racist and sexist “cop culture”’. Toward the end of the century a number of discrimination cases were brought against the police force, which illustrated the sexist environment in which many women police officers worked. However, until then, being part of the very male dominated world of the police was simply a matter that Enid had to endure and survive.

On one level both women seemed to accept such behaviour as nothing more than harmless banter. But as Oakley argues: ‘like rape, sexual harassment is a form of violence against people; rather than sidelined as a sexual act, most of it’s an abuse of authority, the outcome of unequal power relations’. On another level, the ‘banter’ that both women experienced indicated a much more sinister meaning. It cannot be claimed that the experiences of the cohort are absolutely representative of the Rhondda as a whole. However, the evidence does highlight the embedded and deep-seated inequalities between men and women in employment in the post-war period.

Conclusion

Chapter three scrutinised the influences that affected the lives of Rhondda women and the extent to which they were able to flourish. Chapter four interrogated their testimonies as they entered a new phase of their lives—namely, employment. When the cohort left full-time education, it was expected and accepted that they would participate in the new opportunities of reconstruction during the post-war years. However, they were to be left disappointed with the jobs on offer in the Rhondda. Attitudes to women’s paid work after the war were torn ‘between ideological notions of women’s proper place and the economic need to fill

70 D’Cruz, ‘Women and the family’, 211.
employment vacancies’. Consistent with the existing literature, the cohort continued in roles associated with the undervaluing of women’s work, discriminated and segregated.

Moreover, the Rhondda’s preoccupation with escaping from its dirty industrial heritage meant that the cohort believed there was an urgency to gain ‘respectable’ employment. While existing historiography on the south Wales coalfields hints at this, a more systematic consideration is provided here, including some fresh insights into women’s attitudes and attachment to paid work in the post-war years. Most of the cohort sought ‘respectable’ work even though such jobs were still heavily gendered and unequal. Furthermore, the cohort’s testimonies suggest they continued to be defined as mothers and potential mothers in the workplace, which in turn ensured continued discrimination. It appeared too that the cohort were pressured into taking only local jobs. This limited their opportunities.

However, strong familial links between the generations, which were shared by comparable working-class communities across Britain, meant that scenarios were available to enable the women to have some independence over their lives. In some cases, this resulted in a renewed determination to help their own daughters’ careers. Finally, there are glimpses of the ways in which some of the cohort, despite the limitations of their jobs, actively enjoyed and appreciated their employment. I would argue, therefore, that this was one means by which the cohort were able to achieve a degree of fulfilment.

73 Holloway, Women and Work in Britain since 1840, 180.
Chapter 5 Marriage

It never occurred to Marion that she could have both a career and a family. She explained that:

I didn’t give it a lot of thought I must admit. I didn’t give it a lot of thought because I never made a career for myself, never ever. The only career I have had is marriage and having a family.

Furthermore, there were practical difficulties and pressures from the rest of her family:

I wouldn’t have had anyone to look after the baby. I mean my mother was as good as gold. I don’t think they expected. My mother’s attitude was you’ve got a husband to keep you and things and that was the attitude all the way through. No, I never gave it a thought and I did want a baby.

Marion’s path in terms of marriage was a typical one for many women of her generation. Furthermore, while typical, it also seemed universally expected. Pronouncing on the virtues of good homemaking in the 1950s, Mary Grieve, the editor of Woman magazine from 1940 to 1962 argued that for a woman, ‘success in this function is as vitalising to her as it is to a man in his chosen career… [and] failure was humiliating’. ¹ Chapter five analyses just how ‘vitalising’ this role was to women. It examines the marital trajectories of the cohort. To do so, the chapter will explore the issue in two parts: marriage and marriage breakdown. Chapter five will argue first that married life in mid-twentieth century Rhondda had positive aspects for the cohort, but equally there were times when it took away from them as individuals. Second, great importance was attached to the code of respectability in the Rhondda. When this code was broken, the cohort were supported by their community but equally there were times when they were neglected. Third, retelling stories of their younger selves compelled the cohort to respond more confidently as the interviews progressed. Fourth, the years following the war offered new opportunities for women. However, strong familial ties between generations in the Rhondda meant that the cohort experienced a more labyrinthine route to fulfilment than perhaps in other parts of Britain.

Mid-twentieth century marriage in Britain

Marriage in the post-war years became the ‘unassailable norm’. ² Those who chose not to take this ‘“normal” life course’ ran the risk of being perceived as ‘“odd”, “unlucky” or worse’. ³

² David Kynaston, Family Britain (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 558.
For women, the 1950s was a high point for marriage. The chances of them getting married before the age of 50, rose from 81.6 per cent in 1900–02 to 94.6 per cent in 1951–55 and 96.0 per cent in 1956–60. Love and indeed romantic love was seen as increasingly important in the post-war era and started to supersede more traditional concepts of obligation in marriage. Furthermore, marriage itself was regarded as a tool to encourage stability and the creation of ‘an idealized family that the war was supposed to have fractured’. In order to locate this development, one needs to contextualise the debates that existed around the concept of marriage and changes to marriage from the mid twentieth century.

In the early years of the century, ideas around ‘separate spheres’ predominated. This, as Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher characterise (building on the work of Davidoff and Hall), was the notion that:

- nature had endowed all civilised men with an active, initiating procreative sex drive which demanded its healthy outlet in regular but not excessive sexual intercourse, while women’s reciprocal sex instincts were supposedly more moderate and focused more on the joys of emotional nurturing of the young.

As the century progressed, new ideas about ‘companionate marriage’ were increasingly coming to the fore, instigated by Marie Stopes’ celebrated and classic sex manual *Married Love*. Companionate marriage had a number of emphases but, in the main, it was defined by the principle of equal relationships and ‘mutuality’ and ‘the notion that an intimate equality should be established between men and women through mixing companionate marriage and shared sexual pleasure.’ A number of scholars have interrogated companionate marriage. John Gillis, for example, is sceptical about the optimism shown towards companionate marriage, circumscribing it in a way that casts marriage ‘more [as] an elusive dream than an attainable reality’.

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to substantial constraints and obligations'. Marcus Collins argues that a certain pessimism surrounded companionate marriage, along with a belief that ‘something had gone wrong’. He argues that aspirations for its success only ‘served to accentuate rather than eliminate marital strife’. Much of the changing perspectives on marriage and the importance of romantic love has been abandoned in the face of an increasing emphasis on the importance of ‘self’ before the post-war period. While this is a point of agreement between Collins and Claire Langhamer, there is dissent. Langhamer argues the ‘re-framing of love acted as a destabilizing force even as it emerged’. In addition, the ‘taken for granted’ perspective that the start of the 1960s was a major ‘turning point’ in the history of love and romance, is challenged in a series of essays edited by Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones. As they argue, the situation is much more nuanced. Indeed, changes in attitudes towards marriage and love were occurring gradually, even before that period.

One aspect of the debates surrounding companionate marriage was that it placed new expectations on women to be ‘more professional homemakers’. In addition, any benefits accrued from companionate marriage were disproportionately in favour of the husband rather than the wife. There was little indication that women were relinquishing their main responsibility for the ‘Sisyphean task’ of housework. Even though there was a greater availability of labour-saving devices in the post-war period, little changed for women in the division of domestic labour. For example, even when electricity appeared in the home in the post-war period, it was still women who continued to do the bulk of cooking. The assertion made by Mrs Evans at the opening of the upper Rhondda branch of the Gas Federation that such labour saving tools would mean women would now be able to ‘take their rightful place in civic affairs’, was probably far too optimistic. Despite the advent of new technologies, the amount of housework to be done was increasing, mainly because of the expectation of higher standards of cleanliness. As the writer Elaine Morgan wryly noted:

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10 Ibid., 8.
12 Claire Langhamer, ‘Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-war Britain’, Cultural and Social History 9, no.2 (June 2012): 278.
18 Rhondda Leader, 16 February 1952.
Once you have carpets on the floor you have to keep vacuuming them. Once you have acquired a
twin tub washing machine, because it is less laborious, the sheets and everything else get changed
much more often and that makes more ironing.\textsuperscript{19}

Furthermore, the new innovations failed to catch up with the reality of women’s work. As
Caroline Davidson argued, ‘in 1950 most women in Britain were still cleaning their houses
with the same basic equipment and materials that their ancestors had used 300 years
earlier’.\textsuperscript{20}

For couples experiencing marital breakdown in the post-war years, divorce was possible. In
the years following the Second World War the rates of divorce increased. While in 1945 there
had been 15,634 divorces or dissolutions in England and Wales, this figure had jumped to
23,868 in 1960.\textsuperscript{21} In Wales the numbers of divorced women had gone up eight fold from
1931 to 1951.\textsuperscript{22} Peter Hennessy argues that this rapid increase in marriage failures was down
to the ‘separation and stresses of war’.\textsuperscript{23} But it must be remembered that for some time
obtaining divorces had been getting easier. The law had changed in 1937, which extended the
grounds for divorce. Consequently, in addition to adultery, cruelty, insanity and desertion
were included. The Legal Aid and Advice Act of 1949 gave better support to those who
previously may not have been able to afford the legal cost of divorce.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{Marriage in the Rhondda}

When describing their married life, there was a sense that some of the cohort saw marriage as
making them more complete. All of the cohort, except one, had married. This reflected the
marriage rates, evident in their generation, cited earlier. Some of the women considered
marriage an intrinsic part of their lives and regarded it highly. Shirley demonstrated the
importance and priority that she put on marriage in the way she described a school reunion
she attended. She explained her reservations as to what jobs her former schoolmates would be
doing. Before the event she had worried that they would ‘all be teachers, they will all be

\textsuperscript{19} Elaine Morgan, ‘Living at the End of the World,’ in \textit{Changing Times}, ed. Deirdre Beddoe (Dinas Powys,
2003), 145.
\textsuperscript{20} Caroline Davidson, \textit{A Woman’s Work is Never Done: A history of housework in the British Isles 1650–1950}
\textsuperscript{22} According to Johnes, \textit{Wales Since 1939}, 36, the numbers of divorced women in Wales rose from 628 in 1931
to 4,935 in 1951.
\textsuperscript{23} Peter Hennessy, \textit{Having it So Good} (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 130.
\textsuperscript{24} Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield, \textit{The Sociology of the Family}, 29.
Lnurses and what have you’ whereas she had ‘only worked in offices’. However, the lack of status she believed she had in comparison to her former schoolmates was compensated for by her role as a wife: ‘But I thought, no I achieved what I wanted. I wanted to be married’. Some women believed that being one half of a married couple meant they achieved more than if they remained single. As Ruth described: ‘we seemed to do more together than I would have done when I was on my own you know because we’d go to London for a weekend’. But as Ruth further explained, this was compounded by a fairly common attitude within the Rhondda at the time: ‘You know years ago it wasn’t the thing for women to go to London on their own for a weekend, so Jim and I went a few times you know.’

It ‘wasn’t the thing’ for south Wales writer Elaine Morgan to go to London on her own and there were repercussions. Elaine Morgan, in her autobiography, recalls the circumstances surrounding a sole work visit she made to London, where she sought a restaurant to eat and was refused service by the waiter who ‘had been forbidden to serve any unaccompanied female on the grounds, it transpired, that she might be a hooker looking for a likely customer’. Being seen as single or like Elaine Morgan ‘unaccompanied’ was inappropriate for Shirley and Ruth, and there is a sense that they believed marriage validated them. More specifically it was also an indicator of the sorts of values they absorbed from the community.

Yet, as much as the cohort had been positive about marriage, it wrought some changes in their lives. As a single person, Betty had regularly enjoyed dancing at the local church hall. She laughingly described how ‘it was all sequence dancing. And of course there was no drink in those days, in those type of places. So up on the big stage they used to sell cakes and pop and things like that.’ Betty still enjoyed dancing when she got married. But being married curtailed her leisure activities, as the following section of interview suggests:

CC: Do you remember being involved in any leisure activities for yourself?

Betty: No, no I just didn’t want to. I was quite happy then being a wife and a mother.

CC: And what about your husband. Did he have hobbies?

Betty: No. He went fishing later in life. Both of us were quite happy being at home with the children. I didn’t have any hobbies as such.

CC: And did you go out?

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Betty: Always together. We didn’t really go too far. We would take them [the children] to pictures. Didn’t go back dancing because both my husband and I loved dancing. We didn’t go back till my youngest son was about 14 year old so we just went to pictures or we would go to Ponty Park or places like that. We didn’t have an awful lot of hobbies. We were just happy then to be together and be with the children.

The description of her marital circumstances as ‘quite happy’, a phrase she used twice in this section of the interview, was rather ambiguous. I felt that Betty seemed rather underwhelmed and had not put up a hugely convincing argument about how acceptable she found the transition from being single to becoming a wife. In terms of leisure, being married can come at a cost to women. As Claire Langhamer argues: ‘While the paid work of youth legitimised leisure for young women, the unpaid domestic work of married women limited both the opportunities for and expectations of leisure’.\textsuperscript{26} Betty, who married at 19, told me she had a ‘lovely happy marriage’. However, her slightly lukewarm response may have betrayed a greater sense of loss for some aspects of her single life than she was perhaps prepared to openly acknowledge.

While some of the women were very fulsome in their praise of marriage, others were more indifferent. Stella married comparatively late at 35 to a husband who was 47, despite the apparent urgency of her peers for marriage. She had in fact bucked the trend in terms of marriage, in that ‘the average age for women in 1971 was 24.3 years’.\textsuperscript{27} In explaining this, she acknowledged that ‘all my friends had found people to get married to’. Stella, nevertheless, seemed to resist this peer pressure, describing the delay by stating she had not ‘met the right fella… I suppose I didn’t feel right to get married but there was no-one there that I fancied and nobody fancied me! [laugh]’ However, on a deeper level, it appeared that Stella regarded marriage, prior to her own, as ‘boring’ and ‘monotonous’, a label she attached to the marriages of her friends, particularly those who were not working but staying at home. Although her parents needed to keep her at home to help with her father she nevertheless believed she had the freedom to go out at night, and to have a good social life, something it seemed her married friends lacked. Along with her family, she loved going to ‘see cricket and rugby matches… Friends tried to match me up—it wasn’t for me. At the back of my mind I couldn’t afford to get married. Too much of a homebird’.

\textsuperscript{26} Claire Langhamer, \textit{Women’s Leisure in England 1920-60} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 132.
The reasons behind Stella’s decision to marry at a relatively late age were not clear. On the surface it was for economic reasons, but there was a strong suggestion that it was simply a convenient excuse given the pressure on women to get married in the Rhondda. Stella passionately drew a distinction between the opportunities within the public sphere she experienced as a single woman (the sheer enjoyment and ‘real pleasure’ of spectator sport\(^{28}\)) and marriage. Stella defined marriage as a constraint and described defiantly how getting married was not her first priority:

To put it bluntly—my mother and father couldn’t afford to pay for a wedding for me. That was part of the situation. But that didn’t worry me, people used to say, oh, I would be left on the shelf. But I thought, no if I don’t want to get married I don’t want to get married. There was no point in getting married for the sake of getting married. Life went on!

Equally Marion, despite her long marriage, highlighted its shortfalls—namely, the sense of lost opportunities, which at times she struggled to enunciate:

We hadn’t come to the burning bra stages then. Yes I think people thought this is it, this is your life and of course gone are the days then when you had to give up teaching if you got married. I think men in banks weren’t encouraged to have children before the age of 30. I mean I had plenty of friends—we’d meet with the babies, you know, in the park. I have felt- never been unhappy. But there is something inside me when I felt I could have achieved more… but why do other people get on? But sometimes I do think about it and think you could have done a lot more, you didn’t work hard enough.

Here, three issues struck me about Marion’s interview. First, looking back on her younger self, Marion appeared to conclude that this had been a transition period for herself and women like her in the mid-twentieth century, which she may not have realised at the time. The transition time, where she located her experience, was between ‘the restrained and hide-bound 1950s’\(^{29}\), and, as illustrated by her ‘bra burning’ reference, ‘that second wave of feminism which arose out of the upsurge of radical and socialist politics in the late 1960s’.\(^{30}\)

Elizabeth Douvan makes a convincing case for the need for role models in the lives of women as a means to ‘open and facilitate the development of new conceptions of what is possible in their own lives’.\(^{31}\) Marion, however, had no one in her immediate circle with whom to identify. Her position also indicated she felt adrift from a clear sense of self and

\(^{29}\) Deirdre Beddoe, ‘Introduction’ in *Changing Times*, 5.
what was possible to achieve as a woman in leading a fulfilling life. Second, the phrase ‘never been unhappy’ was very telling, particularly in the way in which Marion said it and the words used. The indirect manner in which she seemed to pick over the words belied her careful attempt not to say anything disagreeable. Linguist Deborah Tannen, in a study of the way women and men speak to each other, cites the example of a legal dispute between two women. Tannen shows how, in some cases, women find it culturally difficult not to be ‘nice’ even though they may be taking up a contradictory stance. As she demonstrates: ‘Forbidden to express anger and disagreement directly, these peasant women expressed themselves in the manner that available to them—the vocabulary of politeness and agreement’.  

Similarly there was an element of this in the way Marion did not want to appear negative about her marriage. To do so would be seen as a betrayal of one of the shibboleths of Rhondda life—in a sense she would be renouncing her place in the community.

Third, Marion’s discomfort about her marriage is further developed in the way she recalls her wedding day in 1952. In a traumatic exposition of the experience, the drama of the wedding unfolds:

I remember I was quite poorly before I got married really poorly. I was going to postpone the wedding but I didn’t and then my aunt. Oh you can’t postpone the wedding… Before I went to the chapel I burst out crying and I soaked my father’s white shirt so between everything it was disastrous… I went up the hotel, miserable night and had a meal. There was a film on I wanted to see. Can’t remember the name of it. We decided we’d go to the films and we had been in there quarter of an hour. We were in the middle of a row and all of a sudden, and it must have been shock, I started to cry and not quietly, I sobbed and Terry had to get me out of there.

From the final shocking denouement, there is a suggestion that, after real pressure from the family to go through with it, Marion’s decision to marry was a mistake.

Irene’s mother regarded Irene as disreputable and deviant because she was not married. Irene described how:

And I honestly think it was that really, whether she was thinking she wanted... but the only time she threw it at me was when I’d moved to London and we were in Gower Street in the hostel and B was there. B was out with S who’d she met and my mother had taken her back there for the evening and she laid into me that why... that was the only time she said, why wasn’t I getting married? Why wasn’t I with someone? When was I going to get engaged?

Irene also believed that her mother regarded her as abnormal because of her resistance to marriage. Reflecting on her friend’s situation as part of a couple she questioned: ‘But B was... what was wrong with me?’ Irene’s mother appeared to view her daughter’s situation as

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disreputable. At the root of such an assertion is the mid-twentieth century disproportionate ‘fear’ and ‘moral panic’\textsuperscript{33} about the ‘good-time girl’.\textsuperscript{34} As Carol Dyhouse argues: ‘The good-time girl had become a folk-devil. Stereotypes of her appeared in surprising places, sometimes under the guise of “objective” social research.’ For example, the \textit{British Medical Journal}, cited by Dyhouse, warned of the threat to society from the problematic ‘good-time girl’ who was ‘unamenable to discipline and control’.\textsuperscript{35} Irene was deeply frustrated by her mother’s volatile and controlling behaviour. She explained how she dealt with this very difficult situation: ‘And I couldn’t... I just walked out the room. I just walked out and walked down the corridor and went back in again. If she started again I’d walk out again.’ But through this battle of wills it was Irene who triumphed. She chose to walk away from her mother’s demands, to continue leading the life she wanted in London, independent and without any certainty or indeed desire for marriage.

The post-war years continued to propagandise the state of marriage as ‘the natural order of things’\textsuperscript{36} The testimonies of Stella, Irene and Marion show how aware they were of this ‘natural order’. Yet they were clearly uncomfortable and they displayed signs of resistance and alienation towards marriage. On the contrary, marriage appeared not to offer them the fulfilment they expected.

\textbf{The inevitability of marriage}

The way the cohort discussed their experiences of marriage showed how inevitable it felt in their lives. In talking about their experiences they also revealed the powerful influence of community expectations in the Rhondda. Marriage was a constant, a rite of passage, which all of the women were expected to undertake. Furthermore, the words and phrases the cohort used regarding this rite of passage emphasised how passive they were in the process. The

\textsuperscript{33} See Joanna Bourke, \textit{Fear, A Cultural History} (London: Virago, 2005), 330 who writes: ‘In a moral panic a substantial group of people become frightened and hostile; their mood is volatile and there is a severe disproportion between the nature of the threat and the degree of fear that “sober empirical evaluation” would warrant’.


cohort alluded to the existence of an ‘all-pervasive expectation’ in their lives to get married.\textsuperscript{37} Kathleen acknowledged that there was a ‘pressure’ from within the Rhondda community. Such pressure meant that you felt ‘you couldn’t float around’. There was also the assumption ‘that was the thing to do… it was this is down the path you are going to go, this is the path you are going to take’. Kathleen also added that ‘girls were expected to conform to the role of wife and mother’. Similarly, Ruth seemed almost powerless when she described how ‘in a way I went along with the flow. Everybody was getting engaged and getting married.’ Marriage was emphasised as the most important and inevitable event in a woman’s life.

Ruth also recalled how her father had reiterated the view of the ‘stop gap model’, which simply reinforced that it was unrealistic for women to expect marriage and a sustainable career.\textsuperscript{38}

I can remember my father saying... Well I didn’t want to go to college but I can remember my father saying he didn’t really think it was practical for women to go to college because they would come out to get married and have children.

Ruth did not seem to disagree with her father’s prediction, despite contrary contemporary advice that it was a good thing for a married woman to have a career, albeit one that could accommodate motherhood.\textsuperscript{39} Ruth, like other women in her situation, seemingly did not put up much resistance to her father’s advice. She also referred to the community expectation that marriage should take place:

a lot of it was when I say habit people had been together for a while and they were expected to get married because they didn’t live together but if they had been going out for a few years, people expected them to get married and they sort of did. It didn’t always work out.

In attempting to attach meanings to these scenarios retold by the women, a number of possibilities emerge: First, the attitude towards marriage, which Ruth’s father demonstrated, reflected his internalisation of ‘society’s cultural rules’, which in this case were ‘the rules and expectations’ of the community.\textsuperscript{40} Second, his views can be located within Mannheim’s \textit{The Problem of Generations}. Here Karl Mannheim argued that by belonging to the same age demographic and generation, individuals share ‘a specific range of potential experience,
predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience’. Third, such views were indeed influential on Ruth but the situation was compounded by factors related to the complexities of the 1950s. As Stephen Brooke argues:

the relationship between gender and class… suggests that more complicated and less certain gender identities emerged at the work-place and in the home during this period. In this, femininity became less firmly tied to motherhood, while work gradually became accepted as a province of both men and women and masculinity was seen as reformed.

Clearly it appeared that Ruth and her peers were caught in the middle of this time of conflict, where ‘less certain gender identities’ were in evidence. However, I would argue further that the close-knit nature of the Rhondda, where young women were living cheek by jowl with parents and family networks, made this an even more complex and messy experience for the cohort.

**Pregnancy**

The cohort understood marriage as an expectation, yet there was still a degree of leeway. However, by contrast, if Rhondda women became pregnant then the language used by the cohort to describe marriage moved from one of expectation to compulsion. Betty insisted that ‘there was no pressure for me to get married because I mean I wasn’t pregnant’. She affirmed that if ‘that situation occurred… they had to get married then sort of thing’. Reflecting on the Rhondda’s standards regarding pregnancy before marriage, Ruth acknowledged that ‘when you got to a certain age people expected you to be married’. However, she believed that if a woman was pregnant then coercion occurred, a situation she emphasised by the use of the word ‘certainly’: ‘they certainly expected you to get married’. Stella acknowledged the frequency of pregnancies occurring in the Rhondda to women who had not yet married. Like some of the other Rhondda women, she described the pregnant woman as powerless to do anything other than get married:

Mind I knew a lot of people who had to get married and it was just one of those things which went on—and it had always gone on as it is going on now- it was disgusting. I mean that was life and life after the war was going to be a different thing than during the war. I mean I knew a lot of people who had to get married.

Statistics also confirm Stella’s account: as long as a woman was married then pregnancy was accepted. As Martin Johnes shows, ‘as early as 1949–51, of births to married mothers under

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42 Stephen Brooke, ‘Gender and Working Class Identity in Britain During the 1950s’, *Journal of Social History* (Summer 2001): 774.
twenty in Wales 69.2 per cent happened between zero and eight months after their marriage. For those between twenty and twenty-four it was 26.8 per cent.’ 43

While it was clear from the testimonies that premarital sex was occurring to some extent, which in many cases led to pregnancy, much effort was made to hide this under a mask of respectability. As Shirley described:

Oh yes I remember when someone had to get married and there was an old lady and she would be counting the months. But it happened and loads of them had to get married. No there were standards I think. Someone I know I won’t mention any names in case you know her. She had to get married and of course the baby was nine pounds odd born but they reckon it was premature but every time she has a silver wedding or her golden wedding she celebrates it a year sooner! Still she got married and everybody knew. She was living in a fantasy land… they said the baby was premature but it turned out a whopper, it took some believing!

Many women in the Rhondda would have had experiences of illegitimate births within their own families where attempts were made to hide the truth about the real circumstances. Jeffrey Weeks cites an example from his own family.44 Ruth’s account includes one where she confronts her own parents about an illegitimate relative in her family. Describing her mother’s reactions to her questions as an 11 year old, Ruth said:

And she looked at my father and she said “Oh I think it is time now that we can tell her”. She [the relative] had been born out of marriage and my mother’s parents had brought her up as their own daughter but they had never disclosed that to me. They would never have told me that. So no, things weren’t discussed openly, no definitely not. I mean [laugh] no definitely not.

Understanding why the cohort felt the need to be seen as respectable within their community is complex. First, as I have argued in chapter three, they had strong religious influences with which to contend. Callum Brown argues, ‘as historians have concluded in many different contexts, religion and respectability were congruent impulses in moral culture.’45 In the Rhondda, non-conformity was ever present in the shape of numerous chapels. During the 1950s, many chapels closed as a result of other attractions becoming available, thus reducing their influence in the community. Nevertheless, ‘the core values and mores remained socially conservative’.46 Second, the aspiration for respectability had its roots in the desire by Rhondda people to prove to a wider world that, although theirs was a hard existence, they

43 Johnes, Wales Since 1939, 111.
44 Weeks, The World We Have Won, 28.
46 Weeks, The World We Have Won, 29.
could aspire to great things. Accordingly, as Dai Smith argues, ‘this desire for “respectability”, for things to be in local parlance, “tidy” could exert an almost immovable hegemony over individual behaviour and family ambitions’.\(^{47}\)

Third, the topography of the Rhondda, with its narrow valleys, accentuated its close-knit nature and sense of familiarity among its residents. Like similar communities, ‘gossip was a conduit for all sorts of useful information which countered the strains of domestic isolation [and] helped bond the community together’.\(^{48}\) Rhondda people therefore knew each other’s business and those who did not act according to social mores stood out. Richard Hoggart in his study on working-class cultures argued that, for working classes, sexual matters are much more visible. Girls who engage in premarital sex are regarded as ‘easy’ and are ‘soon well known’.\(^{49}\) As such there was a heightened pressure on women to behave in a respectable way.

Yet attitudes towards respectability were certainly changing among Rhondda people. In the post-war years this can partly be attributed to the ‘greater mobility and the fracturing of traditional social networks’,\(^{50}\) which came about because people were increasingly working outside the Rhondda. Ruth provided an example, drawing unfavourable comparisons between her workplace in Cardiff and the Rhondda. She explained how she believed that her Cardiff work colleagues ‘didn’t want to know all about you, they accepted you for what you were… Whereas up here people would go into your background but they didn’t want to know down there, not the people I worked with anyway’. There was a sense that Ruth enjoyed the freedom of not being under the spotlight of life in the Rhondda and preferred the privacy of Cardiff life. Another theme emerges throughout the testimonies: an awareness of the contrast between mores and values of the Rhondda and of Cardiff.

Yet in contrast, there is a sense that, despite its close scrutiny and policing of women’s behaviour, the cohort felt that attitudes about pregnancy in the Rhondda seemed more relaxed and supportive than in other parts of the country—as long as marriage occurred.

In discussing people she knew who had fallen pregnant Ruth compared her parents’ attitudes:

\(^{50}\) Johnes, \textit{Wales Since 1939}, 359.
My father used to say “if it ever happened to you, you know … he wouldn’t kick me out. You know parents used to say if it ever happened to my son or daughter they’d have to go… but my parents always said no.

I cannot claim that Ruth’s experience is representative of how other Rhondda parents may have reacted at the time, but it is worth noting the differences in approach across England and Wales. As Martin Johnes notes, ‘in 1959 all but four of the thirty-nine English counties had homes or hostels for unmarried mothers, whereas in Wales only Glamorgan did’. There appeared to be less demand from young women for such services. Similarly, Isabel Emmett’s study of a north Wales rural community indicates there was less stigma attached to premarital conception. It is also interesting to speculate as to whether there were varying views on child adoption between England and Wales. Respectability was still a highly prized virtue in the Rhondda. Nevertheless I would argue that if girls did get pregnant there was an increased likelihood that Rhondda would offer support within their own families.

**Domestic work in marriage**

In recounting how they had negotiated their domestic roles within marriage, a number of themes emerged from the Rhondda women’s testimonies. In terms of domestic work carried out by the cohort, there was clearly an unequal distribution between the women and their husbands. But this was accepted by the cohort. Betty explained what her domestic arrangements were with her husband:

> I done all the cleaning because I went on evening shift I would be there all day with the children so I didn’t expect my husband to do the work in the house or help me because I was quite capable of doing it myself. And then because I was on evening shift I still done all the housework because I was there all day and then I worked part time.

Betty was quite emphatic in the way she used the phrase ‘I didn’t expect my husband to do the work’. In doing so I had the impression that she wanted to portray herself as strong and capable of undertaking this role. Given the amount of hours her husband worked to support the family, Betty willingly accepted the situation whereby she carried out all the domestic chores, despite working a twilight shift in a factory:

> I done the housework. My husband worked in the colliery and when he worked on night shift he would come home and go to Cardiff and clean windows or he would go decorating or do anything.

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Betty was clearly very proud of her hardworking husband, who worked a number of jobs to support the family. But she was also keen to establish her own authority in sharing in the financial decision-making affecting the family.

The concept of companionate marriage was an important one in the post-war years. During this period, as Finch and Summerfield note, companionate marriage included a ‘set of ideas about marriage which ranged from the notion that there should be greater companionship between partners whose roles were essentially different, through the idea of marriage as teamwork’.

Betty’s marriage certainly epitomised aspects of companionate marriage. The work she undertook with her husband was ‘teamwork’ and Betty was proud of her contributions to the home. Deirdre Beddoe, writing about women in Welsh life, has frequently referred to ‘the Welsh Mam, that icon of Welsh womanhood’ who was dominant within the family yet held no economic supremacy over the household. However, reflecting on the cohort’s testimonies, there emerges a much more nuanced and self-determining version of the Welsh housewife to that portrayed by Beddoe.

Many Rhondda people lived in ‘the three generations extended family’. This meant living with parents until houses became available, a common situation among the cohort. Shirley talked about the excitement and pride of moving into a new house away from her parents and as a married couple with a young baby, a house she then lived in for six years:

And then we bought a washing machine and we bought a cleaner and then when we moved down here. And when we moved here I thought it was wonderful. And a thousand pound we gave for the house with no bathroom of course.

Reminiscing, she described how she felt on her first night in her new home, where her lack of material possessions was more than compensated for by the independence she felt:

I thought it was wonderful. That first night here. We were so tidy. Like people say that when you first move you are in such a mess for ages but we had the house for a few weeks and we had very little furniture to move from my mother’s so we bought new so that was coming in to the house. So

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55 Deirdre Beddoe, Out of the Shadows, 8.
the two rooms weren’t knocked into one so all the toys I was bringing down bit by bit and they were all in the front room. So the first night I was thinking Oh my little house. I loved it!

Shirley’s emotions were echoed in working-class communities across south Wales where young families were starting to place a huge importance on their homes in the aftermath of the war. As Martin Johnes writes:

In the lower Swansea valley, people’s satisfaction with their home was noted by social investigators: “They add bathrooms and modernise kitchens, put in new grates, hang paper, paint inside out and generally take a good deal of pride in their homes”. 57

Gaining a home of one’s own and taking control over domestic tasks meant a lot to these women. It was also a demonstration of pride, independence and transition into adulthood. Shirley explained how the housework was shared between herself and her husband. In doing so though, she sought to defend him from any possible criticism regarding unequal distribution of unpaid labour. Shirley, like Betty, was also quick to point out how arduous her husband’s working life was, as a justification for him not doing any or very little housework:

Oh no [laugh] and he worked very long hours when he was on the soft drinks because he was a supervisor he would have to wait for all the lorries to come in. Oh no men never did a thing then not a thing laugh. It is really role reversal now.

The remark ‘It is really role reversal now’, seemingly throwaway, was nevertheless tinged with a slight note of envy. This suggested that Shirley believed women of the present generation, whom she perceived as having greater freedom and equality in the home, were having it easier than her generation. Shirley’s words also indicate that she was slightly resentful of the perception that women of her generation were weaker in comparison with modern women. In defiance of this notion, she emphasised the strength, power and capability of her younger self. As an older person, Shirley was reflecting on life as a young woman. As Jane Martin argues: ‘Individual life histories can be used to unpack the political meanings of everyday experience.’ 58 The retelling of Shirley’s life history gave her an opportunity to reclaim the voice and authority that she sensed was silenced over the years.

The experience of listening to Shirley’s story also proved to be a reciprocal process, as during the interview there were ‘times when my assumptions, values, beliefs, expectations, response

57 Johnes, Wales Since 1939, 83.
patterns, ways of thinking were called into question’. As a contemporary feminist I may be guilty occasionally of taking an overly one-dimensional view of the struggles of earlier generations of women, defining them simply as victims of their time. Shirley’s account, like others in the cohort, provides a salutary reminder to be alert to the dangers of prejudice and oversimplification.

Alternatively, in her recall of the division of labour in marriage, one woman in the cohort was quick to define her husband as ineffective in terms of housework. Marion described rather bitterly how, as far as housework and childcare were concerned, she ‘did everything’. In one rather dismissive and sarcastic comment she stated that she believed her husband did not have the skills: ‘I don’t think Terry would have known what end to change the baby. I didn’t expect him to’. Marion’s approach suggested that in retrospectively putting her husband down, she was attempting to seek reparation for the unjust situation she experienced in her marriage as a young woman.

In her analysis of the testimonies of three generations of women in south Wales detailing their experiences of domestic tasks, Jane Pilcher points to differing attitudes as a result of varying time periods. Like Pilcher’s informants, the Rhondda women recognised and accepted that time and tradition had a hand in perpetuating inequalities in the division of labour in marriage. Consequently, Ruth dismissed her experience of the division of housework during her marriage as a result of what went on previously in her own family:

I mean my father didn’t clean his own shoes. They were wonderfully happy but my mother would pour his tea for him.[ Laugh] That’s the way they had been brought up. You got up from the chair didn’t you to let your father sit down.

The fact that Ruth used the term ‘they were wonderfully happy’ about her parents, emphasised that such traditions within their marriage were not unusual. On the contrary, such inequalities were simply taken for granted.

Similarly Marion accepted the situation whereby she did all the housework and ‘didn’t think it strange at all’ because ‘I was brought up in a household where the men didn’t wash a cup’, adding that:

60 Jane Pilcher, ‘Who should do the dishes? Three generations of Welsh women talking about men and housework’ in Our Sisters’ Land, eds. Jane Aaron; Teresa Rees; Sandra Betts and Moira Vincentelli (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994).
When you are brought up in a household where your mother thinks, even when I went back to work, my mother thought that if Terry was out working, he shouldn’t stir a cup of tea because when I did go back to work I would come home before Terry and if I went upstairs to do something, change the bed or anything and be gone. She’d call “Terry will be in now, Terry will be in”. “Yes yes I know I know”. But that’s the environment in which you were brought up.

Marion’s use of the phrase ‘even when I went back to work’ indicates she was aware of an inherent injustice in the way she was expected to continue shouldering the main domestic role. However, she did not speak out against this. The cohort chose not to apportion responsibility to their husbands for their continuing inequality—although, they did blame women from the previous generation for being too lenient with men and helping to maintain the inequities between husbands and wives. This they believed had served to create a legacy.

Hazel recalled who did the housework in her home:

Well I used to do it all. Tom never did anything no. He was... he was spoilt by his mother I think and yeah. And he used to live in London for a bit when he was younger so no he didn’t... I used to do it all really.

Shirley was clearly frustrated by her own mother’s approach, which she believed sustained the idea that women’s time was unimportant in comparison to men’s. Shirley explained how inflexible the situation could be when she was trying to cook dinner for her husband and the pressure her own mother placed on her in carrying out this task: ‘Oh gosh yes I mean the food had to be... I mean I lived with my mother then and she would be saying “Have you got that boy’s food ready?”’ Shirley was also annoyed that she had to be available to make dinner at a moment’s notice. As she explained, ‘he came in all sorts of hours so that was difficult. If it weren’t ready, if I was out, he would have been home early and if I had everything ready he would be home late.’

The testimonies suggest a number of possible meanings. In the case of Marion and Shirley, there were obvious conflicts and tensions between the generations regarding married life. The way in which mothers and daughters relate to each other has been characterised by Ruth E. Ray as occurring in a ‘web of relationships’ with ‘a mother’s biography embedded in the autobiography of the daughter’. 61 This depiction was reflected in the experiences of the Rhondda women. The older women appeared to put pressure on the younger women, such as Shirley and Marion, to act in a certain way, namely to follow the traditions of an older generation and be dutiful wives to their husbands. Both Shirley’s and Marion’s testimonies give a clear sense of how their experiences and occasional conflicts of married life were

influenced by their mothers’ expectations. The testimonies also exemplify the notion that the cohort’s time was not perceived to be as important as that of men’s, a contention illustrated by Oakley. Reflecting on how women are narrowly defined as ‘Angels in the House’, she argues that:

Angels are epitomes of sacrificial femininity, always thinking about other people… Anthropologist Margaret Mead’s daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, married another academic: “For at least twenty years, whenever I interrupted my husband when he was busy, he finished what he was doing before he responded. When he interrupted me, I would drop what I was doing to respond to him”. 62

Like Mary Catherine Bateson, both Shirley and Marion appear irritated by the expectation that they should be at their husband’s disposal. They may have been defined as ‘Angels in the House’, but clearly at times they were reluctant ones. However, for one woman in the cohort, tradition worked in her favour. Enid’s mother lived with her, including when she was married. Enid described how ‘houseproud’ her mother was, which partly stemmed from her mother’s past experiences as a young woman in domestic service after she left school at 14. 63

Enid described how her mother:

worked always, more or less in London in service. The first job she had was in Talygarn, a house down there. It was a lovely place down there and that was the first job she had as a house maid. This pleased her very much because she was a very houseproud person and she enjoyed going to work. She liked the house. She liked the people she worked for and it was her ambition to go to other places with lovely houses.

There was an obvious difference of opinion and approach between the two generations when it came to domestic work. As Enid explained:

Now I’ve told you before my mother was very house-proud. If my mother came here now she would really have a go at me she would because things would not be to suit her you know. She wasn’t a pompous woman but the house had to come first. It didn’t matter what work I did, how important it was or whatever it was, it didn’t come up to running a house. She was one of those “old school”.

However, far from being a source of conflict for Enid, she was quite happy for her mother to use her ‘old school’ approach to support Enid and make life easier for Enid to live a fairly independent life, particularly when it came to her work as a police officer. She explained:

Perhaps I’d be going to work in the morning she’d say “What are we going to have for our dinner tonight then Enid?” “Well I don’t know. Perhaps a couple of lamb chops Mam?” “Yeah. That would be alright.” We’d come home, food would be ready right, and I’d say “What happened to the lamb chops Mam?” “I didn’t feel like doing them”. She said and she’d have done what she wanted to do (Laugh).

Enid therefore put up with her mother’s control and laughed it off as she knew how much the situation benefitted her.

In contrast, one of the Rhondda women portrayed her marriage as nearly equal in terms of who did the housework. Ruth initially described her situation as ‘60/40’ but then after giving it some thought she acknowledged that she did ‘a little bit more’. Ruth worked fulltime, but nevertheless excused her husband for doing less domestic work than her. She explained: ‘I suppose looking back I did do most of it because Jim used to do a lot of evening work even… and he was studying so I suppose in a way...’ Her voice trailed off as she reflected on her life as a new wife, perhaps now realising that it need not have been that way. While her husband had taken responsibility for some of the housework, his tasks were very specific. As Ruth explained: ‘Jim would clean the fire out and light the fire when I was doing this… Yes yes, men didn’t cook the dinner when they came in, did they? But then he would wash the dishes.’ Within this testimony a number of issues were apparent. First, Ruth, unlike most of the cohort, had worked fulltime without the care of children for a long period. Her only child had been born when she was 34 and by then she was well established as a fulltime employee. Given that she did not have the constraints of caring for children, there was no reason for the distribution of housework not to be equal and her work not to be perceived as of equal value as that of her husband.

However, that was not the case. Lynne Abrams in her work on women’s role within the family observes that while men may have undertaken some housework, they shied away from ‘visible or public activities’, which ‘would undermine their masculine identity’. There was a sense therefore that like the working-class families Lynn Abrams describes, Ruth and the other Rhondda women justified what their roles should be—namely, undervalued and unequal.

**Marriage breakdown**

The Rhondda women regarded marriage as a very serious and permanent status. Yet inevitably, there were problems and breakdowns along the way. From the testimonies it appeared that the Rhondda women’s experiences of divorce in the community were rare. As Irene recalled, ‘I don't think there was anything like that’. Shirley could only recollect one person who experienced a divorce and ‘he was the only one we knew got divorced, wasn’t it?’ [checking with her husband]…So we never thought about it like’. While legislative

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changes in the post-war years made divorce more available, for the Rhondda women it seemed out of reach.

It was evident that Shirley defined herself mainly as a wife and mother. Marriage was also for life. It was to be endured even when the situation was not a happy one, an experience Shirley was aware of in regard to some of her friends. Divorce did not feature among Shirley’s circle of friends and peers, although as she clarified ‘their children have been, most of them’.

Shirley further explained that:

I think people coped. You got on with things and like if marriages didn’t work out then you didn’t have a divorce at the drop of a hat. You tried to suffer it [laugh]… No you didn’t hear of many divorcees… divorce was unheard of.

Ruth believed divorce for Rhondda women was possible but only ‘in extreme’ circumstances. The reality was that divorce would have been difficult. As Ruth described, ‘it could take a long time, three or five years’. Given women’s financial dependence it ‘was difficult for people because they couldn’t earn money to live. They couldn’t get any benefits as they can now so I assume that would be one of the reasons.’ But for the Rhondda women there was also a lot of stigma attached to divorce. It suggested a sense of failure, something to be avoided at all costs. As Hazel explained: ‘You didn't hear so much of it then did you that you do now because it’s quite common now but I don't think it was looked on very well.’

Kathleen believed that divorce was regarded as ‘terrible’ and from her own experience had ‘led to rifts in the family’. Ruth reflected how ‘there was a sort of shame attached to’ divorce, adding that ‘Well I think you would feel that you had failed somehow’. The community’s attitude to divorced couples was that ‘they were talked about, you know, in a sort of whisper’. Divorce could be a welcome relief for many women from an unhappy marriage. Yet the fact that it was largely stigmatised by the community made this option an uneasy one for the Rhondda women. It would be many years before divorce was easier to obtain. As Selena Todd notes, ‘in 1969 “blameless” divorce became legal for the first time (prior to this, one party had to accept blame, usually by admitting to cruelty, desertion or adultery)’. Until then, divorce proceedings could be as convoluted and traumatic as that experienced and described by Eva Goldsworthy.

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Any unhappiness that occurred in marriage was largely kept hidden from the wider community and only shared with close family. Ruth was surprised by the attempted suicide of a work colleague after her husband had left her for another woman. She had been surprised because there was no indication of it, which she ascribed to the secrecy with which her peers conducted themselves in their marital relationships:

I don’t remember people telling me they were unhappy but I don’t think they would have in those days. No, no I wouldn’t know to be honest. I don’t know whether I would have told anybody. If I was unhappy you know. I might have told close family but I am sure there must have been people I worked with who were unhappy and they wouldn’t have told me whereas now they would just go wouldn’t they? No I can’t remember anyone telling me anything about their marriage… No now that you mention it I cannot remember anybody in the civil service saying to me that they weren’t happily married and there must have been some.

Such secrecy and lack of discussion about problems at home may seem incomprehensible now to the older Ruth and to a modern ‘Jeremy Kyle Show’ society in which emotions and feelings are laid bare.67 The post-war years, in contrast, was a time when privacy was vital. Moreover, as I argue in chapter four, the unwritten rules of the post-war workplace relied on deference and formality.

The workplace was very much part of the public sphere and the home was private. There was very little blurring of the two worlds. ‘Cultural assumptions’68 about women’s place in the post-war workplace meant they were under sufferance, rather than being obviously welcome—even though their contributions meant much to the economy. In the workplace women could not be open about private matters of the home. This problem was exacerbated because, as Ross McGibbon points out: ‘In the “traditional” working-class marriage, husband and wife largely occupied different social and domestic spheres; in such a marriage, almost more than anything, sexual relations suffered. Husbands and wives hardly knew how to talk about sex.’ 69

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67 The Jeremy Kyle Show first aired in Britain in July 2005. ‘In the mold of “Jerry Springer” in the US, this tabloid talk show features Jeremy Kyle playing a combination of presenter and referee amidst guests who thrash out their conflicts, dilemmas and relationship issues in front of a studio audience.’ (IMDb march 2015). The popularity of the show has been noted by ‘Jeremy Kyle versus God’ in Broadcast, 4 March 2011: ‘On Wednesday at 2.35pm, ITV2’S Jeremy Kyle Show was watched by 570,000/7%;the same as BBC4’S When God Spoke English: The Making of the King James Bible[570,000/3%] at 9pm on Monday. It’s not often that you can put Jeremy Kyle and God in the same sentence.’
In addition, there was also a distrust of being too open, which had long roots linked to the poverty of the cohort’s youth. As Melanie Tebbutt observes:

‘Sensitivity to the surveillance aspects of gossip had been similarly heightened during the Depression years, when the ‘means test’ tapped deep into the petty jealousies and resentments which characterised the insecurities of close-knit, impoverished districts…. Mindful of their humiliating insights, a Rhondda miner wrote how insidiously the notion of being spied on ‘seemed to creep into the minds of the men’ who were unemployed.’ 70

Marriage was very important to the cohort, who invested a lot of emotional feelings in the concept. In comparison to earlier years, the post-war period was defined by a ‘more introspective model of romantic taste which placed emotional connection at its heart’. 71

Under these circumstances, marital breakdown would have been met with disappointment and a feeling of failure.

To some extent, evidence in the testimonies—particularly the notion that marital unhappiness should be endured—was grounded in the community values of the Rhondda. Significantly, two of the women used the same phrase of ‘making your bed’ to illustrate this. As Betty reflected:

I mean when, well years ago when I was getting married then people sort of stayed together, today well they don’t even get married today do they? But today they don’t give it much of a chance before they get divorced, but your know years ago, I mean if you had a row with your husband, well your mother would say “well you made your bed you have got to lie on it” sort of thing.

Similarly Ruth recounted how:

I remember one of my family had problems and left their husband, only for a short while, and I spoke to somebody and I said she has gone back to her mother and he immediately said well she has made her bed she has to lie on it. They believed that once you were married that was it.

Such descriptions are an illustration of how, despite legal changes affecting women’s status within marriage, there remained a sense that they were still somehow under the authority of their husbands. As Hannah Gavron noted, ‘within the contract of marriage itself important changes also took place: as Graveson [1957] said “the general concept of partnership” has come to replace that “of principal agent of master and servant in relation to husband and wife.”’ 72 As such, Betty and Ruth’s testimonies allude to a way of life in the Rhondda that still saw women as passive, and any poor choices in marital partners were expected to be endured.

70 Tebbutt, Women’s Talk? 120.
Domestic abuse in marriage

Domestic violence in marriage was evident in the post-war years, but it was largely kept hidden. However, two of the Rhondda women alluded to it. According to Stella, domestic abuse, when it occurred, was kept secret, suggesting it was frequent and not acknowledged. Stella’s friend had kept her physical abuse at the hands of her husband a secret:

He beat her up and all that and I lost touch with her after that because she did not want people to know what her situation was and I met her mother and father one day and they said she had gone. She had left him, but he had beaten her up but he was such a nice fella. You would never believe he was like that but she did say perhaps you will not see me again and I haven’t from that day to this and I don’t know where she is.

Ruth was not immediately aware of domestic abuse because: ‘That would have been behind closed doors. And I think your parents didn’t show you about people they knew either.’ Furthermore, Ruth’s expectation of her parents was that ‘if they knew it had been going on I don’t think they would have told me then if they knew of anybody’. Problems of domestic violence for women in the post-war years were compounded by the ‘prevailing notions of privacy’ and ‘the lack of services’. The hidden nature of domestic abuse in the mid-twentieth century in Wales is also described by writer Marion Tawe Davies, who recounts her childhood in Ystalyfera at the top of the Swansea Valley: ‘In those days, there was a tendency to be “hush hush” about such matters.’ It would be many years before it would be discussed openly. As Nickie Charles argues:

Women who experienced violence often felt they were the only ones to whom this was happening and that it was somehow their own fault. They therefore kept it hidden, leaving the myth of the happy family unchallenged. It was not until the advent of the women’s liberation movement that domestic violence was brought into the light of day and its existence publicly acknowledged.

Unsurprisingly then, when the cohort or their Rhondda peers experienced domestic violence in their community, they believed they had few options or solutions.

Conclusion

Chapter five explored how the cohort’s expectations of marriage influenced their flourishing. In Britain in the mid-twentieth century, marriage was at a crossroads. Marriage was moving

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74 Marion Tawe Davies, ‘Violent Husbands’ in Changing Times, 181.
from being a relationship that simply provided stability for women to one in which there were high expectations of romantic love and emotional investment. In terms of the cohort, did marriage satisfy and fulfil them or did it constrain them? What impact did living in the Rhondda have on the cohort’s experiences and perceptions of marriage? From interrogating the evidence provided in the cohort’s testimonies I conclude that there were diverse reactions, which both confirm and challenge the existing literature on marriage in mid-twentieth century Britain.

Most of the cohort were very positive about their experiences of marriage. In their interviews, they provide glimpses of great happiness over the years. Some of the women believed that marriage validated them and made them more complete. In some cases, the cohort felt a new sense of self determination by being married. However, in delving deeper into the narratives, some of the cohort experienced loss when they married, whether in terms of their independence or freedom to be fulfilled individuals. In addition, like other working-class communities, the Rhondda placed a great emphasis on the notion of respectability. However, there were contradictions in this. Evidence suggests that sometimes the community showed great support to women in difficult circumstances, possibly more so than in other communities across Britain. A particular example of this was the support given to women who became pregnant before marriage, support that enabled some of the women to lead the lives they wanted. However, this support was inconsistent and, in terms of abusive relationships or marital breakdowns, the community seemed less sympathetic.

As outlined, women’s access to divorce was becoming easier. However, from the evidence, divorce was regarded very differently by the Rhondda women. There is a sense that while divorce was appropriate for some women, this was not the case for them. Such differentiation in attitudes further reinforces the notion that constraint and limitations were placed on women, not only by their circumstances but by their community ties. Another extremely compelling finding from some of the cohort’s testimonies relates to their view of history and victimhood: they were not content to be seen as victims of their time. Recalling their memories of injustices suffered sixty years earlier in their marriages was a means for some to come to terms with their past and obtain ‘personal composure’.76 In doing so, the women

were able to lay claim to a greater sense of self, power and strength, an aspect of the thesis that is particularly noteworthy. Finally, the post-war years were a time of changing identities and priorities for women. But it could be argued that the close-knit nature of the Rhondda, with old and new ideas bonded together, created a more complex world for the cohort to negotiate.
Chapter 6 Sex

Ruth chose her words carefully when she described the challenges in her and her peers’ sex lives when they were young women: ‘It was very unusual for people to have sex... people were having sex undoubtedly because I knew friends who were you know but there was always the fear of becoming pregnant because it was such a stigma’. Furthermore, when comparing attitudes towards sex in the 1950s and now, Ruth laughed, admitting that perhaps:

I’d have sex because that is the main thing and all my friends say that who I talk to in that had we lived in that generation. Were we living in this generation it would have been very different because of the pill and so forth.

Ruth’s testimony, with its sense of dilemma, desire, fear and risk, goes to the heart of the problem considered in this chapter. Chapter six examines how the cohort negotiated their sex lives in the post-war years. It will explore the constraints and opportunities that confronted the Rhondda women during this period. Suzanne Dyson and Elizabeth Smith, drawing on the work of Langfeld and Porter, contend that:

sexuality is an integral part of the personality of every person: man, woman and child. It is a basic need and aspect of being human that cannot be separated from other parts of life and it influences thoughts, feelings, actions and interactions and thereby mental and physical health.¹

Arguably then, allowing one’s sexuality to flourish is essential to realising self-fulfilment. This chapter will explore this further by analysing the cohort’s experiences of sex as young women.

Women’s sexuality in mid-twentieth century Britain

Attitudes and perspectives towards women’s sexuality experienced both change and continuity during the course of the century. The war changed the way women regarded themselves. The degree of independence they felt while their husbands were away on active war service meant women were now ‘no longer willing to be subservient’ to them.² The growing degree of affluence in Britain also meant more self-determination. Broadly, as Kate Fisher argues, ‘birth control use distinguishes the modern family from the traditional one.’³ Furthermore, the greater availability of contraception during the latter half of the century

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¹ Suzanne Dyson and Elizabeth Smith, “‘There are lots of different kinds of normal’: families and sex education-styles, approaches and concerns’, Sex Education 12, no.2 (April 2012): 219–229, 219.
² Sue Bruley, Women in Britain since 1900 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999), 129.
meant that sexual pleasure could be separated from the constraints of reproduction. This in turn opened up new possibilities for the way women led their lives.

However, the picture is not straightforward. Until the arrival of the contraceptive pill in the 1960s, contraception (namely condoms, the cap, withdrawal methods, and abstinence⁴) was unreliable or regarded as ‘a menace’ or ‘onerous’, a situation also detailed by Lella Seco Florence.⁵ While potentially contraception could be viewed as a joint enterprise by married couples in a companionate marriage, evidence shows that many women still regarded this as a decision for their husbands.⁶ Studies also indicate women were reluctant to be seen as knowing too much about sex—reputations were at stake and ‘anxieties about sexual experience prior to marriage cut across the mid-twentieth century’.⁷

Attitudes to women’s sexuality also differed according to class. David Vincent in his comprehensive study of state secrecy reveals that there was much more monitoring and interference in the lives of the poor as opposed to the middle classes.⁸ Lesley Hall too points to the example of the ‘Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists 1940s’ survey into birth control’ as an indicator of how the working classes were scrutinised disproportionately more than the upper or middle classes.⁹ Pre-marital sex was still widely disapproved of in the middle years of the century, as evidenced by the outrage directed at Eustace Chesser’s proposition in his article for the British Medical Association in 1959, which argued that ‘pre- and extramarital sex ought to be matters of individual choice’.¹⁰ However, as Geoffrey Gorer observed, ‘most English people’s views on sexual morality are more rigid than their personal practice.’¹¹ This suggests that what was said publicly was not always followed through in private.

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⁶ Fisher, Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, Chapter five.
⁹ Lesley Hall, Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880, 2nd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 6.
¹⁰ Eustace Chesser’s booklet, Getting Married (1959), cited in: Hall, Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880, 137.
**Sex education**

In terms of their attitudes towards and experiences of sex, the cohort came of age at a time when there was little discussion, openness and basic information about the subject. Public information in the post-war years about sex was patchy. In the media, sex was a topic not frequently discussed. Radio was one potential outlet but in Britain it was problematic. It was strictly controlled:

> As Haire observed from London, only commercial radio stations could venture into the business of transmitting sex information: “Here in England, where no commercial stations exist, where the BBC has a monopoly, and where broadcasting suffers under the dead hand of the Churches, such a broadcast would at the present time, be unthinkable”.12

Young women would have entered adulthood with scant publicly-available information and guidance about their own bodies. Menstruation was not an issue openly discussed, which no doubt added to the stresses of growing up. As Penny Tinkler notes, ‘magazine silence about menstruation was typical of society’s reticence in discussing this matter’. Discourses around sexuality were less informative and rather more concerned with sexuality as a ‘prelude to marriage and motherhood’.13 Little guidance was forthcoming from teachers on sex education and what was available was extremely poor.

In her autobiography, the journalist Joan Bakewell, who attended grammar school in the 1940s, described how her science teacher, Miss Glover, had dealt with sex education:

> ‘explaining the reproductive system of a rabbit: ‘she would stare unblinkingly at the back wall of a lab, go bright red and gabble her way through the information’.14 Clearly, teachers themselves suffered great discomfort and embarrassment when it came to teaching young women about sex. This was not helped by the confusion and inconsistency around the subject. What was regarded by experts as good practice was not upheld by anxious teachers.

As Hera Cook notes:

> Experts such as child guidance therapists believed that children should initially receive sexual instruction well before puberty… but in practice sex education was almost never given to pupils before the age of 13 or 14 years; teachers’ anxiety about undermining children’s innocence and their fear of parental resistance trumped their intellectual agreement with the experts.15

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Given the confusion, ignorance and discomfort from those who could be expected to offer wisdom, it is unsurprising that the cohort’s information and experience of sex was unfortunately lacking.

Some of the cohort attributed this to parental attitudes. Betty told me how her parents had been reluctant to discuss matters of sex and contraception with her:

Well it wasn’t really discussed much then. Whether it was because my mother didn’t discuss it or all the mothers didn’t discuss it. My mother didn’t talk much to us then about the sexual side of anything. Whether she was too shy to say it I don’t know. My mother didn’t say anything no.

Stella too confirmed that her parents never spoke to her about sex, despite sexual activity occurring among young women in the community:

it was happening but I was very naïve about things like that being an only child my parents never talked to me about things like that. I mean I didn’t know what was going on but if you had brothers and sisters… So my mother was very old fashioned and restricted about things like that… It was a forbidden conversation and of course it was a friend of mine told me all about sex [laugh].

Irene similarly told me about her parents’ lack of openness around sex, a subject she described as ‘taboo’: ‘In as much as you thought about anything... well you didn't, sex wasn’t mentioned’. Significantly, the same word of ‘taboo’ was used by a number of the cohort—Kathleen, Hazel and Irene, which suggests the heightened sense of secrecy, shame and prohibition around the topic of sex as experienced by the cohort. Hazel, for example, was very definite when I asked her about attitudes toward premarital sex: ‘It was a taboo subject really wasn’t it, yeah.’ Irene also described her mother’s reaction when she reached puberty: ‘I remember when my periods started I wasn’t 11, not quite 11, and I remember my mother didn't tell me until it started and she said, “Oh you’re going to do this now.”’ And I said, “Oh... oh can I go down and tell daddy then?”’, to which Irene’s mother answered a definite ‘No’.

Contemporary social research reveals the extent to which mothers are prominent in providing sex education, albeit sparse, to daughters. Suzanne Dyson and Elizabeth Smith, for example, argue that it is ‘the female parent’ who is ‘more likely’ to be the main point of communication with their children in matters of sex and relationships. Furthermore, it appears that children tend to ‘prefer’ to speak to the ‘female parent’ rather than fathers about sexual matters.16 In contrast, half a century earlier, a significantly different picture emerges of the relationships between mothers and daughters in this respect. In Irene’s case her mother’s

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16 Dyson and Smith, “‘There are lots of different kinds of normal’”, 220.
discomfort seems almost painful to witness. The fact that she was so clumsy in discussions with Irene about sexual matters did not auger well for her daughter’s future life.

All of the cohort suggested that while they were growing up, the idea of premarital sex received disapproval. Whilst I did not raise this issue, without prompting, two of the women volunteered the information that they did not have sex before marriage. As Betty recalled:

Yes, yes I didn’t have to get married. Well I don’t know. I don’t know whether it was done so much then. They didn’t you know. Well they are not like they are today. They are totally different. I don’t know what to say on that one. Yes, yes. It just wasn’t discussed. But well I certainly didn’t have sex before I was married [laugh].

As Shirley explained: ‘Well we were courting a long time. We really wanted to be together I suppose. It wasn’t a promiscuous society then was it... you wouldn’t let a boy go all the way, never and I mean nearly four years?!’

The declamatory manner in which Shirley emphasised the phrase ‘nearly four years’, raising her voice at this point in disbelief, suggested a degree of astonishment at the differences in women’s lives at that time and the present. Of note here is the awkwardness displayed when discussing sex with these elderly women, of whom Shirley was just one example. This contrasted greatly with the comfortable flow of discussion when other areas of their lives were discussed. Arguably, this awkwardness may itself speak to differences in social mores between now and the time of the women’s youth.

The cohort’s attitudes to sex must also be seen through the lens of community values and the institutions associated with them in the post-war period. Irene ascribed such an attitude to her upbringing in the Rhondda, reiterating the point: ‘don’t forget I was chapel brought up as well [laugh] so it was unheard of you know’. In my question to Enid about sex she explained how secretive it all was and the sense of disapproval surrounding it. Sex was ‘only whispered about’ in the Rhondda, and premarital sex:

was frowned on really… It was frowned on. You’d hear things being said in whispers about people and all the rest of it, you know… I dared not have gone home and told my parents and say something like that. And people were saying it to me, you know.

The relative smallness of the Rhondda created real fears about the dangers of gossip and knowing everyone else’s business. However, while there are clear links between communities and the attitudes that may develop, experiences and interpretations remain diverse—that is,
ideas can have different meanings to different groups, individuals and genders. Indeed, the
notion of community is not static. As Lammers argues:

This does not mean, however, that the entire notion of community needs to be abandoned. It does
indicate, however, that a more nuanced understanding of local identities, and of the specific contexts
in which community did have tangible meaning, needs to be developed.17

Arguably, as chapter three demonstrates, most of the cohort were particularly influenced by
the patriarchal aspects of the Rhondda and its chapel life. One woman stands out—Enid. Part
of her testimony distances herself from the embarrassment surrounding sex that appeared to
affect some of the others. Her work as a policewoman put her in regular contact with cases
relating to young people who had sexual relationships with often older adults. She related to
me how she had approached such situations:

I’d go to people whose children were having babies at 14 years of age. The mothers, I’d have to see
them because they were under age. We’d be booking the blokey [man] because he was committing
an offence wasn’t he? More often than not the mothers would be “Oh dear, dear! People! Now they
will be talking about us! Oh dear it will be awful! What will they say?” And they were worried about
what people were going to say about her having a baby, their daughter.

Enid’s response, however, was very pragmatic and practical, for she focussed less on the
potential loss of respectability and more on the wellbeing of the children:

And I told them and I told everyone the same because I thought it was the best thing to tell them. I
said “All you’ve got to tell them is that you are only too pleased that she is having a baby, and that
she hasn’t got some illness that perhaps would take her life.” I said “Really you can’t say anything
different.” I said “You must be pleased about this”, I said, and “be very pleased” I said, “that she
hasn’t got some terrible illness”, and I didn’t mean the VDs and that.

A number of explanatory possibilities arise from Enid’s testimony, which provided a
different perspective than others in the cohort. One is her professional training and
involvement in the criminal justice system. Another perspective, as discussed in chapter four,
is Enid’s location within a predominantly masculine culture. She also often worked outside
her immediate community of the Rhondda. All of these factors are significant.

However, in contrast to the previously measured and calm way she reacted to issues of
premarital sex, Enid demonstrated a different approach altogether regarding a related area.
Enid’s reactions were very emotive when she recalled a situation she encountered during her
working life. As a young policewoman in the 1950s, she described how she had been asked to
deal with a woman who had been arrested. Her words seemed to tumble out, as she
explained:

There was a woman brought into the station and she was oh she was terribly drunk, awful. So they wanted to put her in the cells now for her to sleep it off. I have never put a woman in the cells. If ever I had something wrong with a woman, she would be with me perhaps in the charge room, perhaps in a little room where we had a bit of privacy, but I never put a woman in the cells. I’ve seen women in the cells and I’ve had to attend to them, but they haven’t been anything to do with me.

Enid continued with her story, her words quickening in pace:

But anyhow, this woman now she came in and she had a handbag and the men had sat her down, and they wanted to put her in the cells so they said to me “Enid search her bag.” Right? Now then that taught me a lesson because this was the first one. I hadn’t been there 5 minutes. I went through her handbag. No, sorry I’ve got it the wrong way round. I searched her first right, sat her down, went for her handbag. Now then I should have done it the other way round because that’s how I did it afterwards. Now I went through her bag and there was a funny smell on that woman. It wasn’t a smell of beer or booze and it wasn’t a smell like odour smell, not perspiration and that you know? It wasn’t that at all but there was something and I didn’t like it. I didn’t know what it was. I went through her bag and I found out what it was. There was an appointment card in her bag for the special clinic and I knew what the special clinic was but I’m afraid I didn’t know very much about VD. We’d never had a lecture on it. We’d had nothing on it.

Enid then explained to me the immediate impact this incident had on her, and went on to relate how panic-stricken she had become:

And I was really upset and I started to cry. They took the woman and they put her out of my sight, and I couldn’t stop. They could not pacify me. They brought the inspector in. The inspector came. “Well Enid you’ve done no harm”, he said. “I know” I said. “But that woman! I’ve searched her!”

It was clear when I pressed her on how she felt during that incident, that little of the fear had gone:

CC: Why were you upset? Because you were frightened?
Enid: Because it was that I saw it on there that she had an appointment in the VD clinic.
CC: Did you feel sorry for her or not sorry for her?
Enid: No! I felt sorry for me! I didn’t know anything about it. I knew a bit of VD and how you got it but I thought to myself “Gosh I’ve handled that woman!”
CC: I see so you were worried for your own…
Enid: Scared to death I was and they could not pacify me at all. The inspector comes in and he says “But you’ve done no wrong”, and he was trying to explain. I don’t care. That woman is—you know… Because I hadn’t been there five minutes really. So anyhow he said “I’ll be back now in a minute.” He went out, right? He was living in the flat in the police station. He came back. “Right”, he said. “Go on in to my wife. She’s put a bath ready for you and put your clothes outside. I’m sending a man up to your digs and he’ll fetch clothes back for you, clean clothes and those clothes,” he said, “You leave them on the floor”. And he said “I’ll get them up from there and I’ll send them to be fumigated. Will you be better then?” “No!” I said. “I won’t be better! That woman! See? You know I’d handled her.”

There was fear in Enid’s eyes when she continued:

Oh Good God! it was terrible. And that’s what they did. I had a bath in the police station in the inspector’s bathroom—Dettol, plenty of Dettol! Plenty of everything and then my clothes! Ugh! And I thought to myself “Who’s going to pick those up?” Perhaps we’ll have something off those. I thought I don’t know. I don’t care!
Significantly, Enid’s testimony reveals that 60 years later, she was still extremely concerned that she had been placed in great danger as a result of this encounter, despite knowledge to the contrary—that venereal disease spreads only through sexual contact.

I asked Enid how she was feeling about the incident now that she was older:

CC: How do you feel about that now looking back? The way you reacted. Do you think, obviously as you get older you know different things so how do you feel about that now?

Enid: I wouldn’t want to do it again. I have searched lots of women again but there’s a way of doing it, isn’t there you know.

Enid’s categorical answer—that nothing had changed, aside from having taken more care rather than dismiss the incident as an overreaction—suggests the long-lasting impact that poor sex education can and did have on the cohort. Enid’s reaction can also be contextualised within the adverse publicity surrounding venereal disease in the post-war period. During the Second World War, responsibility for the disease was attributed to ““little cheap loose-living girls”, soldiers, and foreigners’, especially Americans. Furthermore, great emphasis was put on women and the importance of ‘keeping clean’. By the 1950s, with better treatment in the form of penicillin, syphilis and gonorrhoea were decreasing. However, the prevalence of an ‘enormous number of “worried well” who needed ‘no treatment’, yet were still seeking medical help, indicated that much of the fear surrounding venereal disease was still present.  

Contraception

A lack of advice and access to reliable contraception was a barrier to the cohort’s full engagement with sex. Access to contraceptives improved during the course of the twentieth century, but this was a gradual process. During the early years of the century there was a lack of information and availability, particularly for working-class women. In the 1920s, this was compounded by the fact that the use of contraception was ‘still associated with immorality and prostitution; and they [contraceptives] were opposed by the Church and the bulk of the medical profession’. This was no longer the case after 1930 when the Protestant churches and the medical authorities changed their stance with the Lambeth conference’s change of

18 Hall, Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880, 118, 140.
approach toward contraception.\textsuperscript{20} Nevertheless, an oral history study carried out with 107 people from Oxford and south Wales, concluded that approaches to contraception was ‘ill-thought-out, barely discussed, haphazard actions that could not be relied upon to prevent pregnancy’.\textsuperscript{21} Furthermore, responsibility for contraception ‘was largely seen as the preserve of men’.\textsuperscript{22}

The contraceptive pill became frequently used towards the end of the 1960s, and is regarded as the main reason for a radical change in sexual behaviour. Although, as Peter Clarke argues, ‘there is evidence indicating that changes in conduct in fact preceded—by as much as a decade—the widespread availability of the pill in the late 1960s’.\textsuperscript{23} Nevertheless, it would be some years before the cohort would be able to benefit from a reliable, worry-free form of contraception.

Three of the Rhondda women referred, without prompting, to the use of contraception. Ruth and Betty believed they were very uninformed about contraception during their youth. Ruth explained to me:

You know people like Jim and I we didn’t know much about contraception so we wouldn’t take a chance would you in getting pregnant so it was just the odd ones and there were two that I knew in Porth County and that was in the 50s.

Betty told me she believed things were different when she was younger: ‘Oh my gosh. It wasn’t advertised at all then. It wasn’t talked about you know much really. French letters they were called then but condoms they are today’. The responses of the two women, which focussed on their unfamiliarity in matters of contraception, was typical of many young women of the time. The Little Kinsey survey carried out by Mass Observation concluded that ‘many people are either ignorant or inadequately informed about birth control’, particularly women and those who left school before the age of 14. But such ignorance was encouraged by the need to be seen as respectable. As Kate Fisher further notes:

The crucial difference between men’s and women’s testimony, however, was the extent to which knowledge and experience were actively sought. Whereas women asserted their ignorance as a

\textsuperscript{22} Paula Rawlinson, ‘Gender influences of contraceptive choice: women of all ages are keen to prevent and unplanned pregnancy. However, attitudes to contraception among men vary’, \textit{Primary Health Care} 20, no.6 (July 2010): 16.
means of reinforcing their virtue, men presented their sense of ignorance as a problem to be overcome.  

Other women from the cohort also stated that some young women in the Rhondda were having sex but with the added risk of unreliable contraceptive methods. As Ruth explained: ‘Well I mean the pill wasn’t out and I think had it been out there would have been a lot more sex before marriage. I would have been petrified of having a baby before I got married you know.’ This sense of fear is captured by Penelope Lively discussing her time as a university student in the 1950s:

In those pre-Pill days grim tales of clandestine abortion haunted us all. There was much scared and private counting of days and watching of the calendar. Each of us knew, or knew of some girl to whom it had actually happened: that awful realisation, the nausea, the panic. This was no climate of sexual liberation—it is strange now to think that the sixties were only ten years off.

Ruth acknowledged that friends of hers were in fact having premarital sex but were terrified, like the young women in Penelope Lively’s account, by the prospect of getting pregnant. Despite the risks involved, they were not deterred. The cohort’s fear of pregnancy before marriage was very real, given that it would take many years before a more reliable form of contraception would be available. Novelist Angela Carter noted that: ‘the introduction of more or less 100 per cent effective methods of birth control, combined with the relaxation of manners that may have derived from this technological innovation or else came from God knows where, changed, well, everything.’

Ruth, born just five years before Carter, was unequivocal in her belief that better contraception would have transformed her into a more sexually active young woman. Significantly, reflection on her younger self gave her a new understanding of her life. The intervening years between youth and old age had shifted her concerns about the need for respectability to a more open desire for sex.

But despite the sense of greater equality and partnership underpinned by the notion of companionate marriage, some aspects lagged behind. In relation to contraception, husbands continued to take the main responsibility. Betty clarified her situation:

My husband used contraceptives when we got married. For our honeymoon we went down to—didn’t have a lot of money—I got married in the registry office and we went down to Porthcawl. That was where our honeymoon was [laugh]. But he did use contraceptives... I know we did use

contraceptives but we wanted – I wanted a baby then. So as I say we weren’t married long before we had Mark.

The fact that Betty’s husband dealt with the contraception suggests that she took a slightly more passive role with her husband compared to other areas of her life. In chapter five, for example, I argued that Betty and her husband appeared to be working together much more equally as a team. Here, in sexual matters, it was her husband who took the lead. While the case has been made on numerous occasions that there was social change for women in the post-war years, it seemed that some areas, such as their unfettered access to and use of contraception, were slower than others to develop.

Romance was no substitute for hard information about sex and contraception, as Shirley testified:

CC: You remember you said that it was not the done thing about having sex before marriage, you said you were told about these things by other people. Do you remember if there were adverts or images which were being promoted?

Shirley: No no I mean the glamour of it if you watched films—they would kiss and they would fade out. They would leave the rest to your imagination.

Furthermore, Shirley after many years of reflecting on her earlier life, seemed rather irritated by the constraints she had been under. As she explained:

Mind you I don’t know if this day and age we would be like that with all the preventatives and that. I don’t know how young people get pregnant now and they have got all these... and it makes you wonder!

Shirley’s throw away remark ‘it makes you wonder’ is almost said in a disparaging way about contemporary young women who have the benefits of much more reliable contraception. Shirley’s response suggests that while there were concerns about respectability surrounding sex, it was the practicalities of not having access to reliable contraception that was of prime importance.

**Virginity**

‘Keeping one’s virginity’ was an important aspect in the lives of some of the cohort. Some women referred to it directly without prompting. There is a historical context to the notion that to maintain respectability, it was essential that a woman should preserve her virginity until marriage. Throughout the nineteenth century for example there was a strong correlation between prostitution and a woman who had sex outside marriage. It was thought that:
once a woman had sex outside marriage she was “ruined”, and would become a prostitute sooner or later… the loss of purity—we would call it, getting a bad reputation—damaged prospects for marriage. It led to a total loss of control over one’s own sexuality, as once “used” by a man women became free game for that entire sex.  

A century on, seeds of this fear were still evident. In the 1950s, about 50 per cent of British adults were, in fact, engaged in premarital sex. Yet there was still the fear that losing one’s virginity before marriage, meant running the risk of ‘being seen as “soiled goods”’. There was also evidence that virginity was prized very highly by some women. It had an ‘exchange value’, to be retained for a ‘future husband’. Furthermore, a 1951 survey of 11,000 people demonstrated that 52 per cent of the population disapproved of young men having sexual experience before marriage. In contrast the disapproval rate increased for young women to 63 per cent. In addition, as Hera Cook notes, ‘Many husbands and boyfriends... did not want their wives and girlfriends to display sexual knowledge or passion’. Clearly, during the post-war years there were widespread double standards in perceptions of men and women’s sexual activities.

Within a time of contradictions and uncertainly about attitudes towards women’s sex lives, predictably some of the cohort came under the full glare of community scrutiny. Kathleen responded to my question about attitudes on sex before marriage as ‘bad... it was a no no’, explaining that although she had been a virgin at her wedding she had fallen under suspicion by her church because she ‘was pregnant three months after I got married’. She alluded to the fact that she believed that this had been regarded as ‘not very nice’. Some women had remained virgins despite pressures.

Betty told me laughingly:

I know my husband and myself didn’t have intercourse before we were married. I can remember we used to go down the back lanes when we were young and well we would have a snog in the back lanes [laugh] and I think he was feeling a little bit frisky and he told me to go home [laugh]. But I don’t really know about anybody else. We never really discussed you know a lot of it.

Betty kept to the norms around sex with the help of her future husband, who helped her not to transgress sexual boundaries. Yet some of the cohort testified to the ways in which notions of

28 Johnes, Wales since 1939, 109.
30 Gorer, Exploring English Character, 96.
virginity were less to do with a moral code and more to do with having a white wedding and the spectacle and celebration that it entailed.

Shirley had been ‘courting’ for ‘nearly four years’, which she regarded as ‘a long time’, before she married her husband. Nevertheless, she regarded this as worthwhile given the importance of having a white wedding:

you wouldn’t let a boy go all the way, never and I mean nearly four years… And it was a church wedding and I always said I wanted to get married in white so you had to remain a virgin to get married in white so no way would I do that.

Ruth was very frank about the hypocrisy and subterfuge surrounding the concept of a white wedding. Ruth who married in 1957 explained that ‘It was a church wedding, a white wedding, two bridesmaids… Of course it had to be white and you wouldn’t have known many people… people wouldn’t admit that they weren’t [virgins]’. To be married in church was regarded as more desirable because, as Ruth explained, you could invite ‘more people’ than if you married in a registry office where ‘people would have worn a colour’. As Ruth added, marrying in church and in white was not done ‘on a religious basis or anything like that’.

Earlier in chapter three, I argued that the influences of nonconformity were very strong in the lives of the Rhondda women. Yet perhaps this was less about religious belief and more about symbols of belonging, connection and acceptance among people in the community. Ruth’s testimony exemplifies this in a similar way to that observed by Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher in their oral history study of men and women discussing their sex lives during the middle years of the century. As they note, ‘it is noticeable that although religious teaching and language were used by some in their reflections on the morality of different kinds of sexual behaviour, they were more usually muted, vague or absent in most testimony.’

The sense of show and celebration associated with white weddings is also echoed by Stella, who discussed the move from the years of austerity to more affluent times. Indeed, the need to put on a display may have been a reaction to the austerity years of the immediate post-war era. Stella described how this included ‘stuff going off ration’; however, ‘weddings [were] still restricted’ in that there was still the need for ‘clothes coupons’. It was not until March

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32 Szreter and Fisher, Sex before the Sexual revolution, 31.
1949 that clothes rationing ended. In comparison, by the 1950s, ‘grand “white” weddings’ were the fashion, ‘with all the trimmings’. Many Rhondda women would have aspired to this. Interestingly, Stella, who seemed disinterested in marriage, observed how one of the notable members of the community ‘Doctor X’ had celebrated his ‘daughter’s wedding’. This had been a very grand affair in a church and with a hotel reception afterwards.

The discourses around virginity were diverse. Discourses were connected to the need to maintain community traditions. Additionally, while some of the women came under community pressure to keep within sexual boundaries, for others it was a case of a wider reaction to years of austerity and the subsequent desire to have a celebration of a white wedding.

**Rule breakers**

Nevertheless, some of the Rhondda women did not keep to the rules and there were heavy hints of sexual activity outside of marriage. The secrecy surrounding sex and the feeling that many women colluded in this (despite community condemnation) was well illustrated by one of the Rhondda women. Ruth talked to me about the risks of sex before marriage and the fear of pregnancy. Such a situation could bring ‘shame on your family’. However, she also describes the reality whereby more young women were indeed taking these risks: ‘I think we were beginning to accept that “there but for the grace of god”’. Irene, who had a partner but did not marry, emphasised that she was ‘not a lesbian’, adding that:

> How I got out of some scrapes I don't know… I mean I was always in trouble in school with boys [laugh]… loads of boyfriends… In the Rhondda I was considered a terrible flirt, that I was… with different guys you know.

In order to achieve a level of sexual freedom, Irene regularly and deliberately lied to her parents about her movements. She described one occasion when as a schoolgirl she used subterfuge to meet boys:

> And I said to her I’m going… said to my mother, ‘I’m going down to Vera’s’ in the next road. And Vera said, ‘I’m going up to Irene’s.’ And of course out we went didn't we, some boys more than likely. And of course my mother went down to Vera’s and discovered… they all discovered that we were out. I was in trouble then you see. Oh boys weren’t discussed.

But even as an adult she was not honest with her family about her private life and she reflected many years later on how she avoided scandalising her family and the chapel:

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34 Ibid., 297–298.
Even when I was home on one occasion from London and a family friend, my mother knew his parents. He was taking me out so he came to collect me. I couldn’t believe it and Dilwyn came in and my mother said to him where are you taking her? Oh he said to the rugby club Mrs Lewis. Oh that’s all right but we went first of all to the Prince, so I said Dilwyn I was going in here and I went in with the umbrella like this! I said if Lewis Noddfa passes now my name will be mud! I am going in and that was still there, that you are not supposed to be… if my mother knew that we had gone into the Prince. Well we did eventually land up in the Rugby Club so I could say that we had been there but if we had said we had been to the Prince.

Irene’s mother was particularly disapproving of her daughter going to the ‘Prince’, which was simply a public house whose sole purpose was drinking. The ‘rugby club’, however, had a dual use—including the enjoyment of rugby, which was culturally acceptable in places like the Rhondda. Of particular significance in Irene’s testimony were the meanings she attached to place. Without being explicit, she hinted that in the Rhondda she had to downplay her relationships with men, which was not the case when she moved to London where she lived her life on her terms. When Irene returned to the Rhondda she had to put on a pretence of respectability. Irene’s body language changed dramatically when she described her romantic encounters. She took on an anxious, almost hunted demeanour, when she recalled these in the Rhondda. Alternatively, in the retelling of her experiences in London she seemed to stand taller.

The correlation between place and openness/pretence is alluded to in one of the Mass Observation diaries. Nella Last talks about meeting her son Cliff in London, which in some ways draws out similar themes about behaviour and place:

Cliff, she felt, put on some big-city airs. “I tried not to act country cousins and only slipped up a few times,” she wrote on the 29th, “and was only reproved once, and anyway the little waitress did look tired and the aspirins I gave her and the sniff of my smelling salts did her good, for her head ached. She was a really nice little girl but annoyed Cliff when she stood talking and told me she had a baby of three and twins a year old and worked every Sunday in the Richmond café to help out while her husband minded the babies. Cliff said, Londoners don’t talk to people. You would be looked on as eccentric if you lived here, you know.”

There is also an impression that unlike the Rhondda, Londoners were able to be anonymous because no-one knew your business. Irene like Cliff preferred the anonymity of living her life unchecked and on her own terms because sexual anonymity was impossible in the Rhondda.

36 Daryl Leeworthy, Fields of play: The sporting heritage of Wales (Aberystwyth: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, 2012).
Policing women’s sex lives

The cohort talked about the pressures they were subjected to by the older generation regarding attitudes to sexuality. The testimonies made it clear that some older people in the community attempted to police the sexual activity of the young women. This took the form of warnings that framed women who stepped out of line as bad and immoral. Women who broke the rules should be avoided at all costs. Stella told me how her ‘Bopa May’ was ‘disgusted if people wore red lipstick and nail polish’. Stella also spoke about the changes in the post-war years. After 1956, when more money became available and young women ‘started to be glamorous’, Stella believed that there was, within the Rhondda, a sense of greater freedom for women. However, at the same time, Bopa May condemned women who wore makeup as being like ‘prostitutes up from Cardiff’! Again there is a consistency in the way references to Cardiff and its comparisons with the Rhondda are frequently made during the women’s testimonies, suggesting once more the close-knit environment in which the Rhondda women grew up. Kathleen too illustrated the extent to which the older generation castigated young women who fell foul of the moral code within the community. Kathleen’s friend had become pregnant by a married man. Kathleen explained the situation many years later with obvious emotion:

It was a huge scandal… yes and people were so cruel. I deliberately walked with her because they said [whispering] “loose woman”… It was dreadful… Auntie Flo visited our house. Auntie Flo with her Bible you know and came for tea and she would say “don’t be seen with that girl because you will be tarred with the same brush.” It was terrible and I thought no, she wasn’t a bad girl you know.

Opposing viewpoints between two generations about attitudes to sexuality are also glimpsed through the diaries of the Mass Observation Archive. Antiques dealer B Charles, who lived in Edinburgh in 1946, commented with vitriol on the sexual activities of the post-war woman:

There is another report from America in which a doctor, Clifford Adams, in the magazine Pageant, states that 60 per cent of the women marrying in 1946 will have had pre-marital sexual intercourse. He says that pre-marital chastity is declining so rapidly that it will have reached almost vanishing point in females born after 1940. Among several causes, as he sees it, he stresses the cinema’s influence as being one of the most potent; I agree. Everywhere one sees a positive glorification of prostitution. I should think it must be somewhat difficult, now, for an out-and-out prostitute to make any sort of livelihood, when so many pseudo-prostitute women are about.

According to some of the cohort’s descriptions of their lives and those of some of their peers, many young women in the Rhondda were in danger of being defined as B Charles’ ‘pseudo-prostitutes’ simply by having premarital sex.

38 ‘Bopa’: Local word for aunt, which could be a blood relation or family friend.
Some of the older people seemed to want to shun or ostracise those young women they believed were acting in a deviant way. Certainly, Kathleen alluded to a form of shunning in the description she gave about her friend, who had been criticised by Auntie Flo. Anna Dee Olsen was brought up by Amish parents in a number of Amish communities in the US; in the following, she explains what was meant by shunning, citing her experience of walking away from the Amish life:

Shunning, you will find that this word has a varied meaning depending on the community you are in but I will explain what it meant in my community. When a member of the church (I was not a member until I was baptized at aged 18) has gone against the rules of the church they are considered to be in sin. Your name is then announced to all members so they know to impose the shunning upon you. It is a requirement to shun sinners or you are in sin yourself.40

There was certainly a hint of this ‘requirement’ made of the Amish in what was expected of Kathleen, to which she had to adhere unless she wanted to be ‘tarred with the same brush’. The close-knit nature of the Rhondda would have accentuated and energised such a practice. As Melanie Tebbutt argues:

Gossip helped to link women of the urban poor into a broad and supportive information network whose very nature also made it an extremely effective “self-policing” system among some who used shaming and ridicule as effective sanctions against themselves. This maintenance of group values at street level, which could be extremely restrictive, seems to have been particularly strong in close-knit single industry communities where women had little access to work outside the home.41

Certainly all the ingredients in Tebbutt’s argument such as ‘gossip’, ‘self-policing’ and ‘sanctions’ are in evidence in the cohort’s testimonies. These further reinforce and explain the sort of interactions between generations, and the approaches used by older members of the community to keep young women in check.

The cohort also gave an insight into the hypocrisy and double standards adopted by some of the older generation that caused tensions with young women. The new medium of television had become popularised with the broadcasting of the Queen’s Coronation in 1953. However, its ‘male-dominated’ culture provided another outlet for sexism.42 For example, Ruth described how her father reacted to one particular programme:

I always remember [Laugh] one of the programmes on the television during the 50s was What’s My Line and Barbara Kelly, she used to be on, and my father loved What’s My Line but she wore [a

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42 Chris Arnot, ‘Education: Calling “Loose Women” of the 1950s : Researchers into the early days of television want to know what you were watching in years gone by’, Guardian (London, UK) 6 September 2011, 42.
slightly low dresses. I mean you could barely see a cleavage and my father thought it was absolutely disgusting. You know he thought she was dirty you know.  

The sense of condemnation that affected young women in the mid-twentieth century regarding their sexual behaviour in communities like the Rhondda is evocatively narrated by Lorna Pope. At the age of 15, in 1943, she attended her local chapel in Mountain Ash, in a neighbouring valley to the Rhondda. Her chapter, *The First Stone*, tells the story of a young couple who had given birth to a baby only five months after marriage:

> The young couple stood at the front of the chapel, in the big seat, of Sët fawr, where the deacons— black-clad like crows—gathered, sagely nodding approval of some phrase in the sermon or muttering “Amens” when the spirit moved them. The congregation waited. I looked across at the girl, pale under her Sunday hat, her thick dark hair falling over her slim shoulders, and shifted my gaze to the good-looking young man who stood beside her, his eyes lowered… The hands of the old chapel clock slowly turned and at six o’clock precisely, one of the deacons stood up, his bald head glistening in the evening light, his bull-neck red above his stiff collar. His voice thundered, echoing around the chapel walls. “We are gathered here tonight to take back into our fold this young couple, who have grievously sinned”. Now the girl was weeping quietly, tears streaking her pretty face. The boy put his arm around her.

Pope is transported back to recent days. As she describes:

> The sweet smell of my mother’s perfume filled my nostrils. Lilac. Gall rose in my throat. Last Sunday, the sun warm on my back, the smell of lilac heavy on the still afternoon, I had turned the corner into the back lane. Voices murmured, a girl giggled. Underneath the lilac bush, his heavy body pressed against the body of a young girl who worked in his shop, searching hands fondling young breasts—our deacon... I pushed past my mother, hymn books hurtling, and ran outside to be sick on the chapel steps.

Shockingly, therefore, the denouement of the story underlines the appalling sense of hypocrisy and double standards perpetrated by some members of an older generation, which affected young women’s sexual choices.

The relationship between pubs and working-class communities like the Rhondda was extremely close. The drinking patterns of industrial south Wales can be epitomised by the exploits of Richard Burton’s alcoholic father, of whom it was said ‘never got to a rugby match because there were too many pubs on the way’. That same relationship is embodied, with the added flavour of a rugby game in Cardiff, in Idris Davies’ poem *Gwalia Deserta, XXXIII 1938*, which explores the Welsh miner:

> ‘And then the returning crowd, the great hoarse crowd,

43 Barbara Kelly was a panellist on the quiz programme *What’s My Line*, which ran from 1951–1964 on British television. [IMDb]. She joined the show in 1952. Her obituary in *Guardian* 17 January 2007 described her as: ‘Tall, blonde and with striking blue eyes, she appeared on screen in low-cut dresses and huge dangling earrings. Despite her charm, she had a brash toughness and a no-nonsense approach to television.’


Surges back to the city streets for ale and chops and tarts’.  

But the pub culture in the main was very alien to women. As Elizabeth Roberts’ study points out: ‘Very few mention meeting in pubs; indeed, it still was not acceptable for young women to go on their own into pubs although it was acceptable to accompany a man into one’  

Discourses around women’s sexual freedoms and pubs are well established. For example, Claire Langhamer notes that in the mid-twentieth century ‘older people, and particularly older men, remained, however significantly more antagonistic to the idea, objecting to female pub-going on the grounds of “respectability and morality”’. That women should not flaunt their sexual freedom by drinking in pubs was also an issue for Ruth’s father:  

Well my father used to like to go for his pint but he always said that the day that my mother walked into a bar he would walk out. He couldn’t have stood... My mother wouldn’t drink at all anyway. She was slightly... I wouldn’t say narrow minded but she was a big chapel person and she wouldn’t drink anyway but he would never ever have wanted my mother to go into a bar you know but it was alright for him to go. After my mother died he lived with us and he was quite happy when we would all go out for a drink but not at that time. Oh no there were definite different standards.

But the culture of pub going appears still to raise issues for women even at a contemporary level. A survey carried out with women on their attitudes to pubs argue how : ‘By and large, women by themselves do not feel that they can “drop in” on a pub in passing, the way that a man might, nor visit a pub regularly as many men do’. As ‘Fiona’ illustrates, ‘they think the woman is looking for another man’. Such antagonism and prejudice about women’s sexual freedoms were deep-seated both historically and contemporaneously.

Despite the policing of and antagonism towards women’s freedom and sexuality, there were times when the cohort admitted to wanting to be less sexually constrained. As earlier discussed, the only way Irene could be open about her sexual behaviour was to leave the constraints of her community. Two other women who remained in the Rhondda felt they could not be open about sex, and were envious of women who were. Ruth described her feelings towards some of her school mates who may have been having sex:  

In a way[ laugh] I wouldn’t say I admired them but I didn’t think it was awful but I used to think perhaps I wish it was me. [Laugh] You know sometimes you would admire them because they’d seem to be more go-getting than you, you know.

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46 Idris Davies, Gwalia Deserta XXXIII. (UK, Dent, 1938)  
47 Roberts, Women and Families, 62  
One symbol of women’s sexuality were beauty contests, which became very popular in the mid-twentieth century in Britain. Such events ‘were not organised on a national scale until after the Second World War. The first Miss World contest was held in April 1951 as an event for the Festival of Britain, a celebration of post-war Britain’.\(^{50}\) Stella described how popular beauty contests were in the Rhondda in the 1950s: ‘The girls paraded around the floor’. Stella also told me about her feelings towards young women who entered beauty contests in the 1950s: ‘the girls who thought a lot of themselves—I used to admire them’. What was evident was the extent to which, while nervous and inhibited by the prospect of a fulfilled sex life, both women were envious of others who seemingly were confident of their desirability and sensuality. The standards and attitudes around women’s sexuality were clearly shifting between generations. The Rhondda women appeared to be much more tolerant of sex outside marriage. Nevertheless, there was pressure from within the community—namely from older people who represented a different time, and did their utmost to stop the floodgates of sexual freedom from opening.

**Talking about sex: a reflection**

During my time with the women, the interviews seemed to flow remarkably well—that is, until I introduced the idea of sex and in particular premarital sex. It must be said that this affected both me and the women in equal measures, which was challenging at times. It created a hiatus and a fleeting awkwardness during the interviews. Body language became accentuated at such times as we looked uncomfortably at each other, feeling ill at ease but trying to be matter of fact. Often, we shifted uncomfortably in our seats and stared at each other. At times I silently pressed my hand into the chair and curled my toes. I felt myself swallowing hard before asking the questions regarding their attitudes and experiences of premarital sex. Most of the women laughed nervously when they responded. I asked such questions of some of the women but in others I could not bring myself to go there as I found the topic too difficult to approach. As the women indicated, this was very much a ‘taboo’ subject in their youth and it was still a taboo subject for them many years later. I was therefore uncomfortable with making such enquiries; I expected and received a sense of embarrassment, acknowledging that they too would be uncomfortable.

\(^{50}\)Martin Bright, ‘Education: Parading the objects of desire – Beauty pageants no longer attract millions of viewers in this country, but they continue to be popular abroad’, *Guardian* (London, England), 24 May 1994.
I was always keen for the interviews to be undertaken in a very equitable way, demonstrating a ‘reciprocity… with both researcher and researched learning from each other’. I was therefore averse to not exploiting the situation and pressuring the cohort into areas they may find uncomfortable. This possibly ‘prevented me from giving women the space and the permission to explore some of the deeper, more conflicted parts of their stories’. At times this drew a rather defensive response from some of the women. For example, when I pursued the issue of why Irene had never married yet appeared to be having lots of relationships, this drew a slightly piqued response from her of ‘I am not a lesbian you know’.

The testimonies offer many meanings. A lack of openness about sex when the cohort were young had to some degree blighted the present. It still affected the women years later, something I anticipated and which explained my embarrassment. As Annmarie Turnbull has argued, from her discussions with elderly people, the power of the oral history interview is to ‘help build a more complex, richer understanding of human experiences’. Certainly for me, having the opportunity to glimpse into the lives of the cohort provided me with a greater insight into the different attitudes and values across generations. The embarrassment around discourses of sex that affected some of the women into old age was rooted in the lack of openness to the subject in earlier life. This was a feature of the time, location, gender and family experiences. However, their composure of their life stories at a time when attitudes towards sex were very different from their youth, encapsulated the changes over 60 years.

**Conclusion**

Chapter six explored the narratives around the cohort’s experiences of and attitudes towards sex in the post-war years. This was within the context of an era of changing perspectives towards women’s sexuality. My interrogation of the testimonies was also an attempt to frame such an analysis with reference to the norms that seemed predominant in the Rhondda in the mid-twentieth century. Due to the general lack of good information around sexual matters, the cohort came of age in a world that was confusing, inhibited and uncomfortable around

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51 Christine Chapman, Breaking the Mould :Women’s experiences of exclusion and change in Welsh Labour politics, (Unpublished MPhil dissertation, University of Wales, 2001), 65
sex. This situation was exacerbated by the poor availability of contraception. Indeed, it was this factor, rather than a pronounced sense of morality, which made the cohort uneasy and discomforted around sexual matters. Further, the impact of such inhibitions made some of the cohort extremely cautious and restrained in their early sex lives, with the result that fears still profoundly affected them into old age. Early poor sex education was difficult to shake off. Szreter and Fisher have noted the value of talking to older people about their younger selves and their sex lives. They claim that such opportunities:

represent an extraordinary moment… [and] despite the silence that surrounded sex earlier in their lives, despite retaining the belief that sex ought to be a private matter, concern about and interest in contemporary society’s values motivated many to engage fully and frankly with the interviews.54

My study accords with the conclusions of Szeter and Fisher, and I would argue that evidence from the cohort suggests that over the years, the act of recalling had the effect of lessoning concerns around respectability. The cohort seemed more regretful about the caution of their youth. Additionally, what is distinct about the Rhondda women’s testimonies is the sense that the interviews enabled them to experience a greater sense of self-determination, which encompassed ‘choice, fulfilment, self-discovery and self-realisation’.55

Throughout the thesis, a constant theme emerges: the overwhelming influence of the community. This chapter is no exception. This pervasive and largely patriarchal influence, reflecting the community’s culture, served to constrain the cohort’s enjoyment and freedom of sex. This was also fortified by the close-knit nature of the community, which was firmly rooted in networks of gossip and subject to the watchful eye of the older generation. Shame, stigma and surveillance were therefore utilised to limit the women’s lives in the post-war world. As a result, while other parts of Britain enjoyed a more liberated attitude towards women’s sexuality, the Rhondda remained more traditional for longer.

Finally, there is no doubt that, from the cohort’s experiences, the climate around women’s sexuality was indeed changing. Women’s attachment to keeping their virginity became less for reasons of morality; it was to sustain a convention of celebration (a white wedding) as a symbol of change in contrast to the years of austerity. Certainly, while sexual constraint was still evident, there were clear signs that the ties were being loosened.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

‘Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience’.
Mary Wollstonecraft.

The notion of community, consistently explored throughout the thesis, is often nebulous and vague. Against this challenging backdrop, my study aimed to interrogate the interaction between one community and its individuals. The approach employed in the study was to consider evidence from the life stories of women who reached maturity in the post-war era in one particular community. In doing so, I derived information about how that community functioned to simultaneously support and limit their life choices. So powerful was that influence that it had an impact that lasted into old age.

This study set out to evaluate the barriers and opportunities that affected the lives of a group of women who came of age in mid-twentieth century Rhondda. Each of the main chapters considered different aspects of the women’s life cycle. Chapter two considered how the cohort experienced their education. This was notable because of the structural inequalities in the Rhondda education system and the profoundly stereotypical curriculum during and immediately before the cohort left school for paid employment. Chapter three examined three forces influencing the cohort, which in many ways were rooted in community life. These were teachers, family and nonconformity, which all shaped the lives of the women, both positively and in some cases detrimentally. The employment experiences of the cohort were considered in Chapter four. This analysis probed the extent to which the cohort’s aspirations for employment in a post-war world of reconstruction were met. Chapters five and six moved on to aspects of the women’s intimate lives—marriage and sex. In each chapter, questions were posed as to what elements were satisfying or unfulfilling about their relationships; their answers were interrogated with due reference to the context of post-war changes.

Throughout the women’s narratives there was evidence of both resistance and conformity to the norms and conventions expected by the community in which they lived and in terms of their gendered roles. Overall though, only a minority of women seemed to succeed in resisting fully what was expected of them. As described in Chapter 6, Irene feared for her reputation if she was to be seen going into pubs with a boy. She explained this in the local
parlance of ‘my name will be mud.’ Later, she described how her ‘name was mud’ when she decided to make the final break by moving away from the Rhondda, taking her own path and rejecting the life her family wanted for her. Yet, Irene was one of the exceptions. Most of the women, despite the post-war period offering new opportunities and challenging old ways of thinking, simply compromised, adhered to and conformed to the roles they had always played. A sense of resistance would only come later when they retrospectively reflected upon their younger selves.

The diversity of experiences suggested themes that are both consistent with but diverge from existing literature. Parts of the Rhondda women’s narratives show the extent to which they perceived some aspects of their lives as poor, unchallenging and unsatisfying. The cause of such dissatisfaction included the effect of an education system that held the potential to change lives and be transformative but which failed to do so. In some cases this also included employment, which did not live up to the expectations and eagerness the women had as school children. For some, marriage did not live up to the romantic ideals in an era of companionate marriage. Furthermore, some of the cohort experienced levels of dissatisfaction and unfulfilment in their marriages, which diminished their lives. Experiences of and discourses around sex pointed to the climate of inhibition, anxiety and guilt.

The post-war years meant shifts in women’s lives and identities. However, being born in and living in the Rhondda diminished and moderated those changes. The close-knit nature of the Rhondda meant older ideas were more tenacious. This resulted in greater complexity and constraint for women who wanted a greater sense of freedom and fulfilment in their lives. Some aspects of the evidence indicate that the cohort, as with other women of the same class in Britain in this period, were discriminated against and disadvantaged simply because they were women. The injustice of this is clear from the cohort’s narratives, which also provided an image of a stagnant education system. While there was the potential for it to offer something new and radical in terms of gender equality, it failed to do so. The education system continued to promote stereotypical ideals about women’s roles. This was reinforced by an array of individuals such as teachers, family members and community members who remained stubbornly influential in colluding with the status quo. They expected nothing more than a very traditional life trajectory for the cohort. Equally, the new jobs on offer after the war disappointingly offered nothing more in terms of a new deal for women. Consequently, this cohort remained undervalued, discriminated and segregated.
Nevertheless, some beacons of hope determinedly shine through the often gloomy picture of disadvantage and difficulties, which offers new insights into the dynamics of working-class community life. These were forces and individuals who indeed made a difference to the lives of the cohort and were firmly on their side. The stories told by the women offer glimpses of their power. These individuals went the extra mile, set high standards and were very encouraging, stirring the young women on to realise their full potential. Such evidence includes snapshots of the inspirational teacher who instilled the cohort with a sense of meaning and motivation, and families who despite their own shortcomings wanted the next generation to reach what they did not. Such beacons also included institutions firmly rooted in the community, like the chapels that made recompense for the formal education structures that neglected the cohort. The close-knit nature of the Rhondda had another side to the one which constrained the cohort. At times, it also proved beneficial, helping the cohort to gain a degree of independence. Strong family support, for example, meant that some of the cohort could have a degree of autonomy over their lives.

It was clear too that the early experiences of the women captured in the interviews had in many cases shaped their entire adulthood. Furthermore, such experiences were long-lasting and influenced how they conducted themselves as older women. I was aware that some of the cohort’s reminiscences had never been ‘shared with another human being’. As such, the interviews provided a catalyst for the women to make sense of those experiences and reach a state of ‘composure’, as outlined in chapter one.

Such processes were clearly of benefit to them, and helped purge some of the more negative experiences they endured in their youth. According to Erin McCarthy, there are possible benefits to oral history in terms of clinical settings, which can help alleviate the impact of ill health. I strongly believed, therefore, that the interviews had an almost healing effect in terms of those experiences. As Paul Thompson argues, oral history: ‘allows heroes not just from the leaders, but also from the unknown majority of the people… It helps the less

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privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence… In short it makes for fuller human beings.\textsuperscript{3} Caroline Steedman has also contended that:

Memory simply can’t resurrect those years, because it is memory itself that shapes them long after the historical time has passed… We rework past time to give current events meaning, and that reworking provides an understanding that the child at the time can’t possess.\textsuperscript{4}

I would suggest, therefore, that the interviews, in some cases, left some of the women more confident and optimistic.

The interviews also had wider societal benefits beyond the immediacy of cohort. There was the realisation that contemporary women’s freedom and success is not coincidental but connected with the past. I had a sense that what women of my generation succeeded in was as a consequence of ‘standing on the shoulders’\textsuperscript{5} of women like those of the cohort who were part of the struggles affecting women’s lives in the mid twentieth century. As Fingerman et al argue: ‘Intense parental support may be beneficial to grown children in many circumstances. When individuals have received support they desire, they typically manifest better well-being.’\textsuperscript{6} As such, the legacy of the interviews could also be said to show the support of one generation to the next. For me, I was very much aware of the benefits of generations learning from each another. My own mother’s relationship with me had been the starting point for the research, and I deeply felt the benefits of better understanding her life experiences in the context of mid-twentieth century ideas about women. The intergenerational exchange, whereby my personal life story is interwoven with the previous generation, therefore informed the process of the interviews and my subsequent analysis. I was conscious that my experience may also have reflected the lives of other women whose mothers came of age in the post-war years in south Wales. This has helped to make a contribution to the wider narratives of women’s lives and history in the period as a whole.

\textsuperscript{5} In a letter to his rival Robert Hooke in 1676, Isaac Newton wrote: ‘What Descartes did was a good step. You have added much several ways, and especially in taking the colours of thin plates into philosophical consideration. If I have seen a little further, it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.’
Studies have shown the effects of poverty in the lives of women in south Wales.  

Certainly, the same degree of poverty was not something shared by the cohort. Nevertheless, it was a constant force in the women’s lives and in the main had a detrimental effect in terms of the opportunities for fulfilment denied to them. Other studies and autobiographical accounts of women in south Wales have tended to focus on those who have gained success despite coming from very modest circumstances. This study is different in that most of the women left their education prematurely because of both social and economic pressures. By reflecting on the cohort’s reactions to poverty, in contrast to merely describing and accounting for it, is a departure from other studies. Analysing the cohort’s experiences of poverty revealed that, despite often difficult times, there are some glimpses of real joy and happiness in the women’s narratives.

This is evident particularly around descriptions of married life, which reflects a mid-twentieth transition to companionate marriage. Some writers have been overly pessimistic about the notion of companionate marriage. Yet this thesis provides examples of it being an authentic force in the lives of some women. The study also makes a contribution to the ‘individual and unique story’ of women in Wales who enjoyed the camaraderie of the workplace, being with other women and finding it fulfilling. Andrew Davies has observed that respectability ‘emerges as a complex and multilayered category, which was constantly redefined to match individual and local perspectives’. Furthermore, the adherence to respectability permeated most of the cohort’s narratives. It appeared in many guises and was a force to be reckoned with as a way of preventing the cohort from being completely unfettered in their younger lives.

This examination of the testimonies of the cohort of Rhondda women is a reflection of both change and continuity in the lives of women in the mid twentieth century. This thesis, furthermore, contributes to the growing body of literature combatting the silencing of women in the male dominated historiography of industrial working-class communities. Existing women’s histories have provided broad overviews of women’s social history. This close

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7 Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams eds., Struggle or Starve. Women’s Lives in the South Wales valleys between the two World Wars (Dinas Powys: Honno, 1998).
8 See Elaine Morgan, Knock ’em Cold, Kid (Leicestershire: Matador, 2012).
9 Women’s Archive of Wales, Voices from the Factory Floor. This project involves 200 interviews with mainly women who worked in the manufacturing industry in Wales, 1945–1975.
reading of a small cohort of women’s composure of their life narratives promotes an understanding of a fuller ‘life history’. It enables apprehension of women’s private and intimate lives, their aspirations, achievements and regrets, against the backdrop of a community like the Rhondda.
THE RHONDDA INTERVIEWS

Brief biographical details of the Rhondda interviewees

Note: Pseudonyms were used in all cases

Shirley
Born 1933.
An only child.
Attended grammar school and left at 15 before she did her formal exams.
Married in 1953 age 20.
Children: one son and one daughter.
Husband’s occupation: factory work and then as a salesman.
Before and after marriage worked in shops and offices.

Marion
Born 1929.
Parents: mother a housewife but also worked in a factory. Father was a cobbler.
One younger brother.
Attended grammar school.
Married in 1952 age 23.
Children: one daughter and one son.
Husband’s occupation: industrial chemist.
Worked in an architect’s office before marriage.

Betty
Born 1934.
Parents: factory workers.
Siblings: one brother and one sister both younger.
Attended secondary modern school.
Married in 1953 age 19.
Children: two sons.
Husband’s occupation: Miner and painter and decorator.
Factory work before having children.
Ruth
Born 1935.
Parents: father a shop manager and mother a housewife.
Siblings: one older sister.
Attended grammar school: left school at 16 after CWB exams.
Married in 1957 age 22.
Children: one daughter.
Husband’s occupation: lecturer and local authority professional.
Worked in the civil service.

Stella
Born 1935.
Parents: mother did factory work and father was ill.
Only child.
Attended secondary modern school; left at 15 before sitting exams.
Factory work for a short time but then stayed home to look after sick father.
Married in 1970 age 35.
Children: none.

Irene
Born 1929.
Parents: mother housewife and father died in 1947, ill after the effects of WWI.
Siblings: the youngest of 5 children (one boy and 3 girls).
Attended grammar school; left before sitting exams.
Worked in post office in different branches and moved to London.
Did not marry.
Children: none.

Hazel
Born 1942.
Parents: mother a housewife and father a lorry driver, delivering coal.
Only child.
Attended secondary modern school and then a year in commercial college. Left at 17.
Married in 1969 age 28.
Children: one daughter.
Worked in the civil service until her daughter was born. Returned to work when daughter was 8.

**Kathleen**
Born 1942.
Parents: mother a housewife and seamstress and then worked in a hospital. Father: hospital worker.
Siblings: one older brother.
Attended secondary modern school and then two years at commercial college (14–16).
Married in 1965 age 23.
Children: two sons and one daughter.
Husband’s occupation: technician.
Worked in office work (solicitor’s and for the Council).

**Sandra**
Born 1944.
Parents: mother housewife and father unemployed miner.
Siblings: youngest of five.
Attended grammar school; left before sitting exams.
Office work until having her children.
Married 1964 age 20.
Children: one son and one daughter.
Husband’s occupation: factory worker.

**Enid**
Born 1934.
Parents: mother worked in munitions; father colliery (surface worker).
Only child.
Attended grammar school; left at 16 without sitting exams.
Worked in a shop and then police force.
Married in 1967.

Children: none.

Husband’s occupation: telephone engineer.
APPENDIX A Questionnaire

Age cohort: women born between 1925-45.

**Introduction**

Introduction and explanation of research project.
Looking at the Rhondda during the post-war period.
Looking at women’s lives in this context particularly relating to how the community of the Rhondda affected their lives and reaching their potential.

Explain confidentiality.

**General**

Name
Age

**Questions about marriage status, children or not**

What did you parents do?
When did you live in the Rhondda?

**Formal Education**

Tell me about your education history starting when you went to secondary school first.
(grammar or secondary modern?)
What experience did you have with the 11 plus? How did you feel?
What sort of subjects did you do?
Were they the same subjects as boys did or similar?
Did you get qualifications? If so what were they? If not, give reasons why you did not.
Did you feel that living in the Rhondda affected your education opportunities for good or bad? Limitations/opportunities.
Rhondda’s influences

Did you enjoy school/college—explain—what was good/bad?
What did you think about your teachers? Did they encourage/support you or not?
How did going to school in the Rhondda and the people you came across in school shape your aspirations and opportunities?
Discuss the people in your school—other pupils. How did you get on with others in the school? Was there are difference with the boys?
Was there any bullying, intimidation, sexual harassment in school from teachers or other pupils or was the school supportive?
How did the school react to unmarried mothers or anybody they saw as different? (gay/lesbian eg).
Were you treated differently because you were a girl or not?
Were your parents supportive of your education or not?
Were you treated differently because you were a girl?

Preparation for work

Do you remember any teachers/parents/peers talking to you about what you would do after you left school or college?
Did you get careers advice—formally/not formally? What was the system?
What preparation did you get in terms of work?
What influenced you in terms of your future life?
Were you given different ideas because you were a girl?
Did you want to leave the Rhondda or stay for work?
What were your views about jobs in the Rhondda—opportunities or not?
What books or magazines, newspapers, radio/tv programmes did you enjoy?
Do you think there were messages then about how women were portrayed?

Work

What did you do when you left school/college? (work history).
Describe what happened when you entered your first job?
Was it your choice to go into the job?
What influenced you to enter that particular job/college course?
What were your expectations of that job/college course?
Were your expectations met?
Did you enjoy/not enjoy your work//college? (explain).
Did you get promotion?
If not, why not?
How did working in the Rhondda/not working in Rhondda shape your opportunities in work and for the future?

Relationships

Tell me about your relationship?
Was there pressure on you to get married or not?
What were people’s attitudes to sex before marriage?
What were people’s attitudes to divorce?
Did people marry for love or security in the Rhondda?
What was the reality?
What did you like to do in your leisure time?

Motherhood/marriage

Confirm motherhood/when did you get married?
If you married and/or had a family, what arrangements did you make regarding domestic responsibility (eg children/elderly parents, housework if at all, for husband)?
Did you enjoy being a mother?
Do you think that living in the Rhondda meant there were expectations for you to get married and have children or not? Was it different to other communities?
What were the challenges if any?

Community

What, if anything, did being a Rhondda person mean to you?
Your relationships with people from the area?
If you moved away, how did you feel about this?
What did you miss?
Did you wish to move away?
What was the best/worst aspects of where you lived?
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Dissertations